

February 1, 1992 (Vol. 7, no. 11)

Dear Colleague:

The five most powerful positions in the UW-system are at present the Acting President of the University, the Chancellor of the Madison campus, the Chief of Police, the Dean of Students, and the Chair of the University Committee. It just happens that all of them are now occupied by women. The more purely academic posts--the Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs and the academic deans--are, it is true, occupied by men. This alignment of work by gender reminds me of the old adage, "Those who can do, those who can't teach." (And teaching includes, of course, research, the purpose of which is to pass on knowledge to a broader audience). The women can, they therefore do--they operate in the real world; the men can't, they therefore teach, that is, stay in the protected sphere of classrooms, bookstacks, and labs. I would like to see a further shift in the same direction. Before very long, I expect all the professional colleges and schools--but above all the Law School--will be headed by women and have faculties that are largely female. Only the Dean of Letters and Science and the Dean of the Graduate School will remain male and their faculties will have a majority of men. I see female administrators and colleagues as power figures, savvy and brave enough to confront the harsh real world, and resourceful enough to create at the center of their campus a "playpen" for their male counterparts and for those women who can't quite hack it. In the playpen, the more traditional intellectual pursuits are carried on--I mean, areas of knowledge that call for passivity (or negative capability) rather than a razor-sharp intellect and aggression: thus, theoretical physics rather than nuclear engineering, geography rather than environmental studies, history rather than historiography, the concept of law rather than the rhetoric of law, literature appreciation rather than literary criticism, construction rather than deconstruction.

As a rather wimpy male myself (wimpy in comparison with Catherine MacKinnon who was my colleague at Minnesota), I rather like this picture of the University. But is it fair? Of course not, for it will be one where the women do the heavy work of the world (finance, law, politics), while the men, protected by the tougher sex, have fun figuring out, without anger or resentment--childishly, "the nature of things" (Lucretius).

Best wishes,

