Dear Vice Provost Blair, ACIE Chair,

In our Innovation in Education grant proposal our stated goals for this website were to provide a forum for the Women’s Studies community to collaborate across the disciplines by providing access to past research and internship projects, blog and wiki spaces for research, discussion, and classroom use, and enhanced teaching materials such as syllabi, and webliographies (web-based bibliographies). Funding from the Innovation in Education Grant was essential to creating this new “virtual community” that was integrated into a new Women’s Studies Program website.

The Women’s Studies Program worked steadily with University Marketing during 2009 and 2010 to develop a one-of-a-kind website using an open source content management system. The revised website was available on February 1, 2010 and the interactive wiki and blog (virtual community) became available in May. In addition to functionality described in the grant proposal, news feeds to Twitter and Facebook were also added. These functions have been especially popular with our graduate students.

The site is an eye-catching hub that houses pertinent information for all Pitt audiences and women’s studies contacts beyond our campus. The website won a Golden Triangle award from the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC/Pittsburgh) in 2010. In addition, the School of Arts and Sciences is in the early stages of establishing a presence on iTunes U, a content distribution resource through the iTunes application that allows people to download free educational content to their computers, iPods, or iPhones. The Women’s Studies Program has been asked to participate in this effort as one of 15 video pieces that will be created by an outside video production company. The purpose of these videos is to provide a broad sense of the depth and breadth of the School and its community of learners. We are participating in this exciting
project and will be talking about the Innovation in Education Grant and Virtual Community project in one of the segments.

Another important outcome for this project has been our work with the Office of Experiential Learning. 2011 is the second year in which we have worked with two freshman students in the First Experiences in Research program. Last year, two students investigated how contemporary social media, such as blogging and web interfaces, affect the ways in which students approach the study of women, gender, and sexuality. By incorporating the creation of our refurbished Women’s Studies homepage, including a virtual community of blogs and discussion boards, the students developed a project to examine how blogs and wiki in particular can be effective in meeting our interdisciplinary goals. This project involved extensive data collection and some independent research. The students used this work to participate in the annual poster session organized by OEL. We are working with two additional students this spring.

The Innovation in Education funding was vital to our development of a new and dynamic component of our website. This “virtual community” is being used as an interdisciplinary collaborative space and provides alumni, faculty and students with enhanced teaching materials and syllabi, greater information about the Women’s Studies Program, and access to social media (Facebook and Twitter) and technologies (wikis and blogs) that allow participants to work beyond the boundaries of a given class or Blackboard group. We invite you to visit the site (http://www.wstudies.pitt.edu/) and join our community to see the ways in which participants are beginning to use the site for discussions and research materials across classes, and to highlight projects. Please also see our recent newsletters that highlight some of the developments in this project. In conclusion, I would like to take this opportunity to again thank you for the support of this project.

Sincerely,

Frayda Cohen
Senior Lecturer
Women’s Studies Program