The Role of Online Education for the Advancement of Women

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1. Introduction

Women's organizations worldwide, and especially the national affiliates of IFUW, recognize the need for women to gain an education to improve their lives and those of their families. In nations where educational levels for the general population are low, even the attainment of a grade school education gives women an advantage not only in the attainment of new, practical, task-related skills, but also in the attainment of critical thinking skills, reading and writing skills and research skills for discovering facts and overcoming superstition. In countries where education levels are already high, the skills gained in higher education are invaluable in equipping women to compete in professional and personal pursuits. As electronic communications grow and spread globally, the unique contributions made by electronic means of education become more apparent. Online education can open doors for women that have never been opened before.

2. An Online University

An examination of a global leader in the area of online education may be instructive in forming new ideas for the dissemination of education to more and more women. The University of Phoenix, a subsidiary of the Apollo Group, is such a worldwide leader in the provision of education via the Internet. This university is less than forty years old but has grown phenomenonally to become the largest private university in North America, with 440,000 students, and 31,000 faculty members. The online component of the University accounts for over half of the total enrollment. Effective marketing has caused the local (on-ground) campuses to be completely overshadowed by the enormous Online Campus, to the extent that people hearing the name University of Phoenix, often immediately think "the online university."

Components of the University of Phoenix online education can be replicated by other institutions if certain underlying structures are built in. Indeed, shortly after the establishment of online classes, other universities in the U.S., including public, government-supported universities, also adopted online models. In some cases, the online components of these universities failed because of lack of basic supportive structures. The University of Phoenix itself would credit these supportive structures as a prime reason for its success.

In spite of its success, the University of Phoenix continues to experience problems with its public image: it is a for-profit educational institution that is organized on a business model, with shares in the Apollo Group being sold on the NASDAQ stock market. This has been controversial and the university has had to struggle to overcome – and in fact continues to struggle with - the traditional belief that the profit-motive will inevitably taint the purity of the educational process. This belief has led to laws in many states in the U.S. restricting for-profit educational institutions to vocational or job-training programs and degrees. The University of Phoenix has thus been restricted from offering degrees in the traditional liberal arts curriculum. All the degrees currently offered have some identifiable vocational goal. However, these restrictions are being broken down as graduates of this non-traditional, alternative educational model continue to succeed in the world as equals to their more traditionally-educated peers.

3.   Women and Online Education

Whether the cause is related to the business model or unrelated to it, the University of Phoenix succeeds better than most educational institutions in educating women. A trend which may be labeled the "feminization of higher education" has led to a 57% female majority in U.S. institutions of higher learning. The University of Phoenix significantly exceeds this figure with a 63% female majority of students (University of Phoenix, 2007). Is it possible that online education is especially good for women?

The alternative model of education practiced at the University of Phoenix espouses a "real world education" in which faculty are "practitioner faculty", currently employed in the area in which they are teaching. This practice contradicts another traditional practice, that of full-time university faculty whose full-time careers are spent in teaching or research. The non-traditional faculty work, for example in a public elementary school during the day, and teach education courses at the University at night or online. The part-time nature of teaching duties is conducive to employment of female faculty at the same rate (38%) as the national average for women faculty. However, there is a six percent increase in the diversity of those faculty (26% vs. 20% non-Caucasian faculty), reflecting the increased diversity of the student body as compared to other higher education institutions (Univ. of Phoenix, 2007).

The most obvious advantage of online education is the ease of accessing a classroom at any time of day or night, at the student's convenience. Particular features of an online environment, however, are uniquely suited to the positive contributions of this form of education. For students studying education or economics in remote areas, visits to actual schoolrooms or corporate offices may be impossible. The Online Campus of the University of Phoenix has virtual organizations – businesses, schools, hospitals, etc. organized and presented in the kind of dynamic, interactive detail now available in many video games. In addition, for situational problem-solving, there are simulated situations such as the foreign culture simulation in the Sociology course, which require students to make decisions during the course of an online investigation in a challenging, created environment. Virtual organizations, simulations, and an up-to-date online library are resources unavailable to traditional learners only a few years ago.

The unique features of online education serve to overcome many of the barriers that have made traditional education difficult or impossible for women students. For women or girls facing gender discrimination in a physical classroom, being able to carry out academic work anonymously is a distinct advantage. There is less gender bias when a student does not have to raise a hand or become assertive to ask questions, express opinions, or give answers. Written work in an online forum is less associated with gender, until or unless the woman desires that recognition. Although a student's gender is often apparent within a few hours of online classroom interaction, the gender bias regarding participation is overcome. The anonymity of the online classroom is an advantage in overcoming biases of age and race, as well as gender. In an online classroom, no student may remain "silent," that is non-participatory. Each student is required to post frequently, in class discussions as well as in online group projects. Because no one raises a hand to enter into a classroom discussion, an instructor or professor does not select who participates and who does not. The average age of an online student is greater than that of a student in a traditional university. In an online classroom, however, the age or race of the student is unknown unless voluntarily revealed by the student in conversation. Older students find that online education meets their needs for non-credit classes in their pursuit of lifelong learning, too. Although there is much personal and emotional support in face-to-face contact in educational settings, perhaps the resolution of overt bias is a greater support mechanism for women and girls.

Online classrooms are designed to preserve a student's privacy, for whatever reason that privacy is desired. One student admitted to the author of this paper that she was never comfortable in a

traditional classroom because she felt others stared at her because of her weight problem. In countries where fathers, husbands, or brothers control women's appearances in public, the provision of online education may provide the cloak required by religion or culture.

There are also factors of time and mobility. A woman whose main job is that of housewife can often find a niche in time and space to fit in online education. In particular, not having to leave home and family in order to study is a distinct advantage for single mothers, who make up a large percentage of the women students currently completing degrees at the University of Phoenix.

The student in a non-traditional university, with classes available online, can maintain her current employment while studying for a degree. This opportunity is a financial advantage in that personal or family income does not have to cease due to the educational process. The student studying online typically takes only one course at a time, so that full-time attendance is re-defined in the context of work-life balance. The family of a single mother is often dependent on her income for survival, so education at a traditional university is quite impractical. It is not uncommon for women in some developing countries to leave their families for months or years to go abroad to be able to earn a degree. Once the technological difficulties are overcome, and availability of computers and Internet access is more widespread, the possibility of studying for Bachelor's, Master's, or Doctoral degrees in one's home country from a personal or community-based computer will be a reality. A good example of the technological advantages overcoming longstanding social problems is the phenomenon of mobile phones becoming widespread in countries where the wait list for a landline phone is months or years long.

4. Impediments to Online Study: the Digital Divide

The advantages of online education require the essential elements of a computer and a high-speed or broadband connection to the Internet. The pattern of differential access and use of computers among varying socio-economic populations is sometimes referred to as the Digital Divide. Computer use is significantly less in rural or disadvantaged areas and among minority groups or among people with disabilities. In the United States, 25% of the population does not use computers at home and 45% does not have the high-speed Internet connections necessary for accessing large amounts of material, as that provided in online university libraries. Other nations vary in percentages of their populations with access to computers and the Internet, but it is likely that women are disproportionately represented in the non-access groups.

The involvement of the private sector may be a key to providing online degree programs and other online educational resources to overcome the Digital Divide. In California a pilot program called *Get Connected!* is in its first year of operation combining government, business, and citizen support to raise broadband Internet usage by 10% this year(www.GetConnectedToday.com). Businesses are invited to help fund *Get Connected!* initiatives by becoming "Champions for Access." Private citizens are invited to support the program by raising awareness of the power of the Internet for economic and educational advancement. An in-kind donation program component encourages businesses and private citizens to donate computers, mobile devices, mouse pads, etc. for distribution at community fairs. A review of the success and the challenges of *Get Connected!* at the end of the pilot program will provide valuable information that can be used in other programs in other states and possibly in other countries.

5. A Solution to the Human Rights Goal of Availability and Access to Education?

Katrina Tomaŝevski (2001) has developed the "4-A Conceptual Framework" outlining the human rights obligations in the provision of education as supported in multiple human rights conventions and treaties. She notes that the right to education involves the dimensions of availability and accessibility. Critical actions required of governments include the provision of schools and teachers

and the elimination of barriers to attendance. The unique features of online education may hold the answer to the provision of schools and teachers on a widespread and economical basis. The advantages for women in attending online higher education, as noted previously, are the same as those advantages which governments can employ in providing primary and secondary education. Tomaŝevski also highlights the rights within education, or recognition of rights of learners themselves. These rights include the dimensions of acceptability (to learners and their families) and adaptability (for provision of education for various populations). Again, the unique features of online education allow for multiple provisions of acceptability. Online education is freed from the constraints of time and place, thus meeting many criteria for adaptability. The exclusion of women from higher education, as a result of human rights violations, can be addressed with a considerable degree of effectiveness through the tools of electronic media.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2008) notes that the gender gap in education is still very wide, despite a marked increased participation of women and girls in education. In tertiary education, gender disparities have actually widened in favor of women over the past 10 years, especially in developed countries and those in transition, where there are 130 women enrolled in higher education for every 100 men. However, women are still at a serious disadvantage in sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia, East Asia, and several of the Arab States.

Christine Geith and Karen Vignare of Michigan State University (2008) have examined whether the Open University concept, with its provision of free or low-cost educational resources, can help close the gap in access to educational resources. The widening gap between supply and demand for higher education means that traditional "bricks and mortar" schools cannot be built fast enough to provide adequate educational resources. Their conclusion is that a combination of Open Educational Resources (OER) and accredited and credentialed online educational programs is needed to provide the educational resources for the growing global demand for education. The fact that online institutes of learning are financially sustainable business models should be incentive for increased private investment in this form of education.

The future of education for both men and women seems to lie in substantial expansion of online institutes of higher education, but women are set to benefit more than men. Not only are the women in developed countries demanding more education and enrolling at a faster rate, but women in many other countries can participate more freely in customizable educational programs that will accommodate the exigencies of their life situations.

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