

A Guardian for Justice

The Women's Commission at EMU

BY MARY-ELIZABETH B. MURPHY

Equal Rights for All

Since its founding in Spring 1972, the President's Commission on Women at Eastern Michigan University (EMU) has served as an important guardian for justice, educating the EMU community about issues of sexism and gender equality. In its fifty-year history, the Women's Commission at EMU has largely mirrored broader trends in the conversation around women, gender, and sexuality, embracing change and evolving thinking around these matters.

When EMU was formed in 1849 as the Michigan State Normal School, it opened its doors to women students and students of color. As a school founded to train teachers, EMU was also a welcoming space for women faculty members and staff, a rarity for many institutions of higher learning. But despite EMU's rich legacy of educating women students and hiring women faculty, there was not an independent body specifically dedicated to supporting these populations until the founding of the Women's Commission in 1972.

Fifty years after the founding of the Women's Commission, the impact of this organization is palpable on campus. EMU is a university that is consistently ranked as very friendly to the LGBTQ+ community, boasts the only stand-alone master's program in Women's and Gender Studies in Michigan, has both a Women's Resource Center and a Title IX Office, and employs a significant number of women faculty members. Many of these initiatives were first proposed in the monthly meetings of the Women's Commission, making this organization a critical, if somewhat invisible, part of EMU's larger historical arc in the postwar era.

Inspired by Second-Wave Feminism

The President's Commission on Women at EMU was formed at a moment of polit-

ical and cultural significance for women in the United States. In 1972, second-wave feminism was in full force. Across the country, women were joining local chapters of the National Organization for Women (NOW), pressing for equal pay for equal work, advocating for reproductive freedom and women's health care, raising awareness about sexual violence, and working to banish sexism in the media, intimate partnerships, and the workplace.

The Women's Commission at EMU was a direct expression of this second-wave feminist sentiment. Since the late 1960s, the Faculty Women's Club at EMU had expressed concern that women faculty members experienced sexism in three areas: salary, rank, and teaching assignments. In March 1972, the Faculty Women's Executive Board wrote a proposal calling for a Women's Commission, and it was accepted by both EMU President Harold Sponberg and the Board of Regents.

Members of the Women's Executive Board crafted EMU's Women's Commission in anticipation of the impending federal legislation. That year, the United States Congress passed the Higher Education Amendments. Title IX of this law prohibited educational institutions that received federal funding from practicing sex discrimination. The Women's Commission at EMU thus served as the unofficial enforcement body for Title IX, making sure that the university banned sex discrimination.

By November 1972, EMU's Women's Commission was up and running, quickly becoming a permanent fixture on campus. President Sponberg appointed the first members, all women faculty at EMU. The commission was charged with "inquiring into the status of women in order to ensure fair treatment of all women at Eastern Michigan University." In the first few years, the Women's Commission held bimonthly meetings to address the interpersonal and systemic landscape of sexism that affected women faculty members, as well as issues of gender inequality at the whole university.

In the early years, the Women's Commission was frantically busy. Casting a wide net on issues of sexism, the commission established standing committees on continuing education, criminal assault, day care, scholarships, a Woman of the Year Award, and a Women's Studies curriculum. The Women's Commission was granted a permanent office in Goodison Hall, which served as a clearinghouse, enabling women faculty members to visit and report instances of sex discrimination, interacting with a supportive environment of like-minded women. The Women's Commission was staffed by student secretaries, was open ten hours a week, and maintained its own phone line. The commission even published its own newsletter, *Womenspeak*.

During the 1970s, the Women's Commission implemented many of the priorities of second-wave feminism, whether it was securing equal rights for women students and faculty, raising awareness about sexism throughout campus, or marshaling the knowledge of academic disciplines to create courses centered on women. The Women's Commission conducted a study into the need for childcare on campus, which ultimately

led to the opening of Children's Institute; petitioned the Board of Regents to disclose all salaries; approved of the university's affirmative action plan; championed the recruitment of more women into faculty positions and worked to de-stigmatize part-time jobs so that women could pursue employment while also fulfilling family obligations; and suggested a new grievance procedure after conducting a survey with the Job Classification and Promotion program.

The Women's Commission also worked to change the cultural landscape for women students on campus by sponsoring consciousness-raising seminars in two residence halls and petitioning the *Eastern Echo*, the campus newspaper, to disband its practice of running classified advertisements that limited employment opportunities to specifically women or men.

Within only a year of the founding of the Women's Commission, members established a subcommittee on developing a Women's Studies program. Initially the program consisted of cross-listed courses in Education, History, Literature, Psychology, and Sociology, but in the mid-1970s, it became a minor at EMU. Eastern Michigan was one of six universities in the state to participate in a National Humanities grant, enabling faculty members to design interdisciplinary courses in the new minor of Women's Studies.

An Expanded Mission

In 1977, five years after its founding, the Women's Commission recast its mission, broadening its focus from supporting mostly women faculty members to all women in the EMU community. The Women's Commission voted to include representation from more stakeholders across campus, including members of the clerical and administrative staff members and students.

As the commission expanded, so too did its areas of advocacy. In the 1970s, in accordance with Title IX, EMU began to equalize funding between men's and women's sports. The Women's Commission lobbied for the appointment of more women coaches, advocated for the safety of women athletes by pressing for locks on locker room doors, and hosted events with the newly formed Women's Basketball Team.

The Women's Commission took a special interest in supporting women who had dropped out of school to pursue marriage and motherhood. It worked to help them return to college. The commission held information sessions for these student populations and also critiqued the university's scholarship program, which required recipients to live in the dormitories, pointing out that women composed some of the population that were returning to school and lived off campus. And in coordination with the Michigan Council for the Humanities, they filmed a video aimed at returning women students.

Indeed, 1977 marked a banner year for women, both at EMU and across the country. In 1977, the United States celebrated the "Year of the Woman" and held a National Women's Conference in Houston, Texas, which was designed to generate national

support for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. In response, EMU President James Brickley declared March 1977 at EMU to be “Women’s Awareness Week,” which featured “Women of the Year Awards,” the Women’s Studies Association Meeting, a Women in Business conference, a film festival, and the opening of “Womanspace,” which was the proto-Women’s Center at EMU. Womanspace, also located in Goodison Hall, was modeled on a coffee house. It was designed to be a place where women students could study, eat lunch, and converse. It also hosted lectures and film screenings and had a small library and even an art gallery. Nominations for Women of the Year were popular and competitive, with the Women’s Commission receiving more than seventy-one names among faculty, staff, and students.

The enthusiasm that radiated out of the Women’s Commission likely reflected decades of pent-up frustration among women faculty, staff, and students. It was through the vehicle of the Women’s Commission that all of these major stakeholders could use this organization to improve their experiences at the university.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, even though the national pace of feminism slowed across the country, the Women’s Commission continued to build on its achievements from the heady, early days of second-wave feminism. In this era, the commission focused on matters of sexual assault by hosting a film series on rape awareness, domestic violence, and child abuse. Members also sent a memo to all department heads about sexual harassment.

And the Women’s Commission established the Josephine Nevins Keal Awards to offer financial assistance to women faculty to pursue their research in support of career advancement. Because the Women’s Commission remained busy and essential, President William Shelton granted the chair releases from teaching as well as a personal computer, an innovative purchase for 1989.

Members of the Women’s Commission were also attentive to the organization’s legacy as well as the fate of the campus itself. The commission sent a letter to the administration, asking for a list of all of the buildings on campus that were scheduled to be demolished or those that were preserved. They also worked to include the Women’s Commission at EMU in the Women’s Hall of Fame.

The Work is Never Finished

By the 1990s, feminist activism took many different directions, including support for working parents, an awareness about empowering girls, and ongoing conversations about sexual harassment in the workplace. EMU’s Women’s Commission was at the forefront of these national trends. For example, in the 1990s, the Women’s Commission co-sponsored a panel on the nomination of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas in 1991, and it held an informational session around the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993.

Throughout the 1990s, the Women’s Commission continually supported program-

ming around Take Your Daughter to Work Day. When President Bill Clinton visited Eastern Michigan on a campaign stop in 1996, members of the Women's Commission were invited to a special reception at Arborland Mall.

Fifty years later, it is easy to see that some of the issues that the Women's Commission championed have received fresh interpretation, while others remain as relevant as before. With the prevailing doctrine that gender is a construct, the demand for events like Take Your Daughter to Work Day or legislation such as the Equal Rights Amendment have declined in popularity. As tolerance and awareness about LGBTQ+ populations has expanded, the Women's Commission has been a beacon of support, whether advocating for the opening of gender neutral restrooms on campus in 2017 or celebrating the distribution of menstrual products for all students in 2022. The Women's Commission also co-sponsored a Caregiver's Survey, documenting the impact of the pandemic on women faculty and staff.

Now that women compose the majority of students and faculty, it is imperative that the Women's Commission remain vigilant about sexual harassment and sexual assault. The rich, innovative, and sometimes surprising history of the Women's Commission in the first fifty years offers an excellent roadmap for envisioning the next half-century.

A Note on Sources

Information for this essay was located in the EMU Women's Commission Papers at the EMU Archives and taken from *EMU Today*. For historical overviews of second-wave feminism, see Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000) and Ann Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). For information on the Title IX Amendments, see Elizabeth Kaufer Busch and William E. Thro, *Title IX: The Transformation of Sex Discrimination in Education* (New York: Routledge, 2018). On feminism and feminist activism in the 1990s, see Lisa Levenstein, *They Didn't See Us Coming: The Hidden History of Feminism in the Nineties* (New York: Basic Books, 2020).

About the Author

Mary-Elizabeth B. Murphy is an Associate Professor of History and Chair of the Women's Commission at Eastern Michigan University. She teaches courses in U.S. Women's history, African American history, and the history of sexuality. She is the author of *Jim Crow Capital: Women and Black Freedom Struggles in Washington, D.C., 1920-48* and is working on a book about African American women and bus segregation before the Montgomery Bus Boycott.