

Women in Distance Education: Students and Leaders

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## WOMEN IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: STUDENTS AND LEADERS

### Abstract

The different roles of women in distance education were examined in the context of current research. Women were found to account for more than half of all online students. Research indicates distance education is appealing to women because it offers flexibility and an alternative to the social constructs of the traditional classroom. Women were then found to be strikingly underrepresented in distance education leadership roles. This is the result of gender bias in the fields of both technology and higher education. Several suggestions of how to promote the success of women in distance education are presented. Further research is necessary to understand whether the lack of female leadership in distance education has an adverse impact on the female saturated student body.

## **Introduction**

### **Prevalence of Distance Education**

Emergent technology and the efforts to adapt it to promote learning have changed the future of education. Distant education was born and continues to grow. Simonson, Smaldino, and Svacek define distance education as “institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors” (2015). With the growth of online education, many people who were previously unable to attend school for a variety of reasons can now achieve their education goals fully online. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, one-third of all students enrolled in post-baccalaureate programs have taken an online class, and one-fourth are enrolled exclusively in distance education (Kena, 2016).

### **Research Question**

In keeping with the spirit of female empowerment that has erupted during this 2016 presidential election season, I sought to understand the relationship between gender and distance education. Specifically, my goal was to determine the current role of women in post-secondary distance education, both as students and as administrators/leaders. For this study, my research will focus on education in the United States and factors related to gender only; I will not include conclusions based on age, race, socioeconomic status or any other variables. Through research and analysis, I will provide suggestions on how to promote the continued success of women in distance education.

## **Women as Students in Distance Education**

### **History of Women as Students in Higher Education**

Enrollment of women in higher education has been steadily increasing since the 1970s (Kupczynski & Mundy, 2015). According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, women went from representing 9.1% of bachelor's degree seekers to more than 50% in 2000 (Francis, n.d.). Research has not presented a clear reason for women's sudden interest in a college education, but a possible catalyst for this growth is the Higher Education Act of 1965.

According to the Council for Opportunity in Education, this piece of legislation offered financial aid opportunities for lower and middle-income Americans who wished to pursue post-secondary and higher education (McCants, 2003). With the new financial aid amenities, women would feel more liberated to pursue their education.

Even with financial aid, women face barriers to the traditional methods of education. As long as traditional gender roles prevail, in addition to having jobs, many women are expected to get married, take care of children, and maintain the home, or at a combination of these responsibilities some refer to as the "second shift" (Mundy, Kupczynski, & Spillett, 2015).

When technology advanced enough to support mainstream online education, women recognized the opportunity finally reach their educational goals and added a "third shift" (Kramarae, 2001).

### **Women as Students in Distance Education**

Distance education provides women the opportunity to meet their educational goals. Because of this, it can significantly impact women's sense of achievement and empowerment (Azaiza, 2011). Higher education offers women the opportunity for economic advancement,

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intellectual depth, and further social engagements. Women currently comprise 57% of all college students and earn the majority of Ph.D. degrees (Kupczynski & Mundy, 2015).

The growth of distance education is inevitable; women will continue to seek an education that is flexible and fits their lifestyles most easily. The National Center for Education Statistics projects that enrollment of females in degree-granting postsecondary schools will increase 16% between 2013 and 2024, compared to 11 % for males (Hussar & Bailey, 2016). Meanwhile, approximately 70% of institutions have accepted online education as an integral part of their future (Simonson et al., 2015). With women increasingly committing to education while institutions are increasingly committing to online education, the future growth of women in distance education is sure.

### **The Future of Women as Students in Distance Education**

In her thesis at the University of Central Florida, Jane Moody identifies the most common issues expressed through distance education research as it relates to women's experiences (2002). Moody examines several difficulties women face in the design of online classes, a few of which I will address: communication and social support (2002). Each of these issues leaves room for improvement that could help maintain or even increase the level of female participation in online education. Regarding course design, Kramarae reminds us, "early designs and decisions about structure and delivery can have long-lasting consequences" (2001).

Issues related to communication and its function in the course is a concern for women (Moody, 2002). As women's communication methods differ significantly from men's, this gap can impact the continuation and ultimate effectiveness of online discussion. In online discussion boards, women tend to participate more interactively with the goal of social learning, while men

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make longer and less engaging contributions for assignment completion purposes (Anthony, 2012). This difference in motivation to participate in online discussion would be wise to keep in mind during the course design process. More frequent questions that require shorter initial responses and more secondary responses would both compliment women's interactive participation tendencies and encourage men to engage in discussion more often.

Another hurdle that women must face in online learning, according to Moody, is the lack of social support that is generally associated with face-to-face learning (2012). Studies support that women often strive to form a social identity or be part of a group when participating in online education (Smith, 2015). This is similar to the issue with communication discussed previously but is more about collaborative learning than solely discussion forums. To promote the success of students, course designers should include group assignments and other types of cooperative practices that encourage community in education.

### **Women as Leaders in Distance Education**

#### **Women as Leaders in Higher Education**

Although more than half of higher education students are women, females are underrepresented in the accompanying leadership roles. Women currently account for 50% of assistant professors, 38% of associate professors, and 24% of full professors (Kupczynski & Mundy, 2015). The gender gap is very apparent. According to Kupczynski et al., women see the glass ceiling and are less motivated to pursue higher professional levels of leadership (2015). Online education administration would seem to be the solution to escaping the “boys club” of college faculty.

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Research suggests that distance to may offer a more supportive environment for female education administrators (Perrakis & Martinez, 2012). Much like the benefits of being a student in distance education discussed earlier, participating as faculty or administration in distance education offers a high degree of flexibility. Teaching online allows women to adjust work to the everyday demands of life as well as skip the sometimes oppressive culture of professional higher education. Research also suggests that leadership in online learning requires characteristics that are traditionally associated with women, such as listening and empathy (Kark, Waismel-Manor, & Shamir, 2012). These give women a distinct advantage in the field, but the gender gap has yet to close.

Another key factor in the low representation of female leaders in specifically online education is the stereotype that men are more skilled with technology than men. Despite women's historical commitment to the field of education, online education is still commonly perceived as "just another technology field" (Kupczynski & Mundy, 2015). This ignorance of the educational knowledge involved in online learning combined with the stereotype that men understand technology better than women, according to Kupczynski et al., likely results in the hiring of fewer women (2015).

### **The Future of Women as Leaders in Distance Education**

Although the field of higher education is considerably gendered, the future of distance education administration will call for more female representation. Specific characteristics of leadership in distance education are more often found in women than men, which will be apparent to the success of the leadership and eventually level the field. With time, if left untouched, more women would be drawn to online education administration.

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Closing the gender gap in a timelier manner would take considerable effort. The first step is to communicate the issue to the people involved. It can be difficult for women to confront sexism, but it is essential for change. I would suggest that people currently in leadership roles in distance education be aware of gender bias and, if the opportunity arises, give women the same consideration as men in the hiring process. One at a time, women can become visible leaders in online education.

### **Conclusion**

#### **Summary of Findings**

The roles of women as students and leaders could not be more different. Women were found to account for the majority of all online students. Research indicates distance education is appealing to women because it offers flexibility, thus allowing them to work and take care of a family, and it offers an alternative to the social constructs of the traditional classroom where men tend to dominate the conversation. Women were then found to be strikingly underrepresented in distance education leadership roles. This is the result of gender bias in the fields of both technology and higher education. Women struggle to overcome the stereotype that they are less skilled with technology than men. The lack of women in leadership roles in higher education is systemic and can only be overcome one woman at a time.



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### **Call for Further Research**

The difference in findings of the two roles of women in distance education creates an interesting question for further research. The current generation of female online students are being taught almost exclusively by men, with few exceptions. This likely has an impact on the female students, but research into this specific concern has not been conducted. Further research is necessary to understand whether the lack of female leadership in distance education has an impact on the female saturated student body.

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