

Tuesday, July 26, 2005

<http://chronicle.com/daily/2005/07/2005072602n.htm>

U. of Washington Picks a Man to Lead Its Women's-Studies Department

By [ROBIN WILSON](#)

"A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle." That feminist slogan was popular 35 years ago, as the women's liberation movement was giving birth to the field of women's studies. But the University of Washington has decided that what its women's-studies department needs is a man.

The university announced this month that, for the first time since the department's creation in 1970, it will be led by a man, David G. Allen. According to the university, the choice is also unique nationwide: Mr. Allen will be the only male heading any of the 10 women's-studies departments in the country that offer a doctoral degree.

Mr. Allen said on Monday that he had been asked to take the job because no women who were qualified were interested in it. The university wanted to name only a full professor. Although Mr. Allen has taught a required research-methods course in the women's-studies department for 15 years, he is not one of its 10 tenured or tenure-track members. He is a full professor in the School of Nursing's department of psychosocial and community health.

Nancy J. Kenney, an associate professor of women's studies at Washington, said that while Mr. Allen is "a wonderful man," she found the decision to name him chairman "somewhat depressing." She said she lamented that "after all of these years, there isn't a different alternative out there."

"There simply aren't enough women of the right type and interest to take over this position," she said.

Allison B. Kimmich, executive director of the National Women's Studies Association, said she knew of at least one other university -- George Washington -- where a man is at the helm of women's studies. But that department does not offer a Ph.D.

Ms. Kimmich presented two ways to look at the situation. "One would be to look at the fact that gender includes masculinity as well as femininity, so having a man running a women's-studies program would be a natural outgrowth."

"On the other hand," she added, "in higher education as in many fields women are still underrepresented in leadership and administrative positions, so to have a man leading a women's-studies program would not exactly be ideal."

Mr. Allen, who starts his new job September 1, said he would not arrive with an agenda other than to support the work faculty members already are doing. "There's been a long conversation about the fact that whites should have a stake and be active in antiracist programs," he said. "The same logic goes for men. We ought to be involved in supporting efforts of feminist work."

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