



Short Communication

Women Leading Change: Breaking Through Barriers of Online Teaching

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Abstract

The emergence of virtual workspaces, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has changed education delivery, and transformed how academic leaders carry out their responsibilities. The evolution of online teaching has uncovered challenges and opportunities, particularly for women educators. Despite the unique challenges to work-life balance in remote environments, women educators have shown remarkable resilience. This short communication will examine the historical perspective of women in higher education and the barriers that prevent women from obtaining leadership positions. Obstacles that women encounter in the realm of online teaching, gender biases, and disparities will be explored. The urgency for mentorship and support in addressing these issues is crucial. Without buy-in and support, achieving gender parity will be a daunting task, but the resilience of women educators offers hope for the future.

Keywords: Online Teaching; Academics; Diversity; Work-Life Balance; Leadership; Women

Introduction

For the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant disruption in people's lives and has exposed inequities in ethnicity, gender, and social status. The pandemic elicited an increased response to developing more work-from-home (WFH) and remote positions, including in higher education. In higher learning institutions, women make up the majority of non-tenured track and lecture positions, with 44% being tenured track and 36% reaching the rank of full-time professors. The skewed data indicates an imbalance of women serving in executive and leadership roles. In higher learning institutions, it's often thought that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted productivity among women and social networking. Women have made significant progress in higher education; however, a lack of promotion, representation,

and retention in specific academic fields and leadership positions still exist [1]. The differential impact of the pandemic WFH on the career progression of men and women is a topic that requires further research in higher education, as is the case with many other industry sectors. In a male-dominated field, women face continued advancement setbacks, which reduces women's presence in leadership positions [2]. This paper introduces the intersection of women in higher learning institutions, the challenges of online learning practices, and gender inequity in leadership roles. The topic will offer an exploration and opportunity to identify strategies for overcoming barriers and enhancing women's experiences and opportunities in higher education [3].

Breaking the Glass Ceiling in Academic Leadership

Women breaking the glass ceiling in academic leadership is a significant and evolving phenomenon. The research underlines emerging themes, such as barriers to advancement, implicit

bias, and institutional support. As women ascend in academic leadership roles, they should confront entrenched biases by highlighting the various forms of discrimination and implementing practical solutions to their challenges [4]. Additionally, the current political climate has further complicated these issues, influencing universities' work in relation to sexism, racism, and the threat of campus carry initiatives [5]. Stereotypes about gender roles can affect hiring and promotion decisions [6]. Women in leadership positions at colleges, provost and department chairs, some of the most challenging roles in academia, must champion their contributions as academic leaders while enhancing their administrative and research profiles.

Promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in Online Education

Diversity serves as a powerful catalyst that expands perspectives and enriches ideas. It boosts productivity and enhances the impact of our scientific endeavors, making organizations more adaptable and timelier. Ensuring equal opportunities is crucial for the success of any research institution [7]. We argue that all research organizations, whether in academia or industry, must implement more robust inclusion policies to fully leverage the advantages of diversity in their work. Proposed policy changes, such as the provision of unconscious bias and language training, transparency in promotion and relative pay, female inclusion in meetings and university panels, and female representation in academic grants, will result in a more inclusive environment, which leads to broadened research. Research further indicates that women are less likely than men to be hired or awarded tenure, even when their performance is equal. They receive less grant funding and fewer prestigious accolades, have lower rates of accepted publications, presentations, and patents, and are less often first or last authors on publications or submit to high-impact journals. [8]. Evidence suggests a prevailing belief that men's work is of higher quality, reflected in the disparity of citations between male and female authors in research papers and classroom materials. Review panel positions that influence hiring, promotions, funding approvals, and policy decisions are still predominantly held by men, whose conscious or unconscious biases can hinder women's progress in academia [9].

Underrepresentation of Women in Leadership Positions within Higher Learning Institutions

Throughout our history, women have been relegated to domestic roles with less formal education. Today, women outnumber men in college enrollment, with 8.3 million women being undergraduate students versus 6.1 million men. This astonishing upside in data proves that although women have a higher chance of graduating from a four-year college program, these same women face challenges in securing roles in higher learning institutions and achieving success in online classroom delivery. Women frequently face a "glass

ceiling" that limits their advancement to top academic leadership roles. Gender stereotypes, structural barriers, and implicit biases can impede their progression to executive positions [1]. Women need increased access to leadership development programs, mentorship, and professional networks for career advancement. Unequal opportunities can perpetuate the underrepresentation of women in leadership.

Mentorship and Empowerment: Female Networks in Online Academia

Mentorship and networking are crucial in strengthening opportunities, developing new skills, and providing professional development. The need for formal mentorship programs is particularly acute in academia, where gender dynamics often hinder the empowerment, growth, and development of women. Women who receive mentorship support and professional growth can positively contribute to their institutions, reducing attrition. Despite comprising much of the workforce in public health academia, women still face systemic barriers to leadership positions [3]. The lack of leadership positions and career growth reinforces the gender inequalities women face and the organizational culture that don't emphasize the development of women in leadership positions in academia.

Navigating Work-Life Balance in Virtual Academic Leadership

Virtual academic leadership involves adeptly overseeing faculty, staff, and students through online platforms while maintaining academic standards and cultivating a supportive work environment. Leaders in this field are responsible for offering guidance and professional development, with technology as the primary communication and collaboration tool [10]. Unlike traditional face-to-face leadership, virtual leadership often blurs the lines between professional and personal life, increasing the difficulty of achieving a healthy work-life balance and effectively managing remote teams [11].

Virtual academic leaders often work irregular hours, handling unforeseen issues and remaining constantly reachable through digital channels like email, video calls, and messaging platforms. If not carefully managed, this constant availability can result in burnout, decreased efficiency, and decreased personal well-being. Therefore, balancing personal time with professional obligations is essential for virtual academic leaders to sustain their productivity and well-being [12].

Impact of Women in EdTech and Online Learning Platforms

The impact of women in EdTech and online learning platforms is profound, as they have brought fresh perspectives, diverse leadership styles, and a focus on inclusive technology to the industry. 4 Female leaders and innovators in EdTech have emphasized creating learning environments that are accessible to

all, designing platforms that support diverse learning needs, and prioritizing equity in digital education. This influence is seen in the growing number of platforms that offer inclusive features, such as multilingual content, gender-sensitive designs, and user-friendly interfaces that cater to learners of varying abilities. Additionally, women in EdTech have championed initiatives to bridge the digital divide, recognizing the unique barriers that specific populations, including women and girls in underprivileged communities, face in accessing quality online education [12].

Furthermore, women in EdTech play a critical role in addressing representation gaps in STEM fields by creating resources and programs that inspire more girls to pursue careers in technology and science. Female-founded platforms often emphasize mentorship, community support, and soft skills development, which research shows are particularly impactful for women in technology. As more women take leadership roles in EdTech, they drive an industry shift towards more holistic, empathetic, and student-centered approaches to online education. This impact improves learners' experiences worldwide and fosters a culture of innovation where diverse voices contribute to the future of education technology [13]. With a focus on mentorship, community-building, and empathetic design, women in EdTech are shaping a more inclusive and holistic future for online learning, benefiting learners and educators globally.

Recommendations

Below are key recommendations aimed at empowering women educators, enhancing online andragogy, pedagogy, and addressing challenges in digital education:

1. Foster Inclusive Leadership

Create networks and communities for women in online education to exchange experiences, support each other through mentorship, and develop leadership competencies designed for digital settings. Provide leadership development programs to achieve excellence in virtual learning environments and advance digital andragogy and pedagogy skills.

2. Promote Flexibility and Work-Life Balance.

Tackle the challenges of juggling teaching responsibilities and personal obligations by promoting adaptable schedules, providing wellness resources, and enacting policies emphasizing work-life balance.

3. Provide Professional Development Opportunities

Provide frequent workshops and training programs on innovative online teaching methods, efficient technology utilization, digital evaluation techniques, and approaches to enhancing student interaction. These efforts enable women educators to remain at the

forefront of digital advancements and improve their instructional effectiveness.

4. Address Implicit Bias and Promote Equity

Design policies and training initiatives to address unconscious biases that women may face in online education environments. Establish support structures to resolve equity concerns and promote inclusiveness within virtual learning spaces.

5. Recognize and Support Advancement

Honor the accomplishments of women educators in online teaching through acknowledgment initiatives, grants for professional development, and accolades that showcase their impact. Create clear and accessible opportunities for career progression in digital education.

6. Empower Through Technology

Provide women educators with thorough training and resources to navigate educational technologies effectively, from sophisticated LMS functionalities to dynamic learning platforms. Strengthening their technical proficiency bolsters their confidence and leadership in virtual classrooms.

7. Conduct Research and Gather Data

Invest in research to understand the specific challenges women face in online teaching. Use data to identify areas for improvement, share success stories, and inform the development of targeted support programs.

By focusing on these strategies, we can empower women educators to excel as leaders, continue to break down barriers, and innovate in online learning.

Conclusion

Women are at the forefront of transforming online teaching, breaking through fixed obstacles to lead and innovate in the digital education space. Women in higher education demonstrate remarkable resiliency and strength despite challenges with balancing personal and professional responsibilities while facing gender biases. Addressing barriers and fostering environments where women can thrive and grow professionally will be critical, as there is a need to invest in mentorship, provide access to resources, and advocate for gender equity.

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