Have Laptop, Will Major in Women’s Studies

Online degree programs bring the university right into your home

BY KRYN FREELING-BURTON AND SUSAN M. SHAW

Tina Grissom and her partner own a new business, and their daughter lives with them half-time each week. Grissom has little time for a long commute to the nearest college campus, and works during the same hours that traditional classes are taught. Still, she didn’t want to give up the dream of pursuing a college degree, so she sought out an online degree program that centers on women’s history and activism. The women’s studies program at Oregon State University (OSU), some 40 miles from her home, suits her busy life, informs her woman-centered retail business and inspires her personal activism.

Online education is one of the fastest-growing paths to higher education and a college degree. In 2008, enrollment in online classes grew by 17 percent, compared to 1.2 percent for campus-based classes. With online programs, students can enroll in a college located not just in their own city, but in another town, another state or even halfway around the world.

The flexibility of online education can be life-transforming, especially for those who need to schedule classes around full-time work or child-care responsibilities. From a university’s viewpoint, it’s a cost-saving delivery method that can also increase enrollment by tapping into a population that might not otherwise be able to attend college. And it increases diversity, as classmates in a U.S. program may live as far away as Kenya, Afghanistan or a military base in Germany.

Going online with women’s studies can actually be a confirmation of feminist ideals, since access is increased for all women. As Michelle McGibney

Where to Major in Women’s Studies Online
Several U.S. universities offer women’s studies majors online; a couple of others offer certificates

- **UMass, Dartmouth**, offers a B.A. in women’s studies. Courses include Introduction to Women’s Studies, Feminist Theory, Feminist Research Methods, Global Feminism, Third Wave Feminism, Mothers & Daughters and Ecofeminism. Students select a concentration in gender studies; cross-cultural inquiry; arts and letters; or politics, justice and policy.

  For more information: umassonline@umassd.edu; (508) 910-8536; www1.umassd.edu/online/womens_studies

- **Washington State University** offers a B.A. in social science with a major or minor concentration in women’s studies. Courses include Gender & Power; Intersections of Race, Class, Gender & Sexuality; Women in Management & Leadership; Global Feminisms; Women & Popular Culture; and Lesbian & Gay Studies.

  For more information: online@wsu.edu; (800) 222-4978; www.online.wsu.edu

- **Oregon State University** offers a B.A. or B.S. in women’s studies. Courses include Women: Self & Society; Women: Personal & Social Change; Women of Color in the U.S.; International Women; Gender & Science; Muslim Women; Gender & Technology; and Women & Sexuality.

  For more information: carol.hardy-fanta@umb.edu; (817) 287-5548; www.mccormack.umb.edu/academic/wigp

For more Information: kryn.freeling-burton@oregonstate.edu; (541) 737-2828; www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu

- **Arizona State University** offers an online minor and a certificate in women’s studies; a major will soon be available. Courses include Women and Society; Women in Contemporary Society; History of American Feminist Thought; Global Feminist Theory; Gender, Race and Class; Women and International Health; Women, Aging and the Life Course.

  For more information: wgs.asutampe@asu.edu; (480) 965-2358; http://wgs.asu.edu

- **UMass, Boston**, offers a new graduate certificate, which can be earned in a year, in Women’s Leadership in a Global Perspective through the McCormack Graduate School of Policy Studies. Courses taught by women from around the globe include Understanding the Political System Worldwide; Women’s Leadership in a Global Perspective; Gender and Dispute Resolution Around the World; Women and Public Policy Decision-Making; and Women Gaining Appointed/Elected Public Office.

  For more information: carol.hardy-fanta@umb.edu; (817) 287-5548; www.mccormack.umb.edu/academic/wigp

www.feminist.org
Vlahouilis, a lecturer and online-course developer at Arizona State University (ASU), explains, “The point of women’s studies and feminism in general is to reach out and educate a new audience...and that is exactly what we are able to do with online courses.” At University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, (UMass), women’s studies online coordinator Jeannette E. Riley’s philosophy on web courses is similar: Her goal is to reach “the nontraditional woman student who wants to return to school and find her voice. This is our feminist outreach work.”

OSU, Washington State University (WSU) and UMass are the three U.S. colleges we’ve identified as currently offering online women’s studies majors. ASU’s online major will be available soon, but the college already offers an online minor or certificate in women’s studies.

OSU, where we teach, developed its first fully online women’s studies course—Women: Self & Society—in 2000; it explores how race, sexuality, health, government, family, work and more affect U.S. women’s lives. We soon added additional courses, most of which meet general-education requirements, so OSU students in other online majors can be encouraged to explore feminist history and ideals.

This last year, OSU’s women’s studies program began developing every one of its courses—11 required for the major and nine electives—as online offerings. The first five online majors began their programs in the spring, and more than 75 students overall are enrolled in online women’s studies classes. UMass has a head start on us: They already have more than a dozen online majors and hope to triple that number in the next year.

The virtual classroom looks and feels different from a face-to-face one, but online students still have textbooks, assignments, papers and tests. And they don’t lose the hallmarks of feminist classrooms: participatory learning, the validation of personal experience, encouragement of activism and the development of critical thinking. Instructors have come up with creative ways to maintain and even enhance these qualities. Teachers set up online discussion boards for students to interact around specific topics, and sometimes students are sent on virtual field trips—to a website related to the topic at hand—and then asked to report back.

OSU’s online women’s studies courses often emphasize social engagement as well, requiring students to venture into their local communities for research and activism. Some instructors incorporate live office hours or webinars, during which time students can interact with the professor and/or class in real time.

One term, a student attended class while stationed in Iraq and participated in a moderated discussion about international film portrayals of women with a Muslim student who came from the Middle East. Their conversation and the questions asked by classmates brought a down-to-earth humanity to the topic, illuminated by the students’ geographies and experiences.

Vlahouilis at ASU sees “online courses speak[ing] largely to the new generation of students who use technology in every aspect of their lives.” As women’s studies keeps growing and responding to the times, this is just one more way to connect with those who desire and need what the feminist field has to offer.

KRYN FREEHILING-BURTON teaches women’s studies at Oregon State University and is the program coordinator for the women’s studies online major.

SUSAN M. SHAW is a women’s studies professor and interim director of the School of Language, Culture and Society at OSU.