

The New School for Social Research: A "Second-Chance" Program for Women

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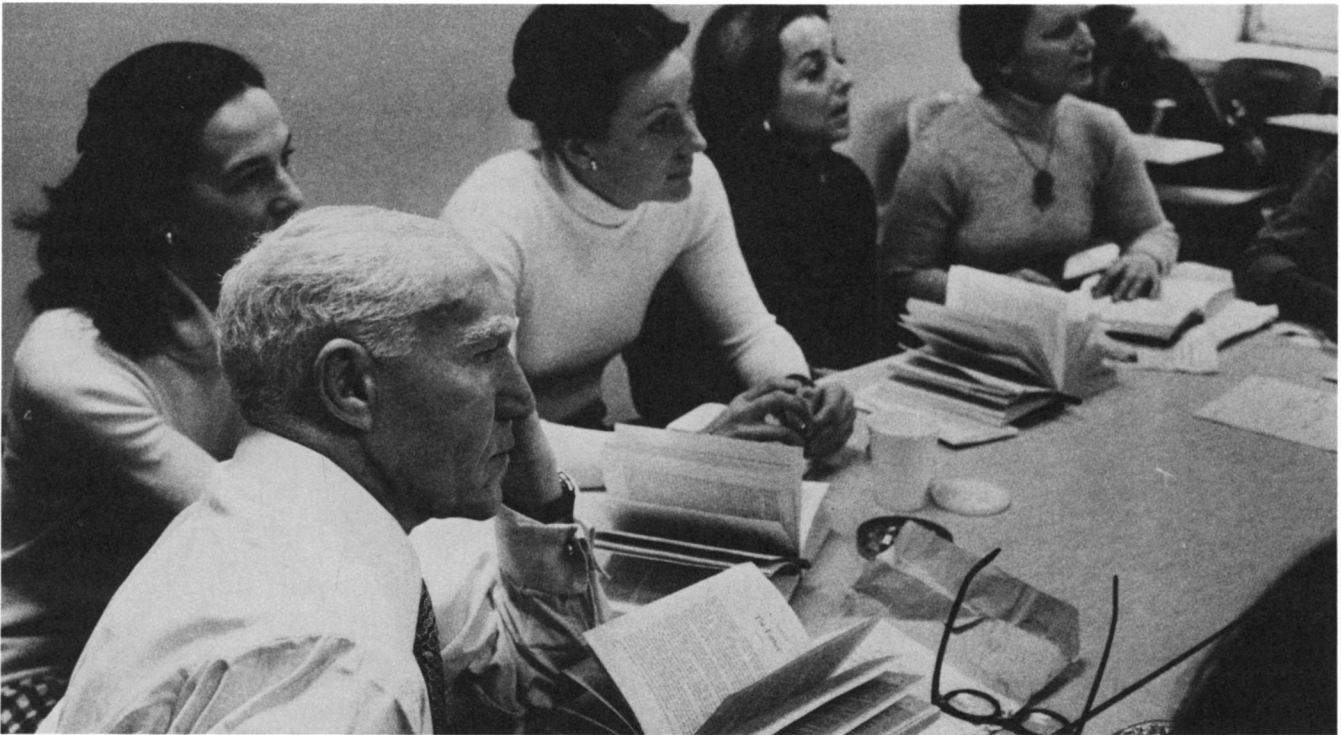


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The New School for Social Research

A "Second-Chance" Program for Women



Students are getting back into the mainstream through the Human Relations Center's classes.

by Elisabeth Hansot

A *New Yorker* cartoon shows an ample, middle-aged woman huddled in the corner of her living-room sofa clutching a tear-stained handkerchief. Her balding husband, hands shoved deep into trouser pockets, stands to one side gazing at her with a baffled, weary expression. The caption reads, "A course at the New School—that's your answer to everything." The cartoon is prominently displayed in the crowded offices of the Human Relations Work-Study Center, an interdisciplinary department of the New School for Social Research.

The New School for Social Research, at the northern edge of Greenwich Village in New York City, was founded in 1919 by a handful of dissident Columbia University professors to offer evening courses for adults who wanted to choose what they

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wanted to learn without having to take prescribed programs. It was characterized recently in the *New York Times* as an institution "that has spent its first fifty years trying to cope with the problem of what to do for an encore." The Human Relations Center is part of that encore. It prides itself on being the oldest (twenty years) continuing education center for women in the country.

Since its creation, the Center has changed its character dramatically from a leisure- and volunteer-activity orientation to a no-nonsense commitment to devising ways for women to get back into the mainstream. Ruth Van Doren, the director of the Center, has a clear sense of the need it fills. "The middle-class woman is suffering, just as the poverty woman, for lack of productive work," she says. "And frequently she has been made to feel that the work incentive itself is shameful—that it reflects badly on her husband's earning capacity or on her own

resourcefulness as a 'homemaker.' But this is changing. Women want an identity outside the family, and I hear an undertone in their voices that says, 'I will do this for me, now.' "

The Human Relations Center has about 1,700 adults enrolled each semester and about 3,500 each year; 95 percent of them are women. The typical student is a well-to-do urban or suburban woman (50 percent commute from the suburbs) anywhere from her early twenties through her late sixties. She is married with 2.5 children and motivated by the desire to get back into what she envisions as the mainstream of life. In good part because their needs are undramatic and not easily categorized, Ms. Van Doren describes these women as "forgotten Americans."

"The professional woman knows how to get what she wants," she says. "But a lot of the women who come here need encouragement, support and sensible advice. A woman may be in her thirties, recently separated and trying to make it for the first time on her own. Or she may be in her late forties or fifties with her children finally grown up and with time to begin to think about her own future. She probably has had some college study and may have worked a bit on the side, but she hasn't really had important work experience. Her husband could be a salesman or run his own business; he earns a decent living and she doesn't have to work. Scholarships for this sort of woman are nonexistent and there is little in the line of serious counseling. She needs trained help to focus herself, find out what she can realistically do as well as what she wants to do and, even more important, what is available to be done."

The Center faculty, in the New School tradition, are almost all part-time teachers working in the professional areas in which they teach. They include among their number a senior vice president of a public relations firm who teaches a course on women moving up; a former employment-agency owner and personnel director who teaches a vocational workshop designed to inform women about career possibilities and teach them how to prepare resumes and handle job interviews; a psychotherapist giving a course on future human relations; and a community medicine instructor from Mt. Sinai Hospital who gives one of the series of intensive training programs in the community services area. (Community service courses enroll 300 of the Center's 1,700 students each semester.) The faculty, busy with their own careers, create in their classrooms a sense of urgency and involvement that maintains the Center at a safe distance from the self-indulgent, desultory "teatime" atmosphere found in some women's programs.

That sense of urgency is reinforced by the

work-study format requiring students to be active outside the classroom and breaking down the time-honored separation between learning and doing. The keys to this approach are the enrollment options and the course variety available to the student. A woman is allowed to audit courses before formally enrolling for credit. As her interests develop, she can go into the certificate program, then on to a BA. The sequence isn't rigid; a noncredit student can move into the BA program and degree students into the certificate program.

A frequently travelled route for the returning housewife at the Center is to enroll in the certificate program. The certificate program is aimed specifically at the woman who has been out of school for some time and is designed to allow her to explore new vocational interests or to prepare for advanced academic training. The program consists of ten semester courses, selected partly from the Center's interdisciplinary courses and partly from courses offered by the New School, and an action project undertaken in the last year of study. The program allows a woman to tailor her studies to her special interests and pursue them at her own pace. Theoretically, a highly motivated woman could achieve this result on her own, but in fact for many who have been away from school for a long period, the discipline of a set of related and sequential courses is an important test of their abilities to achieve self-determined goals.

Central to the certificate program is the project seminar, undertaken in the final year. Its object is to capitalize on the student's ability to design and complete an independent action project and present a critical evaluation of the work. Projects vary widely in nature and scope. One woman initiated a craft program in a new Montessori school. Another helped Mexican artists present a series of exhibitions of their batik and silk-screening process. A 70-year-old woman organized art classes for the Widows' Consultation Service in New York; another set up a replica of the Human Relations Center on Long Island. Summing up the program, Ms. Van Doren says: "Think of learning as a process, a process on which you eventually have to act. What we want to measure is the growth of the student's capacity to act, and that is also a measure of her productivity."

The certificate course sets no time limit for its completion although the Center recommends taking at least one course a term. The drop-out rate is 60-70 percent, a source of considerable satisfaction for the director. "When they drop out of this program, they drop into a job or into a BA program and that's what we're looking for," remarks Ms. Van Doren. "The



Now women want an identity outside the family.

Center is here for women who use it as a tool for a more satisfying engagement with life, not for degrees or certificates."

Just recently the Center has persuaded the New School to accept the certificate for thirty points of credit toward a BA degree. Ms. Van Doren is ambivalent about this achievement. The pressure for credit comes from students who want the status of a degree and the mobility it permits from one job to another. Moreover, many certificate graduates work in health, social welfare or in the schools, where state and civil service requirements frequently make credentials a necessity to avoid dead-end jobs. "Before we asked for credit," says Ms. Van Doren, "we used the certificate to try to break down the credentials habit. The certificate stands for a special training course which is competence-oriented, and we still think that recent evidence of learning in a mature student is the best evidence for hiring." Or as one of her associates bluntly adds: "We don't believe in all this labeling, credentialism and degrees, but if you can't lick them you join them—to a degree." The price that the Center may have to pay for accreditation could be a loss of autonomy to experiment. Credit for some types of experience, such as volunteer work or part-time jobs, makes sense to the staff, and the certificate program would be the most likely vehicle for such experimentation. But the certificate program can now be tied to the New School BA; and when it is, the program comes under the jurisdiction of other departments. According to Dean Allen Austill, the New School is

not taking the initiative in pioneering credit for work experience. The Center, reflecting the interests of its clientele, is very interested in the idea of giving credit for life experiences. Ms. Van Doren thinks the issue will be raised piecemeal by each student making a special case to the dean. "That's the way change occurs in the academic world—slowly," she says.

The Center is expensive; an average certificate course costs \$80; however, courses taken for New School credit cost \$85 a credit. Ms. Van Doren is worried about the women who cannot afford the tuition and is looking for ways to reduce the cost. One way she suggests is through the College Board's College-Level Examination Program (CLEP). This national program offers a series of tests for which many colleges give credit to students who make suitable scores. Ms. Van Doren has asked the New School faculty to point out courses for which students may earn credit through CLEP tests. Ms. Van Doren encourages women to take one or two courses outside their homes to satisfy the need to "get out," and she suggests they form small "listening groups" with other women to view academic courses given on television.

Ms. Van Doren is concerned with widening the Center's constituency. "What can you do for the bright secretary who needs more education but can't get release time from her employer to improve her skills? We need scholarships as well as better counseling and vocational placement help. Without scholarship funds we shut the lower-income women out of the Center—and that will be our loss." The list of projects that Ms. Van Doren wants to undertake for the Center is long: "We should be opening up other training areas in the communications media, in the environmental field and in the paralegal and community-action fields. Why not women lobbyists or housing inspectors?" she says.

The insistent note of "me, me, me" Ruth Van Doren hears from her students signals a change of attitude to be reckoned with. To this observer it seemed as important as any of the overt activity occurring in the Center's classrooms. An unappealing refrain? Perhaps by traditional norms, but not when explained by two gray-haired women who were taking a course on self-awareness and the awareness of others. "I'm a widow and am more interested in the lives of my family than in my own. I want to get out of myself and out of my family." Three chairs away from her the same theme was echoed: "I come from a large family. My life's consisted of doing—doing for my family, then doing for my husband and doing for my children. Now I want to do for me." ■