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Enrollment in Distance Education Affects Women Differently Than Men

Introduction:

Distance Education is a phenomenon which has grown enormously within the past few decades. With the advent of new technologies, Distance Education (DE) no longer relies on correspondence through the mail systems as it has in the past, but is now a rapid, effective, and often synchronous course delivery method. There is tremendous diversity in terms of the types of courses offered, delivery methods, technology use, variety of providers, and the range and effectiveness of courses. This diversity is also seen among the participants in DE courses. As DE instruction becomes more and more global, it becomes increasingly available to a wide range of students. Along with this wide range of students comes a wide range of needs.

Researchers are finding that specific needs among DE students vary among different demographic groups. Different groups may reflect the students' different ages, cultural backgrounds, learning styles, levels of motivation, and gender, just to name a few. While each of these specific parameters can affect how a student will fare in a DE course, this paper will focus primarily in the different needs of women versus men in Distance Education courses. There have been many studies comparing the needs of these two groups and how each group is generally perceives their experiences with DE learning.

Women generally have very different experiences than men do when participating in DE learning. There are many reasons why women and men are affected differently and have different experiences with DE courses. One reason is that women often have many roles to fulfill along side of their roles as students and this can cause women to perceive Distance Education very differently than men do. Women also tend to interact differently with instructors and online learning situations than their male peers do. Class discussion and communication are perceived differently for both men and women, and finally, differences in technological awareness may make the learning experiences different for males and females. There is research available to support each of these claims.

The Multiple Roles of Women DE Learners:

Women's roles in the home and in the workplace are constantly being redefined and many women are finding that keeping up with the demands of both home and career leave very little time for furthering their educations. Distance education has emerged as one of the most popular and sought-after course delivery methods for working women and mothers because of the flexibility that it provides. The U.S. Department of Education released a study in 2001 showing that older women with families and jobs were more drawn to undergraduate distance-education programs during the 1999-2000 academic year than were members of other groups (Carnavale 2002). Often, women must juggle their education with child-care or other familial obligations, and jobs. The rising popularity of DE courses has a lot to do with the fact that students are able to do coursework on their own time for the most part. This consideration of flexibility is relevant to all DE learners, but is to no group as important as it is to women.

In a study conducted by the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium (CTDLC) designed to evaluate the differences that men and women report when taking DE courses, two open-ended questions were included on the CTDLC's standard course evaluation for the fall 2000 semester. The questions invited students to comment on their experiences as learners in DE course in as much length and detail as they wanted to. Gender was not referred to in the wording of the questions because the researchers did not want to color their respondents' answers. The two questions asked were: "Is there anything about the online classroom that has made it easier for you to learn, achieve your academic goals, or participate in class discussions (as compared to a traditional classroom)?", and "Is there anything that has made it harder?" (Sullivan, P. 2001).

The students of both genders indicated that "flexibility" was a major issue. Fifty percent of the women and forty-two percent of the men cited flexibility as the most positive reason for taking DE courses. Even though both genders chose the DE format due to this feature, the reasons for wanting flexibility in their courses were different. Women chose DE because they had jobs and families to take care of. Men less frequently stated other responsibilities such as family as a reason for choosing the online format. One can conclude that for women, flexibility is a necessity, but for men it is merely a convenience.

In a letter written to the editor of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in response to Scott Carlson's article "Distance Education Is Harder on Women than on Men, Study Finds", Karen Ledbetter writes:

I feel that women are availing themselves of the opportunity to get degrees via distance education simply because they now can do what they have always wanted to do. ... Now we can participate in the intellectual stimulation of a college environment, interact with others, do research, network, and open new opportunities for ourselves ... without having the guilt of raising latchkey children and serving fast food every night. ...

(Ledbetter, K. 2001)

Interaction with Instructors and an Online Learning Environment:

Online learning environments share some of the same aspects of traditional classroom environments such as course content, student accountability, types of assignments, and types of assessments. There are, however, many differences between the two mediums and students often must decide which environment will be better for them. Some of the differences include course delivery, anonymity, communication between instructor and student as well as between students, independent learning, and the use of technological skills.

There are many different learning styles and many studies have been dedicated to evaluating what types of learning styles are conducive to online learning. Is there a difference between genders and ability to thrive in an online environment? According to the study conducted by White & Weight, (1999), "female students appear to respond more strongly than male students both to the communication advantages offered by an online learning environment and also to the more negative impersonal aspects of the online classroom." This may be due to the fact that discussions and communication is usually anonymous and women feel more comfortable working within this anonymity. Women who would normally be quiet

and participate infrequently in face-to-face settings may feel more at ease and worry less about the perceptions of their classmates.

There is data that suggests that male students seem to be more comfortable working independently in online situations than their female counterparts. The data also suggests that female college students miss the interpersonal elements of the traditional classroom, like student/teacher interactions, more than their male counterparts. Traditionally, males have been socialized to work more independently and be less social than females (Wood, 1994).

References:

White, K. and B. Weight, (1999), *The Online Teaching Guide: A Handbook Of Attitudes, Strategies, And Techniques For The Virtual Classroom*, Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.