EVALUATING WOMEN’S HOMEMAKING AND VOLUNTEER WORK EXPERIENCES FOR COLLEGE CREDIT

Ruth B. Ekstrom

ABSTRACT: This project developed methods and materials to assist colleges in evaluating the competencies which women acquire from their nonmarket (volunteer work and homemaking) experiences. Competencies were identified through interviews and questionnaires of women’s activities. Next an informal task analysis of each activity was conducted to develop a list of the competencies involved, the "I Can" lists. A twelve step counseling process, based on the use of the "I Can" lists, is described. The paper also discusses methods of dealing with faculty and administrative concerns about this type of experiential learning evaluation.

Colleges have only recently begun to recognize experiential learning—knowledge which comes from working at something rather than from formal, classroom instruction. Yet, many of these programs have recognized only the experiential learning that comes from paid work; learning from nonpaid activities, such as volunteer work and homemaking has been largely neglected.

In 1974, under a grant from the Fund for Improvement of Post-Secondary Education, my colleagues Marlaine Lockheed, Abigail Harris, and I began a study to identify the competencies which women acquire from their volunteer work and homemaking experiences. We went on to develop materials which would be helpful to women and to colleges in evaluating these experiences.

IDENTIFICATION OF COMPETENCIES

The first phase of our project involved identifying the skills and competencies which women have acquired through their unpaid work experiences. We chose to concentrate on competencies since this approach seems to help college administrators understand that learning had taken place. This approach also helps women in describing their volunteer experience in terms of the work involved rather than in terms of the organizational setting.

When a woman says to a college administrator or to a prospective employer—"I’ve done a lot of work for the local Conservation Club," it is difficult to know what kind of work was involved and how it relates to a college curriculum or to a paid job. If, instead, this woman can say "I developed and conducted a survey of regional environmental problems in our area, analyzed the results, reviewed existing state environmental legislation in relation to these problems identified by the survey, drafted new legislation to cover a major problem not covered by existing laws, and successfully lobbied for the passage of this legislation in our state," she is much more likely to have her skills in these fields recognized. By stressing competencies, we are attempting to highlight the similarities between knowledge and skills learned in other settings and those acquired in the classroom.

We did three things to identify the competencies which women acquire from their volunteer work and homemaking experiences. The first was a review of the literature about volunteer work and homemaking. A 1969 survey by the U.S. Manpower Administration indicated that the volunteer work done by women was chiefly fund raising, administration, and leading youth groups. Project Second Start, which assessed how adult programs at Brooklyn College met the needs of low income women, found that these women had acquired a variety of academically relevant skills from unpaid work. These include: 1) organizational, managerial, and leadership skills through community planning and politics and from belonging to tenants’, women’s, and religious groups; 2) technical and professional skills such as accounting, editing, researching, and translating; 3) recreational and cultural skills through experience in theater, arts and crafts, music, dance, painting, and decorating; and 4) skills relevant to health, education, and welfare acquired while working with children, youth groups, and the aging in the home or in child care facilities, counseling centers, and hospitals.

This review of the literature helped us to develop some rough categories to describe volunteer work and homemaking. We used these