FEMALE ADMINISTRATORS PERCEPTIONS OF DISTANCE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Gender disparity is evident in tenure track and tenured faculty positions at universities. However, distance education may provide more supportive environments for female academicians to grow and develop. The term distance learning is used to encompass any type of instruction delivered off campus. Distance learning has increased dramatically and has gained strategic importance possibly presenting women with a new realm for advancement. Leaders in distance learning must have qualities such as good listening skills, be understanding, engage in collaboration, be cooperative, demonstrate openness, have interpersonal sensitivity and empathy; attributes traditionally associated with females.

This qualitative study utilizing a survey design, asked 21 participants, female administrators in distance education: "What are your perceptions of the role of distance learning in education today?" They perceived the role of distance learning in education today to be of utmost import and discussed the needs of learners, the access of distance learning, value of distance learning, federal and state requirements, the future of distance learning, the significant impact on Higher Education and the improvement needed.

Keywords: Online learning, female administrators, distance learning, women, education

INTRODUCTION

Women have made great strides in the realm of enrollment in both undergraduate and graduate programs in the United States since the 1970's. Women represent 57% of all college students and earn more than half of all Ph.D. degrees granted to American citizens, yet, currently, females account for approximately 50% of assistant professors; a number which is actuality is only equal to that of male assistant professors in certain disciplines. However, females only account for 38% of associate professors, and 24% of full professors; significantly lower numbers than those of their male counterparts (Madsen, 2012; Bilen-Green, Froelich & Sukalski, 2011). Additionally females comprise only about 45% of tenure-track faculty and 31% of tenured faculty (Bilen-Green, Froelich & Sukalski, 2011). Participation of women is lowest in doctoral-granting institutions, where women constitute just 34% of full-time faculty, 26% of tenured faculty, and 19% of full professors.

Gender disparity is especially evident in science and engineering departments, where only 19% of full professors are women in four-year colleges and universities, with even fewer in research institutions (NSF Science and Engineering Indicators 2008). More women than men are in part-time or non-tenure track positions, and the increasing scarcity of women as you look at higher academic ranks is clearly shown, especially as associate and full-professors with tenure are the individuals who are generally tapped for leadership

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positions (Bilen-Green, Froelich & Sukalski, 2011; Murray, Tremaine, & Fountaine, 2012; Perrakis & Martinez, 2012).

It has been suggested that non-traditional academic settings such as community colleges and distance education may provide more supportive environments for female academicians to grow and develop (Perrakis & Martinez, 2012). The term distance learning is used to encompass virtually every type of instruction delivered off campus including satellite television, video conferencing, cable, audiotapes, computer systems, fax, correspondence courses, home study, and independent study (Floyd, 2003). Over the past decade due primarily to increases in the availability of technology, distance learning has increased dramatically and has gained legitimacy and acceptance (Gopalarkrishnan, 2012). Furthermore, as the strategic importance of distance education comes to the forefront, it may also present women with a new, increasingly prestigious realm for advancement.

Distance learning advancements have taken place primarily in the form of online education and instruction, which requires instructors and administrators to utilize technology and computers in ways that may be foreign and intimidating to some (Floyd, 2003). As such, leaders in the relatively new realm of online learning must have a listening edge and be understanding, attributes traditionally associated with females again making the distance learning arena a prime area for female advancement (Floyd, 2003; Kark, Waismel-Manor, & Shamir, 2012).

Additionally, as distance learning education continues to be researched and best practices continue to change and develop with each technological advancement there will be an increased need for female leaders' general abilities with transformational leadership, which seeks to inspire employees to go beyond their assigned role, foster creativity and problem solving, mentor, establish vision, and lay plans for reaching that vision (Vinkenburg, van Engen, Eagly, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2011).

Furthermore, the relative youngness of many popular variations in the field of distance education necessitate leaders to engage in collaboration, be cooperative, demonstrate openness, interpersonal sensitivity and empathy, and invest efforts in the development of their employees; qualities that are traditionally associated with the feminine gender (Kark, Waismel-Manor, & Shamir, 2012). The need for these uniquely feminine characteristics opens doors for many women academicians.

The importance of female leadership within higher education was touched on within The White House Report (2009), wherein the authors argued that female academicians, due to their unique experiences, offer differing perspectives from their male counterparts that have profound effects on institutions as well as knowledge and research. Furthermore, successful female faculty and administrators serve as mentors and role models for future generations of women.

This is especially important within the realm of distance education where past research has indicated that women suffer from gender specific issues such as gender identity, the prescribed view of how females should interact with technology, discrimination and sexual harassment (Arbaugh, 2000; Blum, 1999; Trepet 2006; Johnson, 2011).

The need for female mentors within distance education is also important because a majority of distance education students are women (Porter, 2013). Distance education may be very attractive for women as both students and educators simply because of the flexibility it offers. Women tend to strive for a healthy and well-maintained balance between work, or in this case school, and their personal lives, especially as their families expand, which can result in a preference for education or work that can be accessed

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during non-traditional hours. The "second shift" of traditional feminine domestic life may all play a role in a woman's choices when attempting to achieve the balance that they seek (Bilen-Green, Froelich & Sukalski, 2011).

The unique challenges and experiences of women in higher education compounded by those of distance education are likely to give women a highly unique outlook on every aspect of distance education. As women increasingly become the primary drivers of distance education as both students and educators the importance of the feminine viewpoint on distance education cannot be overstated.

METHODOLOGY

The study surveyed female administrators in distance education in an effort to thematically analyze their perceptions of distance learning in higher education. The guiding question for the study focused on attitudes about distance learning among female administrators. Subjects were selected in two ways.

> ➢ They were invited from the Texas Distance Learning Association Group Membership website. An invitation was posted on the "Members Only" webpage asking for participation in the study and providing the link to the survey. The researcher also included an invitation to share the link with other colleagues in distance learning.
> ➢ They were also invited through colleague interactions. The researcher sent out the invitation via e-mail requesting participation in the study and asking colleagues in the field to pass the invitation to other colleagues. These are colleagues the researcher has collaborated with during the last 10 years while working in the field of distance learning. They are not personal friends but are professional colleagues and the invitation clarified that participation was both voluntary and anonymous.

Sample and Population
Initially, 48 individuals responded, 47 agreed to participate, 22 actually participated in responding to the question. One participant was male and was removed from the line-up. There were a total of 21 participants. Race/ethnicity was mainly Caucasian with 16 participants falling into that category, two participants were Hispanic, two were African American and one participant marked other.

The participants included one Dean, one Associate Dean, two faculty, three Coordinators, eight Directors, three Instructional Designers, two Managers, and one Online Specialist. The length of time spent in these positions ranged from one to 18 years with the median and the mode both equal to four years. The participants supervised between zero and 42 employees with a median of three employees. The participants were pretty evenly split with seven employed at universities, seven at community colleges, five at K-12 institutions, one at a technical school, and one at a non-profit business. Of the 21 institutions, 10 were Traditional (majority of students are Caucasian), five were Hispanic Serving, four were Minority Serving, and two were non educational institutions. The median salary was $69,000.

RESULTS

The participants were asked: "What are your perceptions of the role of distance learning in education today?" They discussed the needs of learners, the access of distance learning, value of distance learning, federal and state requirements, and the future of distance learning, the significant impact on Higher Education and the improvement needed.

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There were 12 comments about the importance of DL including the use of descriptive words such as; important, integral, necessary, relevant, significant, mainstream, and embedded deeply, critical, vital, and essential. One respondent stated, "It (DL) is embedded deeply into the "traditional" method of teaching and learning. I believe it is becoming the "new traditional."

The participants perceived the importance of distance learning as it met the needs of students today. According to them students have been raised on technology and distance education has become an integral part of their learning. They perceived that students need this type of learning to achieve their economic goals and improve their career prospects via the flexibility provided by distance learning.

The importance of distance education in its ability to provide greater access was also discussed by several respondents. Both open and equitable access to further education was considered important aspects of distance learning. This accessibility has been furthered by the development of new technologies.

According to one respondent, "distance learning has taken on an increased role in terms of providing additional avenues for students to complete their education."

A couple of participants also discussed the importance of distance learning to the United States economy. "With distance learning, we have a phenomenal tool in our hands with which to open access to students, help them be successful in their coursework, and to help them complete degrees and certifications that are critical to the individual student's economic well being as well as the U.S. economy."

It was perceived that technology was integral to society in a time when employment was becoming more mobile as well as global, in a time period when the unsettled status of the economy was causing workers to fear losing their jobs as Distance Learning can provide the reskilling necessary.

One third of the participants discussed the importance of the growth of distance learning in the future of education. One of the reasons given for the continued growth in this area was due to the lack of facilities to offer face-to-face classes and therefore a need for further DL classes. For one, the experience of downsizing led to a realization of the benefits and values of online education. One suggested that DL has taken on an increased role in terms of providing additional avenues for students to complete their education. It was the perception of one of the respondents that the growth occurs because of the student expectation of online classes. This was reflected by a comment that growth was due to the necessity of meeting the needs of students.

Another determined that the role of DL was expanding due to the new technologies available in the classroom. The expectation of students that online classes are available has also supported this expansion. This expansion is not only occurring at the post-secondary level, it is also happening at the K-12 levels as some states have mandated that each high school student take at least one online class, providing them with much needed experience for future classes in college.

Finally, according to one respondent, we have not only experienced exponential growth in DL in the past decade but on-campus classes are also utilizing the same technologies. She predicted that within 5 years, "online classes will outnumber on-campus classes at a substantial number of institutions and most classes will at least utilize distance technologies."

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However, a caution was raised by one of the participants. She stated that we must ensure that both students and faculty are supported in their utilization of technology. She suggested that faculty need to be taught the complexities of teaching on-line because it requires a different set of skills than was utilized in face-to face classes. She also cautioned that it took a different mindset. This caution is reflected by another respondent who thought that DL was underutilized because of faculty fear of the technology as well as a fear of change in curriculum. In addition faculty and administrators need to determine the best use of DL to serve our students in a student centered approach.

One of the respondents advised that the needs of the learner needs to be put above the need for the use of technology for technology's sake and held the belief that administrators provide a pioneering service in quality assurance for DL within higher education. Learning must be made more appealing to students. Technology enhances both learning and teaching, it allows students to follow their own learning interests and proceed at their own pace.

Online courses need to be dynamic with ample interaction rather than electronic correspondence courses. Additional training, tools, and encouragement needs to be utilized to change this attitude.

It is more than just video-taping of face-to-face lectures. "Technology is an opportunity to make education better and more available to more people. It needs to be done the right way. Those in charge need to know that it's about more than just the tools."

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the perceptions of the respondents, the role of distance learning in education today is of utmost import. It is required to meet the needs of students today as technology has become an integral part of their learning. The flexibility provided by distance learning will help students achieve their economic goals and improve their career prospects. Its open and equitable accessibility has provided more students the opportunity to complete their education.

Technology was considered to be an integral part of society today due to the global nature and mobility of employment and the fluctuating labor market where the possibility of reskilling through DL could become a necessity.

One third of the participants discussed the importance of the growth of distance learning in the future of education. It was felt that this growth was necessary due to a lack of brick and mortar facilities, a need for providing additional avenues for students, student expectation of online classes, and the availability of new technologies. It was opined that both students and faculty need to be supported in their utilization of technology. Faculty, due to a basic change in mindset, a fear of the technology and the corresponding change in curriculum, specifically need to be taught the new skill set for utilizing the necessary technology.

We need to remember that distance learning advancements have taken place primarily in the form of online education and instruction, which requires instructors and administrators to utilize technology and computers in ways that may be foreign and intimidating to some (Floyd, 2003). As such, leaders in the relatively new realm of online learning must have a listening edge and be understanding, attributes traditionally associated with females (Floyd, 2003; Kark, Waismel-Manor, & Shamir, 2012).

Further research needs to be completed comparing the male and female view of distance education. Based on this qualitative study, a survey could be created to quantify these differences.

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