

Gender Council Proposal

Even though a campus may become more diverse in terms of the numbers of underrepresented groups present, the level of engagement can still be inconsequential if those representing different viewpoints are not encouraged and supported to express them. If an institution is not prepared to make space, figuratively speaking, for previously excluded groups, and support their presence on campus, its diversity efforts cannot succeed.

--President Liebowitz, Baccalaureate Address 2007

I. Purpose

While activists have made admirable progress in our culture in terms of gender equality—women can vote, same-sex couples can be married in certain states, etc.—we *do not* live in a post-gender world. Gender affects everyone, both in our country as a whole and in our college community. Homophobia, sexism, and transphobia present daily struggles in the lives of many Middlebury students, staff, and faculty. These problems will not resolve themselves. It is not enough to simply educate ourselves as advocates if we do not use our understanding of oppression and privilege to make this community safer and more inclusive.

Just as the Environmental Council has achieved long-term institutional progress toward sustainability, we hope to harness the passion of anti-oppression activists on campus to effect broad systemic change. In a society where gender is deeply intertwined with race, class, disability, sexuality, and nationality, campus organizations cannot afford to work independently of each other. By forming a permanent, grass-roots, centralized coalition of students, faculty, and staff, we have a greater chance of building a community that reflects the notions of inclusivity and equality in Middlebury's Mission Statement.

II. Values

This is not simply a reactionary organization—meaning that the Council will not dissolve after solving a few problems on campus. Instead, the Council format has been carefully chosen because it most effectively embodies three core values of social justice activism:

1. *Diversity*: While the Council's focus will be on gender, many gendered problems intersect with policies and cultural assumptions related to class, race, religion, etc. Therefore, we cannot hope to see fundamental progress without simultaneously focusing our efforts on multiple areas of social justice. However, certain problems are not always readily visible to those who have not experienced them personally. In order to effect fundamental change, the Council will need to advise the Administration with as many different voices and perspectives as possible.

2. *Permanent presence:* The Council's staying power as a formal body will arise from its consistent devotion to progress. With the help of the Council, Middlebury will be able to more effectively create progressive policies and educational opportunities related to gender. The permanent existence of the Council will ensure that the College as an institution is held accountable for all of its policies that pertain to gender, race, disability, etc. A permanent presence helps ensure consistent progress throughout future years.
3. *Administrative recognition:* In order to maintain an open and healthy dialogue on policy between the Administration and gender advocates, gender-oriented organizations on campus must integrate themselves into the formal structure of the College. The school already recognizes the authority and importance of several other similar Councils on campus, including the Environmental Council and the Religious Life Council. Our school has proven its devotion to progress in these areas. If this Council is formed, Middlebury will demonstrate that it values the input of gender “experts” as much as it values the opinions of those who devote their time to the study and protection of the Environment. That being said, the Gender Council will not compete with or work against other Councils on campus; rather, we will always cooperate and share our experience with other formal bodies as much as possible. The Gender Council's goal of effecting permanent institutional change hinges on its work with other Councils, the Administration, and the campus community.

III. Functions

The proposed Council will serve as a clearinghouse for ideas, and will advise the Administration on gender-related policy. In doing so, the Council will fulfill three main functions:

1) Education and Outreach:

- a) *Community-building:* The Council will strive to reach out to all campus community members to ensure that gender is understood as a complex institution that affects everyone.
- b) *Guidance:* The Council will provide resources and avenues (funding, advising, etc.) for student, staff, and faculty projects with a focus on gender issues on campus. These projects may be critical studies, advocacy and awareness events, or attempts to improve gender relations on campus.
- c) *Privilege-checking:* The Council will critically examine and deconstruct the relationship between privilege and power on our campus. Because privilege remains invisible, and thus dangerous unless it is constantly checked, the Council will make a strong effort to raise awareness among students with racial, gendered, economic, sexual, and able-bodied privilege. The Council will bring these intersecting identities to the foreground of all conversations regarding gender on campus. Discussions surrounding our identities and our power should be open, respectful, and safe.

2) Policy Formation:

- a) *Advising:* Gender-related policy should be informed by a complex interplay of theory, studies done at similar colleges, and first-hand experiences at Middlebury College. In

other words, just as policy makers turn to Environmental experts when they make decisions that impact the environment, they would similarly draw on the knowledge and experience of gender advocates and activists on this Council when making decisions that pertain to gender.

- b) *Prevention*: The Council will not simply be a reactionary organization that fixes problems after they arise. Policies should aim to *prevent* conflicts related to gender *before* crises occur.
- c) *Reinforcement*: The Council will work to bridge the gap between the college's Non-Discrimination Policy, Anti-Harassment Policy, and the current policies and practices on campus that disadvantage students who should be protected under these policies.
- d) *Grassroots participation*: The Council will be open for input from the rest of the community, possibly by way of a blog where other community members can post ideas for potential policy changes, and by way of regular open meetings.

3) **Interdisciplinary Dialogue**

- a) *Gender across the curriculum*: The Council will facilitate conversations surrounding gender across and within all departments of the College. In other words, these conversations should not be seen as the exclusive terrain of the humanities, as they are often assumed to be. Gender should be seen as a complex issue that involves politics and economics as much as it does the humanities.
- b) *Coalitional approach*: The Council itself will inspire a broad-based coalition of all student groups, staff, faculty, and community organizations that have an interest in gender, which will endure for years to come. Having an interest in gender can encompass anyone from a professor who has devoted their life to Gender Studies, to a student who wrote an essay on a particular gender issue.

IV. Structure

The Council will meet on a regular basis (five to six times per semester) to discuss policy strategies and educate each other. With the above values and functions in mind, the Council will be structured as follows:

1) **Leadership**

- a) Staff and faculty who plan on staying with the College for several years will play a key leadership role in ensuring consistency within the Council year after year. However, those in formal leadership positions may be students, staff, and/or faculty. There will be one elected student leader, and one elected leader who is either a staff or faculty member.
- b) Council leaders will be responsible for guiding meetings, delegating tasks, and sustaining on-going discussions year after year. Leaders will not have any more decision-making power than other members. Thus, the Council will primarily have a horizontal power structure.

2) **Representatives**

- a) The Council will be composed of representatives from a diverse array of student groups, departments, and community organizations. Policy and educational discussions can only

be effective if they are informed by intersecting experiences of race, class, ethnicity, ability, gender, sex, sexuality, nationality, and gender identity. Again, the more diversity of voices and experiences the Council has, the more comprehensive and authoritative it will be in affecting change.

- b) The Council will consider a range of political perspectives and experiences, and will strive to fill seats with a diverse group from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds
- c) Every Council member will be a potential liaison to the Administration and to the rest of the campus. In this way, leadership will be shared among all members.
- d) Administrators will be encouraged to attend Council meetings, and Council members should provide a consistent set of voices in Administrative meetings.
- e) At least one WAGS professor should be serving on the Council at any time. *Ex-officio* positions will also be reserved for the Director of Chellis House, as well as for staff and faculty working in the Office of Institutional Diversity and the Center for the Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity. Their expertise will be indispensable to our success, though anyone has the right to decline an *ex-officio* position.
- f) Students will be chosen to serve by the membership of the preceding year through an application process. Selection criteria will include, but not be limited to, experience with social justice activism and advocacy, academic experience with the Women's and Gender Studies Program, and general knowledge of Feminism, Queer Studies, Critical Race Studies, and Disability Studies.
- g) Staff and Faculty will be selected on a volunteer basis, or by assignment from Staff Council and Faculty Council if necessary.
- h) While there is currently no cap on the number of members, the Council may find that a group of no more than 20 people would be the most efficient way to achieve its goals.

3) **Sub-Committees**

- a) Tasks will be delegated to issue-specific sub-committees that will be encouraged to meet outside of regular Council meetings.
- b) Sub-committees will be open to all Council members, though members will be encouraged to join sub-committees in which they have a particular expertise or interest.
- c) Sub-committees will debrief the rest of the Council on their progress at regularly scheduled meetings. This is the time for the rest of the Council to contribute new perspectives that sub-committees may not have considered.

4) **Relation to Other Campus Organizations**

- a) The Council will be an intellectual resource to other campus organizations by actively providing requested expertise on other organizations' projects, and will be a political resource to them by providing an avenue by which to propose policies related to their missions. A list of campus organizations with whom the Council would cooperate can be found below, in section V: Prospective Members and Partners.
- b) The Council will cooperate with other campus organizations by reserving *ex-officio* seats, which will help maintain constant communication among all relevant organizations.
- c) The Council will gather institutional memory (reports, etc.) from other organizations before beginning on a project, and will draw on other organizations' experience and networking potentials when organizing an event or project.

V. Prospective Members and Partners

The following is a list of campus and community organizations that could offer key members to this Council. All of these organizations have been consulted and have professed an interest in either serving on or working with the Council. We apologize if we have accidentally left anybody out of this list, and welcome more suggestions:

- African American Alliance (AAA)
- Alianza Latinoamericana y Caribeña (ALC)
- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Office
- Amnesty
- Athletics Department
- Center for Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity (CCSRE)
- Center for Teaching and Learning Research (CTLR)
- Chellis House
- Counseling Center
- Deans & Departmental Chairs
- Distinguished Men of Color (DMC)
- Faculty Working Group on Diversity Initiatives (FDIV)
- Feminist Action at Middlebury (FAM)
- Gay and Lesbian Employees at Middlebury (GLEAM)
- Global AIDs Campaign
- Middlebury Open Queer Alliance (MOQA)
- MiddDialogue
- Office of Institutional Diversity
- Queer Studies House
- Religious Life Council (RLC)
- Sexual Assault Oversight Committee (SAOC)
- Socially Responsible Investment (SRI)
- Students Against Violence
- Student Government Association (SGA)
- Study Abroad Department
- Women of Color (WOC)
- Women and Global Peace (WGP)
- WomenSafe and associated organizations

VI. Opportunities for Progress

The following is a list of suggested institutional solutions to gender-related problems on campus. Again, this list is subject to change once dialogues within the Council begin.

1. ***Sexually inclusive institutions:*** Several campus organizations and institutions unknowingly perpetuate heteronormative assumptions and myths about the problems they are trying to solve. Heteronormativity includes assumptions that everyone is or should be

heterosexual. The Council could educate members of these organizations to help them solve their stated issues more effectively.

2. ***Trigger warnings:*** Many professors assign movie screenings and readings that contain graphic depictions of sexual assault and other forms of violence and abuse. The learning environment may be safer and more respectful if professors warn their students about these potential “triggers” before assigning the movie or reading. In the case that a student feels that the activity may be damaging, the Council can work with professors and the student to offer alternate assignments.
3. ***Safe, accessible bathrooms:*** Bathrooms have traditionally proven to be places in which gender, sexuality, bodily ability, race, and class are strictly policed – sometimes violently. For example, people who are seen as being gender- or sexually-variant are disproportionately susceptible to violence and harassment within these gendered spaces. The Council will critically investigate any problems that arise from the structures of our bathrooms on campus. Restructuring bathrooms may solve some of these problems relating to bathroom access and safety.
4. ***Inclusive health insurance:*** The school health insurance plan for students is currently limited to Accident and Sickness. This disadvantages many students at Middlebury who cannot afford another health care plan, but still require general medical care. Further, the healthcare plan explicitly denies coverage of healthcare needs for transgender students, such as hormone therapy or gynecological care for trans men. While healthcare reform is a national problem, the Council would work to promote an understanding that the school health insurance plan disproportionately affects people along lines of class, gender identity, nationality, etc. The Council would push for more comprehensive and equitable coverage for everyone.
5. ***Preparation and support for survivors abroad:*** Pre-departure resources for Study Abroad do not adequately prepare many students for certain types of gender-related dangers and experiences that they may have while abroad. For example, many students in locations abroad, particularly Egypt, have experienced unexpected and extreme sexual harassment resulting from different gender codes. The Council would work with coordinators for each program so that they are trained and adequately prepared to talk about these issues with students, both before they go abroad and while they are in their respective countries. Further, returning students who would like to share their experiences would be indispensable in helping others prepare for the possibility of these dangers.
6. ***All-Gender Housing:*** The convention of same-sexed housing is informed by heteronormative assumptions about students, their desires, and their anatomies. For example, the policy is heteronormative in that it assumes that all students are heterosexual and should therefore be most comfortable rooming with an individual of their same gender. The policy also incorrectly assumes that sexual assault cannot occur between roommates of the same gender. The Council should critically investigate how gender- and sexually-variant students are affected by segregated housing. Regardless of whether current students are adversely affected by this policy, however, the underlying

assumptions behind this policy represent values that may inadvertently harm students in the future. These assumptions should be challenged by at least providing the option of rooming with whomever a student wants, regardless of gender.

7. ***Comprehensive sexual assault training:*** Comprehensive sexual assault training should be offered to all students, staff and faculty who are in formal positions to educate, aid, or make judicial decisions that affect survivors of sexual assault on campus. The Council would work to connect community members with the professional resources available to them (e.g. WomenSafe) that specialize in this training. This also goes for cultural, gender, sexual, and racial sensitivity trainings.
8. ***Improve awareness surrounding privilege:*** Many formal and informal discussions surrounding gender on campus currently focus on women's and/or non-heterosexual issues. While these are invaluable discussions, the Council should investigate ways of engaging students, staff, and faculty who do not typically talk about gender, sexuality and identity. In other words, the Council needs to ensure that everyone understands how they contribute to gendered power dynamics, especially if they are typically “unlabeled,” i.e. white, able-bodied, heterosexual, cissexual, male, etc.
9. ***Self-identification on forms:*** Many school forms require students, staff, and faculty to check either a box for Male or a box for Female. This is problematic because many people do not identify as either, and many people's legal gender does not match the gender with which they identify. The Council would critically investigate when gender is relevant, and when it could be taken off forms entirely. In situations where gender is relevant, forms should be formatted so that people of all genders can write in the gender with which they actually identify.
10. ***WAGS reform:*** The WAGS Major and minor do not require any courses that focus on Queer Studies. This is a problem because, as the past few decades of scholarship and activism have demonstrated, Queer and Feminist theories must inform each other if they are going to achieve their respective and mutual goals. The WAGS degrees should be more comprehensive in this way.
11. ***Interdisciplinary gender education:*** Because gender permeates every institution and aspect of our lives, the study of gender must always be as interdisciplinary as possible. However, several important academic departments do not offer any WAGS courses, e.g. Political Science. In order to reflect an understanding that all political power is gendered, the Political Science Department should offer at least one WAGS course. Creating new classes in these departments will help inform more students about the social, political and economic implications of gender.
12. ***Gender Summit:*** The Council should plan a summit to bring together students, staff, and faculty interested in particular gender issues on campus, and to gather their suggestions for potential changes and strategies. This would be helpful in setting the Council's agenda, and determining which initiatives are most pressing. It would also build alliances

with other organizations and individuals who are not formal members of the Council.

13. *Gender beyond Middlebury*: Many of the problems presented in this section extend beyond our microcosm at Middlebury. While improving our own campus should always take precedent, the Council should continually look at successes at other institutions as models, and should investigate ways of facilitating gender activism and advocacy on other campuses and in our community. The Council should align itself in solidarity with larger anti-oppression movements around the world.

[W]e have considerable work to do if we truly aspire to be a community that welcomes diversity and wishes to learn from it.

--President Liebowitz, Baccalaureate Address 2007

All questions, concerns, and suggestions can be directed to Viveka Ray-Mazumder '11 (vraymazu@middlebury.edu) and Lark Mulligan '11 (lmulligan@middlebury.edu)