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Distance Education Is Harder on Women Than on Men, Study Finds

BY SCOTT CARLSON

THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF University Women released a report this month that concludes that women who take distance-education courses face substantially more challenges than do men.

The report, "The Third Shift," says that distance-education classes often add another layer to a woman's workday. Women find time for a "third shift" of studying and online classes early in the morning or late at night, in the free time beyond the first shift of a full-time job and the second shift of homemaking or taking care of children, the report says.

Women, who compose the majority of both online and traditional learners, according to the report, face other challenges. Many choose distance education because it allows them to stay home with children, and thereby offsets costs for child care. But distance-education classes can be just as expensive as traditional college courses and may

include hidden costs, such as expensive technology and subscriptions to online services. College loans sometimes don't pay for part-time instruction and don't always account for the extra expenses, the report says.

The AAUW report was based on online and in-person interviews with 500 students, 462 of whom were women. Its conclusions primarily deal with the effects of distance education on women. The students were asked open-ended questions, and in the report their responses are presented as anonymous anecdotes rather than as breakdowns in numbers or percentages of the total.

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"The Third Shift" also notes that many people think women use a few distance-education courses to advance or to change their careers. However, nearly a third of the women interviewed for the report were seeking degrees, and many

others considered themselves "life-long learners." Many older women said they opted for distance-learning courses because they felt out of place in the younger environment of a traditional classroom.

Ann Martinez, assistant director at the Center for Distance Learning Research at Texas A&M University, said that she hadn't seen the report but that she agreed with some of its main points. She said that the notion of a "third shift" might not apply to all women in distance education, "but for many of them it is true."

"They are doing a job and taking care of a family in addition to carrying a course load," she said. "It's a good analogy. I never thought of it as a 'third shift.'" Ms. Martinez also agreed that many women are indeed seeking degrees online.

Cheris Kramarae, the author of the report and a visiting researcher at the University of Oregon, said she didn't present her data in

charts, numbers, and percentages because distance education is a rapidly changing field and because the motivations and perceptions of the students varied widely. Using numbers and "focusing on the description and statistics of any one moment or month or year would

make the study a historical rather than an analytical contribution to a volatile issue," she wrote in the report. The report is available for purchase (\$11.95 for association members; \$12.95 for non-members) on the AAUW Web site (<http://www.aauw.org>) ■