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Excerpts from:

THE THIRD SHIFT: WOMEN LEARNING ONLINE

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PART 1: INTRODUCTION

Universities in the United States are undergoing dramatic changes as they respond to a competitive global economy, stunning new technological opportunities, and the increased need for and interest in continuing education courses and programs. At the same time, higher education has become more market-oriented, and, according to some critics, more hostile to the development of inclusive education in universities. Computer technology has been at the heart of many of the changes, and it has transformed the delivery of education, the development and dissemination of knowledge, and communications between students and scholars. While some administrators and educators have predicted that bits and bytes will replace brick and mortar in the high-tech college of the 21st century, others are dubious that technology has or will change the fundamentals of education and university learning--for better or worse.

THE THIRD SHIFT

In 1989 sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild published a landmark study of work and family conflicts in which she introduced the metaphor of a “second shift” for women in the home. Most women, she explains, “work one shift at the office or factory and a ‘second shift’ at home,” culminating in the equivalent of an extra month of work over the course of a year. One interviewee explained that although she resisted the idea that homemaking was a “shift,” she did feel that “you’re on duty at work. You come home, and you’re on duty. Then you go back to work and you’re on duty.” As Hochschild concludes, “Her home life *felt* like a second shift.”

This report elaborates Hochschild’s still-timely metaphor of work and family life. It adds education to the equation as a third shift--in addition to paid work and work in the home--for many female students. As lifelong learning and knowledge become ever more important to economic well-being, women and men find themselves juggling not only work and family, but also demands of further schooling and education throughout their lives. In this report, women students, especially, describe how they grapple individually, often in isolation, with time constraints so they can unobtrusively squeeze distance learning into their already packed work and family lives. Through distance education, technology offers new opportunities for many women to achieve educational goals. This report explores

why women pursue the third shift, how they manage to balance work, family, and education, and what would make distance learning easier for them.

COMING TO TERMS: WHAT IS DISTANCE EDUCATION?

The terms online education and distance learning (DL) refer to a system and process of connecting students, teachers, and learning resources when they are not in the same location. (Distance education has been tied to communication technologies for many years in the United States, initially after the establishment of an efficient postal system.) In the past several decades, the format of distance education has changed from primarily paper-based instruction to integrated multimedia (such as the delivery of courses via TV programs) to the use of networked computers (the Internet) and the World Wide Web. Internet-based distance education is becoming the major delivery method in the United States.

The division between online education and e-learning is becoming blurred as many universities form partnerships with businesses and each other to better compete in a greatly expanded global market for students. Some people in business talk about continuing or adult education primarily in terms of modules that can be taken when new skills are needed for particular tasks. However, most study respondents believe that providing skill training, while necessary for many people and businesses, is not the same as helping prepare students for long-term effective functioning in a variety of situations in a diverse society.

The growth of distance education has resulted from many factors, including the following:

- Decreases in government subsidies of the public institutions of higher education
- Increases in costs of higher education at both public and private institutions
- Increases in the number of women who are employed
- Reductions in secure, long-term jobs, a change that places a premium on lifelong learning and learning new skills
- Increases in credential requirements for entry to and continuing work in many jobs
- Rapid changes in information technologies
- Increases in online business (including education)
- Increases in venture capital funding in knowledge enterprises
- Increases in college enrollments
- Increases in attention to lifelong education
- Increases in competition among institutions for education dollars

- Increases in the globalization of competitiveness and commerce
- Shifts to the use of web-based training for workers
- Shifts by the U.S. Army's to distance learning via laptop computers

In 2000, students who could afford them had their choices of more than 6,000 accredited courses on the web. While 710,000 students were enrolled in distributed learning courses in 1998, more than 2 million students are expected to enroll in 2002 (U.S. Department of Education, Web-Based Education Commission, 2000, p. 77). According to a recent government document, the average DL student is 34 years old, employed part-time, has previous college credit--and is a woman (U.S. Senate, 2001).

Some call what is happening an educational revolution--the first major change in higher education in many centuries. Of course the statements that higher education has remained basically the same for many centuries ignores what, for women, has been a revolutionary change during the last century and half: The admission of women into colleges and universities has evolved from a statistical rarity to women slightly outnumbering men overall in undergraduate programs.

Online education should offer important new options and opportunities for women and men interested in higher education, courses, or degrees. Many promoters of web-based courses promise increased and improved educational opportunities, especially for the educationally disadvantaged, which can include adult students, single parents, and others who are unable to attend courses on campuses because of job and family responsibilities, health and physical limitations, and incarceration. However, the technology-inspired and -directed changes in higher education programs will not automatically bring increased equality to everyone interested in and deserving of university courses and degrees. In fact our technological history shows that, at least initially, the uses made of new media mimic existing methodologies and disciplines.

This report examines the convergence of two major trends: the growth of technology and distance education in the college and university setting, and the demographic shift toward a predominantly female population of nontraditional age college students (60 percent of students over the age of 25 are women). It focuses on understanding why women pursue online education, what constraints they may face in doing so, and how they perceive online culture, social identity, and communications.

WHY ASK WOMEN ABOUT DISTANCE EDUCATION?

In this study of gender and online education, we have attempted to remedy the lack of attention paid to women's interests and involvement with online education by paying special attention to women's assessments of their experiences and concerns.

Why is attention to women's perspectives needed in distance education? First, women are the primary users of online education, yet they are dramatically underrepresented in the high-tech sectors charged with producing technological solutions and designing technological delivery systems, software, and educational packages. They are also underrepresented among college and university faculty and administrators currently changing distance education.

Second, many women returning to college classes (whether for career advancement, higher wages, or personal satisfaction) face significant barriers not usually experienced by men, or at least not experienced to the same degree. Many women balance job, community, and heavy family responsibilities against their academic work. They often have more serious financial burdens. Traditionally they have grappled with these difficulties while also facing inflexible class schedules and academic policies, inadequate childcare, lack of appropriate housing, and lack of reliable transportation. Distance learning programs may possibly alleviate some of these difficulties. Is this the case? What do women think about the new educational format?

Finally, adult women often have been--and are today--targeted as a primary constituency for online learning. In the past century, women constituted the majority of students in correspondence courses. Educators usually thought of these women, if they were thought of at all, as education consumers working on the sidelines of higher education to fulfill individual goals. Now that distance education programs have evolved technologically and, under various social pressures, moved to the center of many university programs (at least in terms of long-range plans), universities are searching not only for successful, cost-efficient online courses and programs, but also for additional students to take the courses. Adult women, who typically have more family/work responsibilities and time demands than most adult men, are still targeted as one of the prime constituencies of an increasing online student pool, although evidently not as consumers of the new expensive computer science and post-graduate business courses and

programs.* Yet we know little about how this group of students and potential students feels about education or about how distance education may or may not increase their access to education.

Many of the women who participated in this study described themselves as having problems (e.g., not enough money to continue their education, many family responsibilities) that require them to improvise individual and often extremely difficult solutions. While their individual situations differ, the number of women currently working to complete courses and degrees online represents a social phenomenon. Awareness of women's problems and action to help overcome the problems are needed to increase the success of the women and the online programs.

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF METHODOLOGY

This report is based on a study of interview and questionnaire responses from more than 500 women and men from many occupations, as well as a review of published research on distance learning (see the Appendix in the printed report for a more complete description of methodology).

Data were collected over a 16-month period using in-depth interviewing and an online questionnaire. Information was gathered from a total of 534 people (481 women and 53 men), including many women re-entering academia, potential online students, and teachers and administrators interested in the possibilities and problems of online learning. The interview protocol and online questionnaire included questions about access to resources needed for online learning, learning styles, best and worst educational experiences, and experiences, worries, and successes regarding online education. Interviews were conducted in a variety of places including homes, offices, businesses, and schools.

The focus in this study is on researching perspectives and recurring themes expressed by the respondents. The emphasis in this study is therefore on long-term issues that have been largely ignored in research and on discussions about attitudes and practices on the Internet and in online education.

* [Advertising for some courses seems to be aimed at men. For example, a recent advertisement announcing a new online master's degree in business administration features a photo of a young man in a business suit carrying a baby and groceries. The text reads, "So you can get that degree you need to advance your career, without putting the rest of your life on hold" \(Smart Money, Feb. 2001, p. 151\).](#)

PART 2: WHY DO WOMEN GO ONLINE? EDUCATIONAL PLANS, PREFERENCES, AND ASPIRATIONS

EDUCATIONAL PLANS

Contrary to a perception that most online students pursue discrete skills-oriented courses for career or other pragmatic ends, women responding to the survey part of this study reveal a wide range of motivations and goals for their online experience. Indeed most respondents are pursuing degrees and emphasize the personal enrichment of the experience as well as its utility. A smaller number pursue courses to meet career needs, while others take courses simply for the enjoyment of learning. Although women have varied backgrounds, most have clear visions of what types of courses and degrees they want and for what purposes. The surprise is, perhaps, how focused they are despite a dearth of clear information about accredited online courses and programs in comparison to traditional programs.

Summaries and examples of respondents' plans follow [in the printed report available from AAUW].

PREFERENCES

Adult online students came of age in traditional classrooms--rooms with desks in rows facing a teacher's desk or a dais on an elevated platform. Even now, similar institutionally drab campus rooms are used in 50-minute sequences and are equipped with bells that begin and end the time that teachers and students spend together. Increasingly classrooms, at least in better-endowed colleges, are equipped with electronic teaching aids such as overhead projectors and connections for computers. While classrooms offer a place for students and teachers to meet on a regular basis, with the possibility of stimulating conversations and challenging lectures, some students may experience the classroom and its rhythm and structure as confining, tedious, or unduly regimented.

Now that distance learning has created new means of delivery for education, we asked respondents whether they would prefer online or traditional classes.

Almost half of the approximately 350 women who responded to this question opt for online courses, the vast majority for very pragmatic reasons involving their current work and family situations. (Women responding to the online survey may be more likely to favor DL than a representative sample of women in school might be.) Dozens of women praise the flexibility offered by online courses, and many

others cite reasons related to the control of their time and schedules. A much smaller number of women explain that they actually prefer the online learning experience itself. [See the full AAUW report for the specifics.]

Many women mention that distance education helps them control childcare and travel costs, and some list these indirect costs as the primary reason for their online preference. “If I could cut my two-hour per day commute to classes, my life would be so much easier,” explains a single mother who lives at home. “I pay \$500 per month in daycare fees so that I can go to school.”

Women who wrote about physical problems and psychological characteristics in traditional classrooms also indicate in follow-up conversations that there is very little understanding of their special needs. Working online often alleviates problems of access associated with physical disabilities.

Traditional Classroom

While women who have taken only traditional courses are likely to say that they prefer traditional education, many of them also say that they are interested in trying distance education courses. Many women who have taken both say they prefer traditional classes, but their situations make it impossible or difficult for them to take such courses. Women prefer traditional methods of instruction, in descending order of prevalence, for face-to-face interaction, the structured pace of the traditional classroom, their conviction that more is learned and retained when students attend on-campus classes, and their desire for immediate feedback from teachers and fellow students.

SAMPLE QUOTE: I prefer traditional ... but I did like certain aspects of distance learning because 1) it's at my pace, 2) I can zap off e-mail to the professor, and 3) CONVENIENCE and time savings in commuting. I would not have taken the class otherwise because of distance and working full time. However, one disadvantage of distance learning is lack of interaction with professor and other students, and missing the classroom dialogue. --Reference librarian, 52.

Enjoying the interaction and social aspects of the classroom

Most women who prefer the traditional classroom point to its social atmosphere and face-to-face encounters. Significantly, these women view interaction online as a less satisfying, immediate, or authentic form of human contact than face-to-face contact. “I prefer being with live people over sitting in front of a computer alone,” a high school English teacher comments. Another woman states that online

instruction would not make her feel like a student. As an account executive says: “I recently had to choose between the two. I chose traditional because I would miss the human contact.”

Just as some women prefer DL for the autonomy and self-pacing they feel it allows them, other women prefer the traditional classroom for its structure. A driving instructor admits that she “needs a structured environment and attention,” and another respondent observes that she tends “not to do my best in distance education (just enough to get by).” A few of these women feel that the traditional classroom is a sterner taskmaster than the Internet, where they can “ ‘blow off’ the ... courses ... too easily,” as a 42-year-old woman describes. A teacher confirms, “Traditional classroom makes more demands on my efforts. Keeps me more on track.”

However, most respondents who have taken online courses are generally enthusiastic about computer-based learning. Other studies comparing online courses to traditional courses with similar content indicate that students can be equally satisfied with different methods of learning.

Many recent studies are primarily case studies with small sample sizes. They are also limited in that students tend to prefer the course delivery method in which they participate. But the studies give some indications that while these delivery methods differ, many students can be satisfied with each. A major lingering concern, however, is that many students do not feel they have a choice about the educational delivery method.

Regardless of what they most want, many of the women in this study report that they need to take online courses to successfully manage their other responsibilities. They repeatedly report the need to be close to home for family obligations. Some men also report that because of employment obligations they want to take courses online, and several remark that they cannot leave their families to travel to or stay on the campuses that have the desired degrees. But the women repetitively reported the need to be close to home for babysitting, cooking, and cleaning.

A 31-year-old salesclerk and part-time student gave a fairly typical response when she said: “I really prefer to learn through discussions, but right now we need to save money, and I need to stay home with my children. My husband would be in favor of distance education since I would be able to care for my children instead of putting them in daycare.”

AN EDUCATION OF LAST RESORT?

Respondents in this study were asked if they thought that distance education is a good alternative study method when it is the only way to take a course. Not surprisingly, almost all responded with at least an initial “yes.” More than half stated that distance learning provides excellent opportunities for women who have children, heavy work responsibilities, disabilities, or tight schedules, or who reside in geographically isolated areas.

Other respondents similarly characterize online learning as the educational option of last resort for some students who “may not have another chance to further their education,” as a 34-year-old housewife describes. A 30-year-old with a child at home notes, “If the classes I took weren’t online last semester, I would have dropped out of school for sure.”

[Distance learning] allows us the option to continue growth during what could be inhibiting years. --Program consultant, 52, married, child at home, DL experience

Some women say that online programs are not only a viable last resort for women with tight schedules, but, even more explicitly, they provide equal opportunities. “To deny an online education would be to deny education to someone based on a handicap. The handicap may be lack of transportation, childcare, or even a ‘handicap’ on the part of an institution [with] a limited number of faculty, courses, and programs,” states a 51-year-old director of communications.

BEST AND WORST EXPERIENCES

Knowing what students think of as their best and worst educational experiences is an important basis for thinking about any major changes in higher education. What do women--or men--want from their education? What delivery methods, classroom styles, curricula, or other characteristics stand out in their minds as especially positive or negative? Hundreds of women were asked to assess their educational experiences and, significantly, most describe an online course as their best experience. Their recent educational experiences and the stated focus of this study probably produced more examples of online courses as best experiences than we would otherwise find.

LEARNING STYLES

There are very few studies that look at the process of learning in online and distance education contexts, let alone the perspectives of the tutors and students involved. --Vice president of education in a company that provides online tutoring and learning support to higher education institutions

Online courses use a variety of teaching and learning styles, and the options will increase in the future, at least for those who can afford and wish to use computer microphones and cameras. Most respondents list more than one way when asked how they learned. Yet the highest number choose independent work because they have very tight schedules and they are going to receive grades based primarily on their individual work.

While more than half of the women list independent study as their first choice, many of them say they learn best by first reading, researching, and writing and then participating in group discussions to hear other opinions and ideas. “Independent work gets the knowledge available, the discussions implant it,” a 22-year-old flight instructor explains.

Many women prefer independent study because they can count on themselves more than anyone else, an important factor for people with tight time schedules. “I think the mature learner is usually on a mission, and independent work is fine,” summarizes a high school guidance counselor taking a DL course.

The next most frequently voiced opinion is that learning takes place in integrated ways, from three methods (group, independent, and a mix of both)--a “totality of elements,” as an administrative assistant describes.

A smaller number of women indicate that they learn primarily through group work, because they are team players, or socially outgoing.

Many women reported enjoying group discussion but not group work.

Teachers are more likely than are women students to be interested in including group work in their courses.

THE E-STUDENT: WHO IS MOST SUITED FOR ONLINE EDUCATION?

Women responding to questions about the people most suited for online education mention both the pull factor (being interested in online learning because of the

particular attractions of this method of studying) and the push factor (barriers to access to other methods of studying). Many note that success online depends on motivation, time-management skills, maturity, and the ability to work late at night or very early in the morning. Many of the respondents said that online courses are more likely to be a good fit for those older women who are more focused on goals and less on social interaction.

We asked the respondents to focus on the attributes of individual students. We could also, with benefit, have asked what characteristics an online program must have to make it possible for students to study effectively and finish courses successfully. One possible response is the ideal educational experience provides students with a variety of different learning opportunities (an integrated system of online time, lectures, collaborative sessions, one-on-one interactions with a peer or professor), considers employment and family responsibilities, and offers courses at a cost that reflects not only institutional costs but also the resources of students. Some of the teachers we interviewed pointed out that it is in the interest of society that someone takes care of the children, so our society should be particularly supportive of the people who serve in this way.

PART 3: THE DIGITAL DIVIDE: GAPS AND BRIDGES

The initial euphoria over the Internet resulted from its democratic potential and environment. The Internet was an electronic space that did not see race, sex, socioeconomic class, or age, and thus admitted everyone as equals. Studies in the 1990s, however, sounded cautionary notes that access to and use of computers varied greatly depending upon class, age, nationality, race, and native languages. These studies led educators and policy-makers to recognize a digital divide in education and online culture.

Yet in searching for factors that distinguish and explain the digital divide, researchers often ignore gender and focus exclusively on race/ethnicity, class, or region. In many digital divide discussions little mention is made of the differences between women and men overall or in any racial or ethnic group.

In addition most surveys do not seek information about gender differences within households. We know that “family resources” often are not evenly divided among males and females in a household, so studies that treat the family as one unit of analysis do not give us information about computer ownership and use *within* the family.

Most surveys of Internet users pay attention to the socioeconomic and employment status of the users, but do not ask the women and men respondents questions about, for example, work and family responsibilities--and thus about time and financial factors that may be centrally responsible for differing rates of computers purchased, maintained, and frequently used.

STUDENT COSTS

Students and prospective students discussed costs of education more than any other topic. Many people remain convinced that distance learning eventually will be a relatively inexpensive mode of education. Many women with difficult economic situations express keen interest in taking courses; however, at the moment distance learning opportunities are disproportionately taken by the relatively well-resourced. Some poorer students may take a course and then temporarily drop out of the program to earn and save money to pay for the next course, trying to earn a degree even if it takes many years.

Understanding the full costs of education also requires understanding indirect costs and, for women, inequalities of power, resources, and access in families. For example, respondents indicate that the cost of childcare is usually added to women's lists of expenses but not to men's. Successful students report that they have the support of family members. But many report heavy home demands, which often make it difficult for them to take and complete distance education courses.

Tuition

Most students report paying approximately the same tuition for online classes as they do for traditional courses.

Funding for DL may be more limited or restricted than for traditional courses. Several women comment that restrictions on funding and loans for distance learning impede their participation. "I have a child and a job and I looked at the possibility of taking online courses, but the main reason that I did not ... was because the financial aid ... would not cover any costs, and I just did not have that kind of money," observes a graduate student in her 20s.

While their specific situations and accounts vary a great deal, single women without children often mention that they can afford to take a course because they are single. They speculate that they would not have as much financial freedom or time if they had complex family responsibilities.

Computer-Related Costs

Some respondents either do not own a computer or own a computer that is inadequate for online courses. Conflicts among family members over computer use do not usually appear in studies that assess household use of computers. For example, a guidance counselor explains that to take an online course, “We might need a new computer at home. We all use it so much I would have to ‘fight for time’ on the machine.”

Students point out that for online courses they are expected not only to know how to use computers but also to have Internet access. While not all of them own a computer, most manage some access to the Internet. Some people have access to computers, email, and the Internet through their workplace and do not pay direct costs; others use community freenets or commercial services that charge a standard monthly or hourly rate. These costs and resources need to be considered in addition to tuition when thinking about who has access to online learning.

Students also face unique financial and technological pressure with upgrades and improvements to their computer systems.

Global Concerns

Women in other countries list many of the same problems mentioned by women in the United States. Tuition was the central concern for almost all. Additional major problems were difficulty of access to computers and to the Internet, unreliable electrical sources, difficulty finding good online programs in their own culture or language, and difficulty obtaining academic journals and books in nearby libraries.

AGE AS A CLASSROOM ISSUE

The ages of typical undergraduate and graduate students have been rising. In recent years adult undergraduates 24 years of age or older represented between 40 and 45 percent of college students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 1997). Just 16 percent of college students now fit the traditional college student profile: 18-22 years old, attending school full time, and living on campus (U.S. Department of Education, Web-Based Education Commission, 2000, 4).

A large percentage of adult students are women. As the responses below illustrate, however, many older women students perceive themselves to be anomalous or

different on campus. Many respondents indicate that because they are older than the typical college student, they feel more comfortable online than on campus.

The Silent Online Majority?

Older women who report being comfortable with computers and interested in online courses are surprised to hear about similar students. But how are they to know? Not through media images, which rarely show older women competently using computers. In TV commercials, for example, female computer users are rarely over 40 (and girls are seen much less often than boys).

Respondents at remarkably young ages worry about being “old” or “older” students. Students in their late 20s think of themselves as being unusually old. Not only do women outnumber men among older students, research suggests that they worry about age differences in the classroom to a much greater extent than older male students (American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, 1999). While we hear of a lot of talk about the importance of lifelong learning, universities have not made clear that students of all ages are welcomed on campus and online.

TIME DEMANDS

The refrain that distance learning is a good option--or compromise--for women with children and little free time runs throughout this study. (See the full study available from AAUW.) A few men also mention the value of DL for men with family responsibilities, but respondents note that women, in particular, face time pressures when seeking education.

Women enrolled in online courses have even less time to call their own than do most students in face to face learning environments. Many of them serve a first shift at work outside the home and a second shift as primary caretakers of family members. The only way they can accomplish a third shift--their education--is to fit it in when and where they can. Women, especially those with children, have less free time to be away from their family responsibilities and other work. DL can allow them to study at home (at least in the evenings or when off work) while still performing home duties and being available when needed.

The need to hide private responsibilities is particularly important for women who want to advance in their careers by taking courses and degrees while still maintaining familial relationships. Distance learning courses can be particularly valuable for women who can thus more easily pass the availability tests at work and at home.

Many women respondents describe with satisfaction that DL allows them to do several tasks at once, as they discuss trade-offs they make in carrying out (often enjoying, sometimes resenting) family responsibilities and pursuing career goals.

Student Time

Many online students mention enjoying online discussions but are fervent in their wish to do assignments independently.

Most of the mothers talked about studying during late evening hours, or, less frequently, very early morning hours.

Most of the students who have taken online courses mention receiving quick e-mail responses from their professors, but some perceive a trade-off between speed and quality.

Faculty Time

Coordinating collaborative web-based courses is time-consuming for faculty members, particularly if they are trying to stay aware of the interaction in the small group discussions that are a part of many web-based courses. Their continual involvement seems important to discourage harassment (especially in undergraduate courses) and help guide and support discussions. These factors suggest that web-based courses need to be much smaller than many of the large lecture courses now offered in traditional programs.

Most respondents emphasize that time is a critical issue for almost everyone involved in online learning. A realization important for future research and educational policy plans is that students can overload teachers and vice versa. As one administrator for a center for new designs in learning and teaching warns, some teachers are “including a bunch of technological stuff but not taking anything out of the course to make room for it.” Students may find themselves working more with the technology than the professor or the subject material.

FAMILY FACTORS

Online courses and programs are sometimes presented as the ideal higher education delivery for women, who are often assigned or take on most of the responsibilities for childcare and domestic work. In the United States, women still

perform 70 to 80 percent of childcare, which, of course, affects how much time they can spend on paid work and education

We are made to feel guilty if we go to school when we “should” be taking care of children. Our government is not really interested in children or in education. If there was real interest, then the officials will begin by asking what is best for all human beings? What systems do we need to make things work the best? We would not start by saying, “Oh, online education is great for women who have to take care of children.” Listen to the assumptions behind that statement. --Graduate student, 40s, children at home

Few researchers have studied the ways women handle the multiple responsibilities of income provider, parent, and student. In this study, women with spouses and children indicate that they would need, or want, to talk with their partners about taking an online course because of the costs and the time involved. Many men also indicate that they would want to talk with their partners before signing up for an online course. Most of the men with families, however, consider family responsibilities to be at their discretion.

When asked whether they felt guilt or would feel guilty taking courses when there was other work at home, approximately half of the women respond that they do not or would not feel guilt, even though many of them admit that their family responsibilities come first. Many try to do their course work while other family members are sleeping, or they postpone taking courses until their children are older and more independent. Other women couch their responses in terms of family interests, indicating that their continuing education work is as important as other responsibilities, not only for themselves but also for other family members.

Some women report that because of circumstances beyond their control (such as a child's serious illness), they are sometimes unable to finish a course even though they are doing well. To them the term “drop out” (which they feel implies a failure on the part of the student) does not indicate the varying reasons a student may not complete a course in the allotted time. They argue that they may be *required* to leave their courses because online programs and teachers usually have specific and restrictive deadlines for completion of all work, regardless of what may be happening in the students' lives.

One might expect that children, especially young children, would be the greatest impediment and heaviest responsibility for female distance learners. But a number

of responses indicate that single mothers may actually feel less guilty about neglecting housework than do married women.

The Third Shift: Fitting in Online Education

Many women state that they avoid guilt because they make sometimes quite heroic efforts to slot schoolwork unobtrusively into their family and work schedules or because they forego leisure time to accommodate their families and jobs.

Their accounts indicate that for many women participating in distance education, the third shift of student life occurs late at night or early in the morning, after the day's paid work and household/family work. While DL allows women to squeeze in their studies around the seemingly immovable barriers of family and work life, this evades any general social discussion of how time and responsibilities, both in the workforce and the home, might be reconfigured to make fulfillment of educational goals a more humane and less taxing process. Instead, women make individual compromises and choices--as family members, workers, and students--to fit all of these activities into short days. While an insomniac lauds late-night studying as "the beauty of online education," other women accustomed to more regular hours report that the third shift of education cuts into their already-scarce hours of leisure or sleep time.

Most women who are going (or, in many cases, returning) to college have multiple responsibilities. Many single parents are caring for young children, many are the sole provider or co-contributor to their family's income, and some are taking care of aging or ill parents. Some respondents write about their right to continue their education or about the importance to their own careers and to their family income of continuing their education. Others write about the tension between their wish to take courses and their need to fulfill family responsibilities. Most respondents mention income problems. All of their answers open a window on the ways that women, pulled in these cases by the three shifts of work, family, *and* school, attempt to reconcile these competing demands on their time and energy--often with little institutional, financial, or even emotional support from co-workers, employers, schools, spouses, or children.

Teachers and institutions could help in a number of ways. Recognizing some of the pressures that women, especially, might be experiencing, institutions can consider building more flexibility into their schedules and setting up rent-to-own, leasing, or interest-free loan programs for required equipment. Institutions should interview

students who drop out to see if more flexible opinions would have made a difference in their ability to finish courses.

PART 4: LOOK WHO'S TALKING: GENDER IDENTITY AND CULTURE ONLINE

Synchronous or same-time computer-mediated communication (CMC) differs from asynchronous forms of communication such as e-mail, which do not require that participants be at their computers at the same time. CMC receives a lot of attention from educators and students interested in replacing, perhaps improving on, the kinds of interactions possible in classrooms.

The important caution for students, teachers, and developers of CMC software is that specific cultural differences in home communication of various ethnic groups may affect the ways that students participate in course discussion. What is appropriate conversational behavior for some students, including the right amount of talk, may be uncomfortable or feel inappropriate for others.

Distance learning makes access to higher education possible to a great number of previously excluded people. But the increased access involves not just numbers of students but also diversity in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, class, income, and work and family situations that once limited participation. Online courses offer special opportunities for working on stereotypes--if institutions support this work.

Women taking online courses are optimistic about technology as a corrective to subtle--and sometimes not so subtle--bias or discrimination in the traditional classroom. More than half of the respondents say that online classes without video present less or no possibility of racism, sexism, or homophobia, since students and teachers cannot see or hear each other. Answering a question about whether online classes minimized or eliminated sexism and racism, one respondent illustrates the enthusiasm for online classes as equalizers: "If you never see who you are dealing with, how do you know unless they tell you? Prior to this question, did you know I was African American? Would you have known even with this question if I did not tell you? I think not."

Since teachers and students cannot see each other many respondents believe that problems with stereotypes should disappear. For example, a business administration graduate student, 40, taking online courses, states that online (and

therefore unseen) students who have experienced discrimination before may have fewer difficulties:

Several dozen respondents state that old bases for judgment and bias may be replaced with new cues, especially those of writing style and content: A 47-year-old social worker writes that because Native Americans on reservations have less access to technology, they are likely to reveal their inexperience in an online course and may, as a result, experience some discrimination. Also, teachers usually have some personal information about students and always have students' names, which often carry gender and ethnicity information.

While most women in this survey applaud DL's success, or potential success, in minimizing negative biases, many do not necessarily believe that online courses can mask differences among students, nor do they endorse this as a desirable goal. Respondents value explicit identification of differences in online discussions and courses for a variety of reasons. Some feel that avoidance of differences and potential bias will not make the problem go away. Similarly, a few respondents write that it is a valuable part of the educational process for students to confront their own assumptions about others and to challenge others' biases.

FACE-TO-FACE CONTACT: HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO WOMEN?

When asked whether seeing the reactions of others in a classroom was important to them, most U.S. teachers reply that it is very important. Several add that while it is vital to them as a teacher, it is not so important to them when they are students themselves. However, most student respondents indicate that making contact and seeing the reactions of others, especially of teachers, are very important or at least important in some situations.

Many women reply that what is most important right now is the degree itself, however it can be obtained. Their answers imply that women may view contact as a social or expendable component of the educational experience.

Some students in online courses think that making contact with other students is more important for some courses than others. Contact is deemed important for people-oriented courses and visual courses such as psychology and art but not so important for math and science courses.

Online graduate students who are required to spend some time together on campus believe the experience is critical to the success of subsequent online discussions.

Several dozen women made the argument that contact is important and that DL classes accomplish this goal. They point out that they can still get reactions through writing and chat room conversations rather than through primarily visual cues. Others add that new and future technology will allow for greater visual and even tactile learning online. “Facial expressions are an important part of some interactions,” comments a single mother returning to school online, “so a camera onsite and at home would fix that, but there’s a lot to be said about the safety of anonymity.”

Some respondents note that an online global student body can provide diversity and a cultural richness that is otherwise nearly impossible to represent in a traditional course. They note that this is only true, however, if student expertise and understandings are considered a part of the course material.

ONLINE ISOLATION: LONELY OR ALONE ONLINE?

Popular wisdom holds that women value interactive experiences in education, personal relationships to advisers and counselors, and collaborative learning. With these assumptions in mind, we can ask does online learning make women feel *less* connected to students or lonelier in their education?. Many replies reject a strict division between being connected and being lonely.

Most women who have experience with online education are more positive about the social and educational possibilities of web-based education than are those who do not have that experience, which indicates that perhaps women have preconceived ideas that online learning will be more isolating than those who pursue it actually experience it to be.

PART 5: RECOMMENDATIONS

In the past, distance learning courses in the United States have been closely associated with off-campus women and “practical needs” courses--courses isolated from regular higher education and removed from academic excellence. Today university administrators and new education businesses are becoming increasingly interested in ways of using new information technologies to promote and integrate online learning as part of their traditional programs and, in some cases, as for-profit parallel programs.

Who will produce and deliver the learning materials? Who will decide what kinds of programs are offered and the content of courses? What efforts will be made, and by whom, to ensure that uses made of the new technologies do not reinforce social disparity and limited theories of pedagogy?

The following recommendations will help ensure positive changes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY POLICY

- **Treat DL students as responsible and intelligent beings, not as passive educational consumers.** This should be a guiding principle for all planning and policy.
- **Recognize that older students using distance education are a less homogenous group than on-campus students.** A major difficulty in planning for older students' educational concerns is the lack of information about their situations and strategies. This report describes some of these differences.
- **Involve women administrators, students, and teachers as active participants and advisers in the planning process for online courses.** Given the heavy participation of women in distance learning courses and programs, they, especially, should be encouraged to evaluate their situations and needs and make recommendations. In the past they have been the primary, albeit invisible, receivers of distance learning; in the future they could serve as primary evaluators and planners of online courses and programs.
- **Make explicit the institution's mission statements regarding distance-learning plans.** What are the goals? To allow students to increase their ability to understand their place in their society? To serve a greater number of students in the region? To increase students' ability to find employment? To secure a place in the distance learning market? To increase institutional profits? To try to recoup the (often heavy) expenses of distance education? All these and more? Making clear the relationship of the various goals of the institution will help everyone involved--administrators, staff, teachers, and students.
- **Find suitable mechanisms for the continual evaluation of online programs,** including student and teacher involvement in planning the evaluation programs.

- **Establish places for online students to talk face-to-face, when possible.** A technology consultant for a low-income housing project cautions that even if it were possible to put a computer into every apartment, it is also important to have a computer lab in the buildings--a place for people to congregate in person, discuss course work, learn together, and get technological support if needed.
- **Find ways to make older women students feel welcome online.** Well-planned online programs already include learner support services such as counseling. However, even students who are no older than the average university student but who have children or are working full-time feel that they are too old to return to classes. Many women who often do not have institutional support for their continuing education worry about whether they will be successful in their return to higher education classes. Attention to their concerns will raise their enrollment and success rate. Some programs have special buddy systems, with successful older students acting as guides and mentors for the incoming students.
- **Combine efforts across programs, colleges, and universities to make political leaders and policy-makers aware of problems (including financial) that adult women, especially, face** when trying to continue their formal education. Bring pressure on government to ensure that students admitted to accredited online programs can receive scholarships and loans for both full-time and part-time course schedules.
- **Broadly disseminate information on scholarships and loans for online programs.** Many of the students most interested in online courses suffer from limited funds, and many do not have life styles that bring them in contact with standard bulletin boards and educational journals that ordinarily post information about funding. In some cases, costs of online education are not covered by traditional grants and loans.
- **Explore and publicize the hidden costs of not investing in women's online education.** Adult women's education has not been a major political priority, although women's participation in the workplace has been recognized as critical for the national good.
- **Provide teachers of distance learning courses with consolidated material, such as contained in this report, on the many social and equality issues**

involved with distance learning. Research based on conventional classroom arrangements may not translate to the online learning context.

- **Interview students who drop out,** to see if more flexible options would have helped them complete courses.
- **Consider rent-to-own leasing or interest-free loan programs for required equipment.**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRESENTATION OF COURSE MATERIALS ONLINE

- **Ensure that promotional materials for online education, as well as courses themselves, provide information and guidance relevant to women and other underrepresented groups.**
- **Develop policies for respecting others and codes of conduct online, and make them available as part of the course materials.**
- **Encourage teachers to become informed about CMC (computer-mediated communication) research and serve as moderators of online class discussions.** A laissez-faire approach allows the most aggressive individuals to have the most freedom. While single-sex groups might not be feasible or even permitted in many online courses, the knowledge that women in single-sex groups are more supportive of each other, and more understanding of the kinds of difficulties many women experience when they have young families, may help teachers and students find ways to encourage supportive behavior even in mixed-sex groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND INSTRUCTORS

- **Clarify for everyone--administrators, students, and teachers--the learning needs that are being addressed by uses of the new technology in each program.** Tell students why specific methods (such as requiring participation in chat rooms) are being used. An administrator of one distance teaching university states that there is still tension in many programs over which takes priority: the technology or the learning needs of students.

- **Recognize different learning methods, and diversify approaches and methodologies used in online education.** Adult students generally know how they best study and learn. Many women (and men of underrepresented groups) have their own learning systems based on cultural learning processes.
- **Make positive pluralism one of the goals of all online programs.** Create opportunities for every student to participate as fully as possible in online classroom discussions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT AND NATIONAL POLICIES

- **Provide loans for students currently unable to qualify because they are taking low course loads.**
- **Consider what groups of potential online students are likely to be ignored by online programs.** School-age children of migrant workers are entitled to access to education and training and may benefit from online courses. Online courses could be a great resource for individuals who have to move for political or economic reasons or for prison inmates who have legal rights to the national educational system. Policy-makers must take into account the wide variety of social contexts and needs of online students. One course does not fit all, contrary to recent discussions about the possibility of a set lesson plan cheaply distributed to many.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Universities can play a large role in establishing new research programs to examine small- and large-scale social applications of online learning and culture. This seems critical if universities are going to continue to be a base for research and educational policies. Otherwise, industry is likely to fill this role--and industry's questions and concerns often are different from those of people concerned about social equality and intellectual vigor. A caveat, however, is that researchers in colleges and universities are notoriously ready to study and critique institutions and behaviors other than their own. In this time of rapid changes in higher education, everyone will benefit from reflective, open evaluations of the online courses and programs.

The following research questions could provide important analyses of online education policy and practice.

Online conversation

- Can gender differences in computer-mediated conversations in online courses be generalized across computer program formats, assignments, and course topics?
- Does participation in online discussion change depending upon whether the teacher is female or male and depending upon the ratio of women and men in the class? This study reports that women and men often arrive at online courses with different experiences and goals and that online conversations are often not equitable. For teachers and students to know how to best prepare for, organize, and participate equitably online, there must be more research on the specifics of their conversations and satisfaction levels.

Structure of DL programs

- How can DL work best for women (and men) with family and career responsibilities and plans? If we want DL to work for people with many time demands and other pressures, we will sponsor more research about how women and men actually try to fulfill their (often competing) family wishes and their career wishes and how DL can be best structured to work with their goals, rather than simply assume that DL (in whatever form) is a good (or the only) option for women with children.
- What pedagogical and economic goals of teachers, students, administrators, and investors can the broad application of the new technologies help achieve?
- Why are many potential learners not participating in distance learning courses? What valuable information can be gathered from students who do not finish online courses and programs?

Access to DL courses

- What access do women and men have to computers? What kind of equipment is available at home and at work and when can it be used for online courses? How are computer time and work space allocated within households?

ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

Cheris Kramarae is the author, editor, or co-editor of more than 75 articles and 10 books on gender, language, technology, and education. Her edited books include *For Alma Mater: Theory and Practice in Feminist Scholarship* (with Paula A. Treichler and Beth Stafford), *Knowledge Explosion: Generations of Feminist Scholarship* (with Dale Spender), *Women, Information Technology, and Scholarship*, (with H. Jeane Taylor and Maureen Ebben), *Feminist Challenges in the Information Age* (with Christiane Floyd, Govind Kelkar, Silvie Klein-Franke, and Cirilia Limpangog), and *Technology and Women's Voices*.

Former director of women's studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Kramarae has taught in universities in a number of countries, including China, The Netherlands, England, and South Africa. In 1999-2000 she was an international dean at the International Women's University (Internationale Frauenuniversität) in Germany as well as project director for the courses "The Future of Education," and "The Construction of Gender on the Internet" during the 2000 session. Now a researcher associated with the Center for the Study of Women in Society at the University of Oregon, her most recent publication is the four-volume *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women: Global Women's Issues and Knowledge* (co-edited with Dale Spender).

Kramarae's teaching has included hybrid university courses, which combine face-to-face and online interaction. She was a co-organizer of the WITS (Women, Information Technology, and Scholarship) work and study group and participated in the early stages of task force innovations in the use of computer technology in university courses at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

See the bibliography in the full AAUW report.