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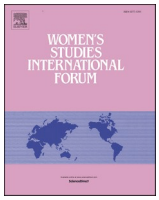

Can you get a job with that? Student endorsement of misconceptions and stereotypes about Women's and Gender Studies☆

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ABSTRACT

University students today are increasingly concerned with social justice issues and the relevance of their degrees and skills in the job market. Enrollment in Women's and Gender Studies (WGST) programs are decreasing, and university administrators must better understand student perceptions of WGST programs to promote recruitment and retention. This exploratory study used an online survey to assess the attitudes of 141 first-year students. Students indicated how often they had heard 38 different statements about WGST (e.g., *WGST is easy*) and how much they agreed with those statements. All students recognized the benefits WGST provides to social change. However, women were more likely than men to endorse positive statements toward WGST, and many students do not understand the applicability of WGST degrees and how they could help in the job market. We discuss the implications of these findings and how WGST can improve student recruitment and retention at their universities.

Women's Studies or Women's and Gender Studies (WGST) programs have been inspired and developed by feminist scholars for decades (Sevelius & Stake, 2003). As higher education institutions used only to consider the experiences of individuals who were White and male, individuals who did not align with this group demanded a change. Although the location of the conception of WGST has been contested, it is generally agreed upon that through rallies, petitions, and more, the first WGST program was established in 1969/1970 (Guy-Sheftall, 2020; Humm, 2014). Since then, WGST programs, courses, and degrees have been established in post-secondary institutions all over the globe. WGST program mandates initially focused on improving women's lives, specifically through empowerment and promoting positive personal and social change (Guy-Sheftall, 2020). However, WGST programs have also faced heavy criticism and have been challenged to look for new ways to improve students' learning. As such, WGST courses and programs have evolved and seek to raise awareness of institutionalized oppression and inequalities that are present and intersect for many diverse groups (e.g., women and gender minorities, racial and ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, and other marginalized groups; Yee, 1997). Over several decades of growth and change, WGST programs have become multi and interdisciplinary feminist university departments that have worked to deconstruct boundaries between disciplines and focus on equality and empowerment for everyone (Guy-Sheftall, 2020; Staff Writers, 2022).

Although WGST programs are constantly evolving, attempting to be inclusive, informative, and scientific, they remain controversial in some circles. Anecdotally, some critics have suggested that WGST is frivolous and impractical, and scholars have suggested that students enrolled in WGST may even be met with hostility from others who do not understand the value of WGST courses (Letherby & Marchbank, 2001). Several stereotypes and misconceptions about WGST continue to discredit WGST as a marketable degree with value for students entering the job market. Some of these historical stereotypes are statements such as *all WGST Students hate men* and that *WGST does not prepare students for future employment* (Horwath & Diabl, 2020; Letherby & Marchbank, 2001). Due to such statements, students who pursue a WGST degree or are interested in WGST courses may be warned that it is not a "real" discipline. Students may also be told it wastes time as it limits their potential job prospects through a lack of practical and marketable skills (Rollmann, 2013) or face questions such as "Can you get a job with that?" Certain degrees (i.e., science or business) are perceived as more relevant and useful, allowing students to be competitive within the job market (Porter & Umbach, 2006). If students can land a successful job or

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career quickly, they do not need to worry about the ever-growing issues of financial instability. Unfortunately, all these beliefs, stereotypes, and misconceptions disadvantage WGST programs, as students may not understand the versatility and applicability of a WGST degree to numerous industries. This may impact people's attitudes and behaviors and contribute to under-enrollment in WGST courses.

In addition to concerns about employability, some evidence suggests that university budget cuts have also contributed to the perception that WGST degrees are not "real degrees." Many universities globally (e.g., Canada, the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom) have experienced waves of budget cuts across decades (see Duan, 2016; Gahagan et al., 2022; Salley et al., 2004) which disproportionally target traditionally liberal or arts-based programs compared to science or engineering programs. When these budget cuts occur, universities reduce programming options and faculty positions. Programs that focus on social justice issues, such as WGST, are typically among the first to face budgetary cutbacks (Duan, 2016; Gahagan et al., 2022). When WGST programs are in a perpetual state of financial distress, and rumours of course cuts are frequently in circulation, the tendency to question the legitimacy of WGST is unsurprising, and could likely explain low enrollment rates, particularly when programs are cut substantially.

Common critiques of WGST programs state that these courses overemphasize political issues and students' personal experiences instead of focusing on serious academic scholarship (Stake, 2006). More broadly, many stereotypes are associated with feminism – for instance, that feminists have a "male-bashing/man-hating" reputation, indicating WGST classes are hostile and unsafe spaces for male students (e.g., Marchbank & Letherby, 2006; Pleasants, 2011). As feminism is commonly misunderstood and met with negative attitudes, the fear of being labelled a feminist can hinder enthusiasm toward WGST for students of all genders (Good & Moss-Racusin, 2010). Thus, identifying as a feminist remains a controversial stance that might be perceived as positive or negative depending on one's point of view.

Historically, feminism has also been criticized for focusing solely on the experiences of heterosexual White women (Ginsberg, 2008; Zakaria, 2021), which may lead individuals to believe WGST courses are unwelcoming spaces for individuals who lie within different intersections of race, sexuality, class, and more. Finally, many people believe we live in a postfeminist era, that gender equality has been achieved, and that there is no longer a need for feminist movements and discussions (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). This belief may lead to an overall decrease in enrollment in WGST programs. These misconceptions about feminism and WGST can adversely impact enrollment and recruitment for WGST programs (Bryne, 2022; Good & Moss-Racusin, 2010; Horwath & Diabl, 2020; Marchbank & Letherby, 2006; Richardson & Robinson, 1994; Stake, 2006).

Although critics continue to question the legitimacy of WGST, previous research has also sought to understand the various benefits of these programs. Research indicates that WGST courses can positively impact male and female students (Flood, 2011). Students who took WGST courses report that the classes had a more significant general impact, value, relevance, and legitimacy than other classes (Flood, 2011; Horwath & Diabl, 2020; Stake, 2006, 2007; Stake & Hoffmann, 2001). Students also report experiencing greater feelings of confidence and empowerment after taking WGST classes (Stake, 2006). In addition, students indicated that WGST courses substantially impacted their personal lives, thoughts, and feelings outside of the classroom. Students suggested WGST was essential for changing society and identified that their feminist enthusiasm continued to grow once the course was finished (Harris et al., 1999; Horwath & Diabl, 2020; Stake & Hoffmann, 2001). Finally, students who took WGST courses also showed declining support for traditional attitudes toward gender roles and a greater awareness of sexism in society (Stake, 2007). They reported a lower endorsement of sexist beliefs after completing a course that contained content about male privilege in society (Case, 2007). Even though both men and women report positive experiences in WGST courses, women have traditionally reported the greatest engagement with and benefits of WGST content compared to men (Horwath & Diabl, 2020; Spoor & Lehmiller, 2014). However, gender differences in perceptions of WGST remain relatively unexplored in contemporary literature, particularly in North America, indicating a gap in the current understanding of these important programs.

WGST is a complex and inclusive field that has expanded its interests into gender, queer, Indigenous and Black identities, sexuality, and social justice (Yee, 1997). Given the diversity of content taught in WGST courses, individuals may seek out the discipline because it speaks to them and their experiences of marginalization. Their experiences, combined with a robust theoretical framework that is taught, provide students with practical and useful analytic tools to succeed in various professions (O'Sullivan et al., 2016). WGST degrees may build skills related to critical thinking and awareness of social issues and help students develop an ability to use an intersectional and feminist lens in their work. In doing so, these skills can be beneficial in numerous employment spaces. In addition, the skills acquired through WGST courses may provide students with the confidence and understanding to further incorporate equity and equality into all aspects of their lives. Finally, increased personal empowerment from WGST courses can prompt individuals to pursue future opportunities more enthusiastically and seek greater overall personal success (Harris et al., 1999).

Given these benefits, assessing students' attitudes toward WGST is necessary to understand the extent to which misconceptions and stereotypes continue circulating in current post-secondary settings and whether students continue to endorse any harmful myths about these programs. Anecdotally, there is some evidence that anti-WGST beliefs are associated with ongoing attacks on WGST students and faculty, such as an incident in June of 2023 in which a "senseless act of hate" resulted in the stabbing of two students and a faculty member in a Gender Studies class in Ontario, Canada (Shetty, 2023, p. 1). Empirically, across >30 years of research, only three studies were identified that assessed student attitudes toward WGST (Horwath & Diabl, 2020; Letherby & Marchbank, 2001; Marchbank & Letherby, 2006). These studies assessed students' attitudes by looking at how often they had heard positive and negative statements about WGST, followed by how much they endorsed it. The first two studies by Letherby and Marchbank (2001) and Marchbank and Letherby (2006) looked at student attitudes toward WGST across five universities in England. They presented participants with several statements about WGST (e.g., *Women's Studies discriminates against men*), and asked students to indicate whether they agreed with those statements. The authors compared the attitudes of students who had taken a WGST course or were WGST majors versus students who had never taken a WGST course. WGST was identified to have little status in the academic hierarchy, with students reporting it as an "easy" or a "Mickey Mouse" subject (as in, a subject that is not to be taken seriously or is taken as an "easy A" type of course).

The most recent study that assessed student perceptions of WGST was conducted in 2016 in Austria (Horwath & Diabl, 2020). Their study assessed the attitudes of graduates and current students at a university that made WGST courses a requirement for all degrees to advance gender equality in academia and society. This decision had been met with polarizing opinions at the university, as some believed that the requirement of WGST was a significant feminist success as it was top-down institutional support, while others believed that we no longer need feminism and engaged in anti-feminist backlash. Through comparisons based on gender, men most frequently endorsed negative or anti-feminist statements about WGST, such as *WGST discriminates against men* and *WGST draws on outdated gender relations*. Comparatively, women more frequently endorsed positive and feminist statements about WGST, such as *WGST is important for changing society*, and *WGST increases awareness of problems*. To the best of our knowledge, this study by Horwath and Diabl (2020) was the only one to address student perceptions of WGST since Marchbank and Letherby (2006), and this is the first study conducted on this issue. Given the ever-changing socio-

political landscape of higher education and Women's Studies, it is important to continue to explore changing patterns in student attitudes toward these important social-justice-oriented programs, particularly in the wake of powerful social movements such as Black Lives Matter or #MeToo. This study sought to address the nearly 20-year research gap regarding students' perceptions of WGST.

Current study

As the debate surrounding the legitimacy and practicality of WGST has continued, there have been decreases in student enrollment and budget cuts in various WGST programs and departments (Bryne, 2022; Weissman, 2021). As society's understanding of and engagement in social justice issues continues to grow (e.g., #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter), it is important for WGST programs to fully understand and acknowledge where the current gaps are among students to ensure effective recruitment methods. In addition, the previous research assessing student attitudes toward WGST has been conducted in Europe, specifically the United Kingdom (Letherby & Marchbank, 2001; Marchbank & Letherby, 2006) and Germany (Horwath & Diabl, 2020). It is helpful for scholars, university administrators, and department heads to have up-to-date and relevant information about student attitudes toward WGST in North America, particularly in today's more politically aware social climate.

This study assessed first-year students' attitudes toward WGST. For many university programs, the misconceptions likely affect student enrollment in courses and the program. As men are more likely to have negative views and attitudes toward feminism, previous research has demonstrated that men are less likely to enroll in WGST courses (Marchbank & Letherby, 2006; Pleasants, 2011). It seems likely that men would be less informed about what is taught within WGST courses, its importance to society and social justice, and its relevancy to numerous job markets. Therefore, directly building off the findings of Letherby and Marchbank (2001) and Marchbank and Letherby (2006) but in a new geographic context, this exploratory study made comparisons based on gender to assess how often men and women had heard a series of stereotypes and misconceptions still circulating at a Canadian university and the extent to which students continued to endorse those beliefs in 2021. The current study addresses a gap in the literature that has largely been unfilled for the last two decades.

Method

Procedure

Ethics clearance was obtained from the University Institutional Review Board in Southern Ontario, Canada. This study was part of a larger project focused on recruiting new students into a WGST program, so all participants in the current study were in their first year of university. As this study prioritized increasing program enrollment and recruitment, first-year students were chosen because they were less likely to have decided on a major. First-year students are also more likely to be interested in taking classes in a range of topic areas and, thus, perhaps more interested in taking WGST courses in the future. Participants were recruited through departmental emails and social media posts on the WGST program's Facebook and Instagram. Undergraduate secretaries sent recruitment emails to first-year students in various departments across the university. All eligible students who completed the survey were entered in a draw to win one of five $200 cash prizes. Participants completed the demographic questions, during which they were asked which gender identity they *most identified* with. This was to allow individuals to self-identify with the social constructions of gender versus the biology of sex. The gender identities provided were male, female, transgender male, transgender female, two-spirit,[1] non-binary, and other. Students who selected "other" were allowed to write their own responses. For this study, participants who selected "male" were categorized as men, and participants who selected "female" were categorized as women. Once participants finished the survey demographics, they responded to a list of statements that were similar or the same as statements used in previous research about how often they had heard a statement about WGST, and then the statements were presented a second time, and students were asked how much they agreed with each of the statements (Horwath & Diabl, 2020; Letherby & Marchbank, 2001; Marchbank & Letherby, 2006).

Measures

Reach and endorsement of stereotypes toward WGST

This study used questions developed from previous studies to assess student perceptions of stereotypes about WGST (Horwath & Diabl, 2020; Letherby & Marchbank, 2001; Marchbank & Letherby, 2006). The questions were adapted to improve and align the response scales and add items related to the inclusion of transgender, non-binary, and racially diverse individuals in courses and the discipline. First, students responded to a list (38 statements) of positive, negative, and neutral statements about WGST. The list is available in Tables 2, 3, and 4. First, to assess the general reach of these statements on campus, participants were asked to indicate how often they have heard the statement on a scale of 1 (*Never heard*) to 5 (*Very often heard*). Then, to establish endorsement of statements, participants reread the statements and indicated how much they agreed or disagreed with each statement on a scale of 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*).

Participants

A total of 234 individuals opened the link to the survey. To be included in the analysis, students needed to have completed beyond the demographics section of the survey. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1. The survey was completed by 143 first-year undergraduate students between the ages of 18 to 51 ($M = 20.0$, $SD = 4$). The sample was predominately female ($n = 111$, 77.6 %), followed by male ($n = 30$, 21.0 %), and two students identified as non-binary ($n = 2$, 1.3 %). Most of the sample reported being White ($n = 94$, 65.7 %) and Heterosexual ($n = 104$, 72.7 %). Participants represented a variety of majors, the most common of which were psychology ($n = 29$, 20.3 %), criminology ($n = 14$, 9.8 %) and social work ($n = 16$, 11.2 %). Out of the 143 participants, only 25 (17.5 %) had previously taken or were enrolled in a WGST course when they completed the survey. Because there were only two non-binary people in this sample, and the analysis involved comparing group means based on gender, responses from non-binary participants were excluded from the current analysis, resulting in a final sample of 141 men and women.

Results

We used a series of independent samples *t*-tests to explore group differences between men and women with respect to their likelihood of having heard a series of statements about WGST. Next, we explored whether men and women endorse those statements about WGST. The results are outlined in Tables 2, 3, and 4. Bootstrapping procedures

[1] *Two-Spirit* is a term commonly used in Indigenous communities in Canada. Two-Spirit individuals identify as having both a masculine and a feminine spirit and are used by some Indigenous people to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity.

Table 1
Demographics of participants ($N = 143$).

Variable	*n*	%
Race/ethnicity		
White	94	65.7 %
Indigenous	4	2.8 %
Black	17	11.9 %
East Asian	4	2.8 %
South Asian	8	5.6 %
Middle Eastern	8	5.6 %
Latin or South American	4	2.8 %
Bi/mixed/multi-racial	4	2.8 %
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	104	72.7 %
Lesbian/gay	8	5.6 %
Bisexual	16	11.2 %
Demisexual	1	0.7 %
Pansexual	4	2.8 %
Unsure	9	6.3 %
Major		
Psychology	29	20.3 %
Criminology	14	9.8 %
Psych and Crim	10	7.0 %
Social work	16	11.2 %
Social work and WGST	4	2.8 %
Engineering and math	11	7.7 %
Computer science	3	2.1 %
Acting/drama/music/film	13	9.1 %
Environmental studies	2	1.4 %
Disability studies	4	2.8 %
English/French	8	5.6 %
Political science	4	2.8 %
Concurrent education	14	9.8 %
Interdisciplinary studies	3	2.1 %
Business	1	0.7 %
History	4	2.8 %
Human kinetics	2	1.4 %
Interest in WGST		
Not at all interested	30	21.0 %
Slightly interested	30	21.0 %
Somewhat interested	44	30.8 %
Very interested	39	27.3 %
Have taken a WGST course		
Yes	25	17.5 %
No	118	82.5 %

Note. No students identified solely as a WGST major, which is likely an artifact of the fact that at the university this study took place, WGST is a combined program under the academic administrative unit of Social Work.

(1000 samples; Preacher & Hayes, 2008) were used on all statistical analyses to account for unequal group sizes between men and women. Statements are organized by whether they are positive statements ($n = 13$, e.g., *WGST is a valid degree subject*), negative statements ($n = 20$, e.g., *A WGST degree won't help you get a job*) or statements that can be perceived as positive or negative depending on the individual's personal beliefs, which are referred to as 'neutral' for the purposes of this paper ($n = 5$, e.g., *Men who do WGST are more sensitive than other men*).

Heard statements

The three statements which were reported to have been heard the most often, regardless of gender, were: *WGST increases awareness of problems in society* ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.44$); *People do not take WGST seriously as an academic field* ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.41$); and *A WGST degree won't help you get a job* ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.50$). The three statements which were reported to have been heard the least often in society, regardless of gender, were: *WGST discriminates against people who are transgender* ($M = 1.58$, $SD = 0.88$); *WGST discriminates against people who are racially diverse* ($M = 1.68$, $SD = 0.96$); and *WGST is only for white women* ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 1.07$).

There were no significant differences between men's and women's likelihood of having heard any of the negative or neutral statements. However, there were several statements, as highlighted in Table 2, that women were more likely to have heard many of the positive statements about WGST than men (e.g., that WGST professors and staff are more approachable than other staff members, that WGST is a subject that can be well related to ones own life, and others).

Endorsement of statements

Separate from the findings regarding how often men and women *heard* particular statements, we also explored how likely they were to endorse each of these statements. The three statements with the highest endorsement ratings, regardless of gender, were: *WGST increases awareness of problems in society* ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 1.06$); *A changing society needs more WGST* ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.14$); and *WGST is important for changing society* ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.20$). The three statements with the lowest endorsement ratings, regardless of gender, were: *WGST is only for white women* ($M = 1.44$, $SD = 0.86$); *all WGST professors and staff are men-haters* ($M = 1.54$, $SD = 0.99$); and *all WGST students hate men* ($M = 1.61$, $SD = 1.03$).

We found several significant differences between men's and women's endorsements of the statements about WGST. First, although men and women were equally likely to have heard the following two statements, men were statistically more likely than women to endorse them: *WGST discriminates against men*, and *WGST is about politics and not science* (see Tables 2–4). We note that both statements portray negative pictures of WGST as a field. Conversely, although again, men and women were equally likely to have heard the following statements, women were more likely to endorse these beliefs than men: *a changing society needs more WGST*, *WGST provides important skills to apply to gender in research*, *WGST increases awareness of problems in society*, and *people do not take WGST seriously as an academic field*. We note that most of these statements portray positive pictures of WGST as a field, apart from the last one, which speaks to how WGST is perceived in society.

Lastly, there were several statements that women were more likely to have heard than men *and* more likely to endorse than men: *WGST is a valid degree subject*, *everyone should do WGST*, *all women should do WGST*, *WGST is important for changing society*, *WGST is a subject which can be well related to ones own life*, and *WGST increases celebration for a diversity of identities*.

Discussion

Misconceptions and stereotypes about WGST programs can adversely affect enrollment, student morale, and administrative support for continued resources and funding for WGST programs (Bryne, 2022; Weissman, 2021). The current study explored the extent to which university students commonly hear a range of stereotypes about WGST programs. We also explored the extent to which university students endorse those stereotypes. Historically, harmful stereotypes about WGST programs convey that the material is only relevant to women and perpetuates discrimination against men and that WGST courses only focus on issues relevant to White people, particularly White women (Ginsberg, 2008). The circulation of harmful stereotypes can adversely impact course enrollment (Berkowitz, 2004). Results of the current study replicate and build off previous research that has explored student perceptions of WGST (e.g., Horwath & Diabl, 2020; Letherby & Marchbank, 2001; Marchbank & Letherby, 2006).

More specifically, in the study by Marchbank and Letherby (2006), between 16 and 38 % of men endorsed the beliefs that *WGST is easy*, *WGST students hate men*, and *WGST discriminates against men*. The current study found that many students continue to endorse some of these negative stereotypes about WGST. Moreover, men were more likely than women to endorse that WGST discriminates against men. However, there have been some positive changes regarding perceptions of WGST. In Marchbank and Letherby (2006), <20 % of all students had ever heard the statements *Everyone should do WGST* and *All women should do*

Table 2
Positive statements.

	Heard				Endorsed			
	Mean – Men (SD)	Mean – Women (SD)	t(p)	Cohen's d	Mean – Men (SD)	Mean – Women (SD)	t(p)	Cohen's d
WGST is a valid degree subject	2.73 (1.36)	2.66 (1.24)	−0.25 (0.80)	0.05	3.37 (1.43)	3.99 (1.12)	−2.50 (<0.001)*	0.52
A changing society needs more WGST	2.90 (1.45)	3.34 (1.35)	−1.54 (0.14)	0.25	3.23 (1.43)	4.24 (0.93)	−3.78 (<0.001)*	1.04
Everyone should do WGST	2.21 (1.6)	2.82 (1.25)	−1.12 (<0.03)*	0.49	2.47 (1.5)	3.70 (1.28)	−4.61 (0.04)*	0.97
All women should do WGST	2.17 (1.15)	2.95 (1.30)	−3.22 (<0.001)*	0.62	2.24 (1.16)	3.48 (1.33)	−4.8 (<0.001)*	0.95
WGST is more creative than other disciplines	1.83 (1.07)	2.61 (1.33)	−2.32 (<0.01)*	0.61	2.59 (1.05)	2.98 (1.63)	−1.72 (0.09)	0.36
A WGST degree will help get you a good job	2.00 (1.04)	2.13 (1.02)	−0.76 (0.46)	0.10	2.83 (1.28)	3.22 (1.05)	−1.35 (0.20)	0.29
WGST professors and staff are more approachable than other staff members	2.34 (1.20)	2.95 (1.40)	−2.32 (0.03)*	0.45	3.07 (0.92)	3.15 (1.04)	0.40 (0.35)	0.04
WGST is important for changing society	2.77 (1.03)	3.43 (1.38)	−2.24 (0.03)*	0.53	3.24 (1.57)	4.23 (0.98)	−3.82 (<0.001)*	0.83
WGST is a subject which can be well related to one's own life	2.52 (1.21)	3.31 (1.43)	−3.01 (0.01)*	0.58	3.32 (1.22)	3.99 (1.13)	−2.82 (0.01)*	0.61
WGST provides important skills to apply gender in research	2.97 (1.32)	3.21 (1.36)	−0.87 (0.36)	0.18	3.50 (1.17)	4.13 (0.99)	−2.77 (0.02)*	0.60
WGST provides important skills for equality management and training	2.97 (1.40)	3.25 (1.37)	−0.96 (0.32)	0.21	3.68 (1.09)	4.03 (1.02)	−1.45 (0.11)	0.32
WGST increases awareness of problems in society	3.14 (1.48)	3.72 (1.42)	−1.90 (0.07)	0.41	3.61 (1.13)	4.26 (1.01)	−2.87 (0.02)*	0.62
WGST increases celebration for a diversity of identities	2.27 (1.32)	3.42 (1.39)	−2.23 (0.03)*	0.46	3.33 (0.96)	3.95 (1.02)	−2.95 (0.01)*	0.61

Note. Bootstrapping procedures (1000 samples) were used for all analyses.
* Significant at the 0.05 level.

WGST. In the current study, we asked students how often they reported hearing these and other positive statements about WGST and found that students reported hearing these statements relatively often around their campus. Yet, gender differences persist – women were more likely to have heard many more of these positive statements than men. Importantly, we acknowledge that comparisons between the current study and the findings from Marchbank and Letherby (2006) should be interpreted cautiously, given geographical differences and an 18-year gap between the two studies.

Men and women were equally likely to have heard all the negative and neutral statements about WGST. However, the fact that women were more likely than men to have heard several positive statements might indicate that positive ideas about WGST are more likely to be discussed in women's social circles and friend groups. If men are not very likely to hear positive things about these programs, they might be less likely to take these courses. In other words, it is difficult for men to form positive associations about WGST programs if they are not involved in positive narratives about them on campus. This finding has direct implications for the recruitment of men into WGST courses.

The current research results indicate that many of the stereotypes and misconceptions that have been historically most prevalent may not be actively circulating among contemporary university students. For example, in the 1970s, WGST was criticized for only considering the opinions of heterosexual White women. Yet, the idea that WGST programs are only for White women was the single least commonly heard statement (followed by the claim that WGST is exclusionary to people who are transgender or people who are racially diverse). This finding broadly indicates that current-day university students are not involved in discourse that paints WGST as a field that only applies to White women.

Generally, the endorsements of the "positive" statements about WGST were much higher than the endorsements of the "negative" statements about WGST, indicating that both men and women largely support a positive view of WGST. Students believe that *WGST increases awareness of problems in society*, that *a changing society needs more WGST*, and that *WGST is important for changing society*. However, women were, overall, more likely to endorse positive statements such as these than men. Moreover, men are more likely to endorse some negative perceptions of WGST, such as that *WGST discriminates against men* or that *WGST is about politics and not science*.

The relatively low rate of endorsement and reach of negative stereotypes about WGST does not indicate that these beliefs are not still prominent in cultural discourse. Instead, this study's findings demonstrate that the nature of discourse about WGST has shifted in recent years. The contemporary discourse around WGST focuses on program utility and implications for graduates in the job market. Two of the most heard statements in this study were that *people do not take WGST seriously as an academic field* and that *a WGST degree will not help you get a job*, highlighting students' anxieties about the usefulness of a WGST degree on the job market. Results of this study, therefore, indicate that as highlighted by previous literature (Porter & Umbach, 2006; Rollmann, 2013), the marketability of WGST degrees is one of the most common areas of concern for contemporary students, an issue which should be at the forefront of considerations for program administrators concerned about program recruitment and retention.

At the same time, men were significantly more likely than women to indicate that they thought WGST was more focused on politics than science. We also found that many women, specifically, were likely to have heard statements like *WGST is easy*. As noted, a possible explanation for why women are highly likely to hear statements like this about WGST is from family, friends, and other social groups who offer their opinions about WGST when women tell them they are taking WGST courses.

Limitations & strengths

Although this study provides important insight into how students currently perceive WGST, some limitations could have impacted the findings of this study. The first is the unequal cell size comparisons between groups. There were only 30 male participants compared to the 111 female participants. The low representation of male students participating may also indicate previous research findings that women

Table 3
Negative statements.

	Heard				Endorsed			
	Mean – Men (SD)	Mean – Women (SD)	t(p)	Cohen's d	Mean – Men (SD)	Mean – Women (SD)	t(p)	Cohen's d
WGST is easy	2.90 (1.37)	3.38 (1.32)	−1.70 (0.11)	0.36	3.03 (0.96)	2.94 (1.07)	0.46 (0.62)	0.09
A WGST degree won't help you get a job	3.31 (1.37)	3.44 (1.54)	−0.43 (0.70)	0.08	2.83 (1.42)	2.42 (1.70)	1.44 (0.15)	0.33
All WGST students hate men	2.41 (1.48)	2.63 (1.53)	−0.68 (0.50)	0.14	2.00 (1.31)	1.51 (0.91)	1.93 (0.06)	0.49
Men are scared of WGST	2.17 (1.20)	2.64 (1.48)	−1.77 (0.08)	0.33	2.30 (1.05)	2.57 (1.21)	−1.17 (0.21)	0.23
People do not take WGST seriously as an academic field	3.17 (1.23)	3.48 (1.46)	−1.16 (0.24)	0.22	3.33 (1.09)	3.90 (1.06)	−2.49 (0.02)*	0.53
WGST is too theoretical	2.21 (1.11)	2.36 (1.23)	−0.65 (0.56)	0.13	2.73 (0.94)	2.48 (0.86)	1.35 (0.25)	0.29
Men do WGST to meet girls	2.38 (1.47)	2.57 (1.48)	0.63 (0.54)	0.13	2.33 (1.06)	2.44 (1.09)	−0.48 (0.63)	0.10
WGST does not prepare students for future employment	2.76 (1.52)	2.73 (1.48)	0.08 (0.90)	0.02	2.83 (1.39)	2.34 (1.19)	1.76 (0.08)	0.40
All WGST professors and staff are men-haters	2.07 (1.33)	2.20 (1.40)	−0.45 (0.65)	0.09	1.81 (1.11)	1.43 (0.89)	1.65 (0.12)	0.41
WGST is only for White women	1.71 (1.11)	1.66 (1.04)	0.24 (0.78)	0.05	1.78 (0.89)	1.34 (0.76)	2.02 (0.59)	0.53
WGST does not reflect the experiences of racially diverse women	1.82 (1.12)	2.07 (1.20)	−1.01 (0.13)	0.21	2.33 (0.88)	2.22 (1.16)	0.57 (0.58)	0.11
WGST does not reflect the experiences of people who are transgender or non-binary	1.75 (1.01)	2.00 (1.44)	−1.01 (0.29)	0.22	2.52 (0.94)	2.26 (1.13)	1.22 (0.23)	0.24
Actually, WGST is about politics and not science	2.89 (1.42)	2.85 (1.42)	0.15 (0.85)	0.03	3.37 (0.88)	2.98 (0.99)	1.98 (0.04)*	0.40
WGST discriminates against men	2.46 (1.53)	2.32 (1.37)	0.44 (0.61)	0.10	2.48 (1.25)	1.60 (0.10)	3.39 (<0.001)*	0.85
WGST discriminates against people who are transgender or non-binary	1.61 (0.99)	1.55 (0.83)	0.27 (0.74)	0.06	1.89 (0.93)	1.73 (1.08)	0.75 (0.54)	0.15
WGST discriminates against people who are racially diverse	1.71 (1.01)	1.65 (0.95)	0.33 (0.76)	0.07	2.04 (1.02)	1.71 (1.06)	1.46 (0.15)	0.31
WGST provides a false reassurance of women's worth in society	1.75 (1.01)	1.79 (1.05)	−0.18 (0.85)	0.04	1.96 (0.94)	1.74 (1.05)	1.05 (0.30)	0.21
WGST presents an outdated picture of feminism	1.86 (1.11)	2.04 (1.23)	−0.75 (0.56)	0.15	2.44 (1.09)	2.19 (1.09)	1.09 (0.28)	0.24
WGST is patronizing to women	1.86 (1.18)	1.86 (1.12)	0.00 (1.0)	0.00	2.33 (1.21)	1.99 (1.02)	1.35 (12.)	0.32
WGST draws on outdated gender relations, which society overcame long ago	2.46 (1.45)	2.74 (1.37)	−0.91 (0.40)	0.20	2.74 (1.23)	2.54 (1.16)	0.76 (0.26)	0.17

Note. Bootstrapping procedures (1000 samples) were used for all analyses.
* Significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 4
Statements that might be perceived as either positive or negative depending on the individual.

	Heard				Endorsed			
	Mean – Men (SD)	Mean – Women (SD)	t(p)	Cohen's d	Mean – Men (SD)	Mean – Women (SD)	t(p)	Cohen's d
All WGST professors are lesbians/gay men (or members of the LGBTQ community)	1.77 (1.25)	2.22 (1.40)	−1.72 (0.09)	0.33	1.79 (0.94)	1.80 (0.98)	−0.01 (0.99)	0.00
There are lots of lesbians (or LGBTQ people) among WGST students	2.73 (1.41)	3.08 (1.45)	−1.18 (0.24)	0.24	2.66 (1.17)	2.93 (1.01)	−1.12 (0.28)	0.25
All WGST students are expected to be feminists	3.40 (1.33)	3.36 (1.46)	0.12 (0.90)	0.03	3.07 (1.25)	3.03 (1.29)	0.14 (0.44)	0.03
Men do WGST to be thought of as sensitive	2.27 (1.17)	2.31 (1.35)	−0.17 (0.86)	0.03	2.41 (1.27)	2.08 (1.04)	1.32 (0.21)	0.31
Men who do WGST are more sensitive than other men	2.07 (1.26)	2.54 (1.31)	1.82 (0.09)	0.37	2.66 (1.08)	2.29 (1.10)	1.61 (0.11)	0.33

Note. Bootstrapping procedures (1000 samples) were used for all analyses.

are more likely to participate in surveys than men, especially if they have an invested interest in the topic (Saleh & Bista, 2017; Sax et al., 2008). In addition, due to the very low response rate from non-binary students, their responses were removed from the analyses. Future research on WGST should make concerted efforts to expand the sampling of individuals who identify with gender identities beyond the traditional binary, including by way of purposive sampling of gender to provide a more nuanced comparison between genders. Alternatively, researchers could employ qualitative research methods, including interviews or focus groups, using tools such as discourse analysis or reflexive thematic analysis to understand the perspectives of individuals who identify with minority gender identities that may be commonly excluded from studies such as this one. Finally, researchers should also attempt to understand other identifying characteristics such as race/ethnicity, dis/ability status, socio-economic status, or age as they relate to differences in perceptions of WGST or intent to enroll in WGST

courses.

In addition, purposive sampling of WGST students (recruitment through the WGST program's social media in addition to the departmental emails sent out to students in other programs) may have contributed to our findings regarding students' generally positive views toward WGST. Importantly, only 25 (18 %) students in this sample had ever taken a WGST course, all of whom were women. The fact that the group of women contained students that had taken a WGST course and the group of men did not contain anyone who had taken a WGST course could have impacted the results of this study. However, we did have a very diverse sample across faculties with student representation in arts, science, business, and education departments. Future research may benefit from comparing student attitudes across faculties to understand how different departments perceive WGST.

Despite these limitations, several methodological strengths support this study's findings. This study builds on the findings of several key studies from the early 2000s (Horwath & Diabl, 2020; Letherby & Marchbank, 2001; Marchbank & Letherby, 2006), and provides valuable insight into how these attitudes have changed (or stayed the same) across time and geographic setting. To our knowledge, this study is the first to assess student attitudes in North America. In addition, using previously established measures to assess attitudes toward WGST allows for broad comparisons over time and to notice significant trends within students' attitudes across social and cultural contexts. Notably, the adaptions made to the measures, such as the inclusion of items specific to transgender and other gender-minority groups, modernized the items to make them more inclusive to individuals of all intersections of race, gender, and sexual identity. Finally, one-third of the participants in this sample identified as non-white and a substantial proportion of students identified with a queer (LGB+) sexual identity. In addition, over 15 departments/majors were represented in the students who participated in this survey.

Practical implications

Although exploratory, the results of the current study provide valuable insight into the presence and endorsement of historical myths and stereotypes of WGST. The current study results show that many stereotypes scholars have previously been concerned with (i.e., that WGST is only for white women) have possibly fallen out of favor and that many students (male and female) can see the benefits of WGST courses. The statement *WGST increases awareness of problems in society* was the most heard and endorsed statement across genders. This finding shows that students understand and acknowledge the substantial benefits of WGST courses in society and culture. As society's understanding of social justice issues continues to grow and change, it is more important than ever for students to engage in coursework that will help develop their awareness and engagement in equity, diversity, and inclusion issues. The current and incoming generations of university students are concerned with social progress, diversity, and multiculturalism (Fromm & Read, 2018). Many of today's younger students expect their peers and institutions to take a stand on social justice issues (Fromm, 2021). It is not enough for institutions to post messages on social media; social justice values must be reflected in institutional change (Porter & Umbach, 2006). Therefore, WGST should continue to emphasize the prevalence of social justice issues within their department and their considerations of all intersections of race, class, gender, identity, and more in their coursework. WGST may be especially relevant to the incoming generation of students who prioritize positive social change and believe that positively affecting the world will be an important aspect of their future careers (Spears et al., 2015; Morning Consult, 2020). The incoming generation of students has grown through several significant historical periods, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the #MeToo movement, and #BlackLivesMatter. Even in the face of adversarial events such as the attack in a Gender studies class in Ontario, Canada, in June of 2023 (Shetty, 2023), many students rallied online and engaged in various forms of pro-gender studies activism in the wake of the attack, prompting international attention (e.g., Hauser, 2023). These experiences have likely resulted in social and economic shifts in attitudes toward WGST and societal systemic issues. They should continue to be acknowledged and discussed in research and WGST courses.

Nevertheless, it is evident that students need to fully understand the benefits and relevancy of WGST in the current job market. WGST programs and faculties should use the current analysis to develop new recruitment strategies. Information should be provided to high school or first-year students who have not yet taken a WGST course and do not understand the possible benefits these courses may have to themselves, their academic career, and their future careers. The results from the current study can be used as a framework for highlighting positive aspects of WGST and to directly challenge any misconceptions that WGST will not help new graduates get a job or that WGST is not taken seriously.

Conclusion

Student enrollment is at the forefront of discussion in most academic departments and programs. Stereotypes about WGST (and feminism more broadly) can negatively impact student perceptions of WGST, ultimately impacting enrollment in courses that can be very valuable to students and faculty. The current study explored how frequently students report hearing negative and positive stereotypes about WGST. We also explored the extent to which students endorse these statements. Generally, women were more likely than men to endorse positive statements about WGST. However, students of all genders support the idea that WGST is important for spreading awareness about important social and cultural issues and increasing students' abilities to think critically about these issues.

Nevertheless, WGST has an image problem: students largely perceive WGST degrees as difficult to market in the hunt for employment after graduation. They commonly hear that WGST is not taken seriously as an academic field and that society, broadly, does not fully understand the value of WGST courses. In the future, WGST programs must highlight how their program will help students better understand and support issues of social justice. They would also benefit from clearly identifying how the skills they will develop in their WGST courses will help prepare them and provide them with essential confidence to succeed in their future careers.

Declaration of competing interest

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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