

WOMEN'S STUDIES TRAVELLING SPEAKERS

*Sponsored by the Department of Women's Studies
and
the Ruth Wynn Woodward Endowed Chair in Women's Studies*

This bureau is designed to make available to communities outside the BC Lower Mainland the teaching and research expertise of Women's Studies faculty, sessional instructors and graduate students. It allows people in these communities to decide for themselves what issues they want to examine and it provides a forum for them to explore those issues in depth with one or more speakers who have expertise in the field. As an integral part of the outreach responsibilities of the Ruth Wynn Woodward Endowed Chair in Women's Studies, we arrange and cover all costs for speakers' accommodation and travel. The communities need only arrange and pay costs for the venue and local advertising for their event.

Over the years our various outreach activities have included organizing major conferences in the Vancouver-Burnaby area. These conferences have been very successful, but in all cases the majority of the participants were from the BC Lower Mainland. We realized that holding outreach events in Vancouver and Burnaby restricted our ability to provide services to the rest of the province and the Yukon. Even where out of town participants were able to attend events here, we were reaching only those with an interest in the themes we had defined. The major direct service we provided to distant communities was a visit by the occupant of the Woodward Chair, who would give a lecture in her field of expertise.

Our response to this difficulty was to reverse the conference concept. We decided to offer a wide range of lectures, seminars and workshops to the interior, island and northern communities, and to allow them to determine, within the limits of what we were able to provide, who would visit them, what themes would be discussed, and what the format of the visit would be.

We first offered this bureau in 1990-91. That year, speakers travelled to eight locations, reaching a total audience of between 345-370, at a cost to us of \$4600. These figures are remarkable in that the attendance for this bureau was more than double that of our largest conference, while the cost of the bureau was about one-seventh of what it cost to put on that same, two-day, conference.

Without exception, response to our speakers has been enthusiastic and underlines the success of the bureau in a number of ways. For instance, Sunera Thobani, who travelled to Quesnel last year, noted that "The Indo-Canadian women who came to the evening presentation carried out a lively discussion, and as a result, they have decided to form an Indo-Canadian women's group in Quesnel." The organizers of a six-part lecture series in Whitehorse designed to help establish Women's Studies courses and programs at Yukon College, wrote in their evaluation of the series (in which two of our speakers participated):

It is probably safe to say that the possibility of tapping into the outreach program offered by the Women's Studies program at Simon Fraser University at no charge to the organizers of this series or Yukon College was critically important and made it financially possible to use outside resource persons. (*Empowering Women: An Evaluation*, p.1)

Finally, the following comments by Andrea Lebowitz, in her evaluation of her recent trip to Gold River, are a good example of the common responses our speakers receive:

The people at the talk were very positive and wanted to impress on me that this [12] was a very good turnout (pop. 2300). They wanted to know if someone would come again. ... Also, the organizers complimented WS and SFU for the Travelling Speakers -- and likened it to 19th and early 20th century efforts to bring information/literature to working people.

By assisting others in the development of college programs and by introducing the discipline in remote areas, we believe this bureau helps to close the gap between the academy and the community at large. We offer women's organizations an educational service which helps them advance their work in the community and at the same time we expand the interest in Women's Studies courses at the college and university levels. It is interesting to note that this bureau, begun in 1990, is a successful application of the recent call by the Smith Commission for universities to increase their community outreach activities.