

Surrounded by four large book shelves filled with books on the history of Germany and different women's studies topic, UW Oshkosh history professor Michelle Mouton is deciding what requirements she should put for a paper that she is assigning for her next hour class, intro to women and gender studies.

As a teenager Mouton never would of thought she would be a professor of women's studies or consider herself a feminist.

"When I was growing up, my mother was a feminist," Mouton said. "My mother was raising me during the women's movement, and she didn't get to do all the stuff, but she was definitely a feminist."

Mouton recalls being young and not understanding what being a feminist was.

"[My mother] bought me a t-shirt when I was a teenager, that said 'A fish needs a bicycle like a woman needs a man' and I could wear it," Mouton said. "I'm sure I gave it away because I thought, 'I can't wear this'. It was totally outside my paranoid that it's not true that every woman needs a man."

Fast-forward to a few years after her mother gave her the infamous t-shirt, Mouton was studying history, which opened her eyes to the oppression that women face.

"I studied woman's history when I was an undergrad at Madison," Mouton said. "I was studying history and I took two classes just because I was taking my breath requirements. And they completely turned me on."

Mouton said learning about history and realizing women weren't mentioned at all, made her truly realize the oppression that women were facing.

"Women were not in history at that point," Mouton said. "I just felt this crusade that they were on about filling in the blanks and telling the stories on women. That's 50 percent of the world who aren't represented in history and it's ridiculous."

Mouton said when she studied abroad in Germany, she realized how not only are American women oppressed, but in other parts of the world, it can be even worse of women.

"I went to Germany after I graduated from college and I did a project about a grant policy that got into the way that German society is structured," Mouton said. "At that point it was not very conducive for women who had children."

Mouton said in Germany, women are expected to be home in the afternoon to cook a hot lunch for the children and also help them with their homework. Mouton said she saw the effect this had on her friends who were studying in the same field as her at the time.

“So all of my friend I made in Germany were facing this conundrum of if they ever get married and have kids, then they won’t be able to work,” Mouton said. “And I just thought it was outrageous. We were here studying the same thing and I was going to go off and get a job and they weren’t.”

Mouton knew after seeing the different oppressions of women in societies around the world, that having a wide knowledge topics is important.

“I have like three more credits in history than everything else,” Mouton said. “I did a lot of things. I studied abroad and stuff like that, so its not like I was focused on history as an undergrad, I just ended up there.”

Mouton who mainly teaches history at UWO, said she enjoys teaching women’s studies because it focuses on issues in today’s society, that history doesn’t get the opportunity to do.

“I love that in the intro to women’s studies we get to talk about what is going on in today’s issues,” Mouton said.

UWO Interdisciplinary studies professor Liz Cannon said having a broad knowledge of topics helps teaching interdisciplinary topics.

“All of us who teach in women and gender studies come from a variety of different disciplines,” Cannon said. “That’s what’s really cool about women and gender studies.”

One of the issues that is discussed in Mouton’s class is pro-life and pro-choice arguments. Mouton said this can be a difficult subject to discuss.

“That is the hardest of the issues that we talk about,” Mouton said. “And my opinion is that we silence those who appose of it. I don’t know how to teach it so we don’t.”

Cannon said it can be hard for anyone to teach without have a biased attitude because it is human nature.

“The reality is, human brains operate due to the person’s own experiences and there are biases that the person doesn’t even know they inherited or created,” Cannon said. “No one can teach without teaching through some kind of lens. As much as we try, all we can do is acknowledge that we have biases.”

Mouton said she tries to use different readings in her class to prove points, so the author can make the argument for her.

“I won’t say that’s the only way, but that’s the best way I can think of an issue that is so incredibly polarized, is to the other authors speak,” Mouton said. “Someone said

'You can't be equal as a women, unless you have the write to an abortion,' so then I didn't have to say it, because someone else said it for me."

UWO junior and women and gender study minor, Emily Peterson is currently enrolled in Moutons intro class. Peterson said she thinks Mouton being biased on certain topics just comes with the territory.

"I believe professor mouton teaches topics in more of a biased way towards feminism," Peterson said. "But again, if someone didn't plan on learning about feminism, I don't believe they should have taken that class."

UWO student who is currently enrolled in Mouton's women and gender studies course Andrew Nichols said he doesn't think the materials Mouton teaches is biased, but sometimes the discussion can be.

"I think she is unbiased with the material in the class," Nichols said. "But when it comes to asking people for their take on a question she generally ask the women in the class, she can be a little bias in that way. Which I understand that, men have no Idea what women really go through, so she doesn't feel she needs an answer from a guy."

Nichols said regardless, he feels Mouton teaches the material and let's the student's decide how to interpret it.

"I like our professor," Nichols said. "She seems very knowledgeable about the subject, and she is not forcing you to think in a certain way. She gives you all the info and you can do with it what you will.

Mouton said she finds it difficult to teach without a biased, but she still thinks the class is important for UWO students to take.

"We are all living with it," Mouton said. "We are all living with these issues. The issues are our lives. So we can either live with them and not know what's going on, or we can live with them and be aware of them and try and interpret them."

Peterson agrees having a women and gender studies class is beneficial.

"I do believe that it is important to talk about controversial issues because one of the most important parts of a liberal education is to be able to make decisions about controversial issues based on a large variety of opinions from your peers," Peterson said. "You mature a lot after high school, when you move away from home and are more independent, and your views are sometimes affected by the new way of living because of the new perspectives your new life offers."

While Cannon said she would love to have a women and gender studies class be required, she thinks it would change the atmosphere of the class.

“While having opposing view points is really good and really helpful, if they aren’t in a position where they don’t want to engage and discuss, it can have a dampening effect on the whole class,” Cannon said.

Mouton said with a constantly changing society, she learns to adapt her class. One section she added to her class this year was the Students, Staff and Faculty for Equality training, which she had Cannon come in to teach.

“Things are changing all the time,” Mouton said. “[Learning pronouns] was the first time it had come up in my class. I haven’t taught this class in two years, but when I taught it two years ago, maybe we stepped on people, I don’t know, but it didn’t come up. That’s why I called in Liz [Cannon] this year because I wanted to do S.A.F.E. training with my class. “

Mouton, who has a 15-year-old daughter, said she sees first hand some of the issues women and girls are facing today. She said while the topics may be uncomfortable, it doesn’t mean we should ignore the issues.

“You know, no one at 15 should be having sex, but if they are, then let’s deal with it,” Mouton said. “Let’s not close our eyes.”

Mouton said one thing she would like to see differently in her class is the enrollment of men in the class. She currently has three guys in her class.

“Three [guys in a class] is a lot. I’ve done it with one, I’ve done it with two, I certainly have never had more than three,” Mouton said.

Nichols said he doesn’t mind being one of three guys in the class. He said he was surprised to see that many.

“I feel pretty great about it,” Nichols said. “I thought I was going to be the only guy in there, but when I seen Nathan and Derek, I thought that was pretty cool. If they are there for the same reason I am, we just want to learn about women's equality.”

Mouton said she thinks it could be beneficial for more guys to learn about the oppression of women and other genders, but it could also make the women in the class feel uncomfortable and not want to talk about certain topics.

“I think its good they are there,” Mouton said. “I think you just deal with whatever you get. I wouldn’t want to force guys into it because I also think it is a safe space for the women in the class and if you had half guys it would completely change the dynamic.”

Mouton said she respects any guy who takes her women and gender studies class.

“I also appreciate that it’s not easy for them to be there,” Mouton said.

Cannon who admits she has not sat in on any of Moutons classes said she has only heard positive feedback of Mouton teaching women and gender studies.

“I have the highest respect for Michelle and I have heard very good things about her teaching,” Cannon said.

****This story was a class assignment****