

# Chapter 17

## Supporting Male Students in Female–Dominated Virtual Classrooms

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### ABSTRACT

*In female-dominated academic disciplines, male college students face distinct challenges, such as lagging admission and graduation rates when compared to their female counterparts. To address this concerning trend and enhance support for male students, online educators should embrace a gender-adapted, culturally responsive teaching approach. This approach enables instructors to understand and support male student academic performance and tailor their educational strategies to enhance a male student's sense of belonging and engagement in the course. By adopting this approach, online educators can help male students cultivate a pro-social, strengths-based self-perception, fostering a positive sense of identity as learners, men, and future professionals. This approach emphasizes how their masculinity can be a source of strength, enabling them to derive maximum benefit from their educational journey and make meaningful contributions to their academic pursuits.*

### INTRODUCTION

Virtual learning offers cost-effective, convenient, flexible, and high-quality education to students (Cavinato et al., 2021; Kim & Park, 2020). However, it has also brought attention to a growing gender disparity in higher education, particularly the concerning trend of men falling behind women. Research findings indicate that men may encounter difficulties when it comes to initiating and sustaining engagement with classmates and professors in online learning environments, ultimately impacting their academic performance (Yaghmour, 2012). Male students may also find it difficult navigating online classrooms in female-dominated academic areas (e.g., nursing, education, counseling, social work). Several studies, over the last few decades, have investigated the effects and experiences of female students in male-

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dominated academic disciplines (Dresden et al., 2018; Steele et al., 2002), but little attention has been given to male student's experience of the converse.

Male students may experience social isolation, lack of access to academic support, including advisement and supervision (Williams, 2015), which can limit their opportunities for networking and professional development. Furthermore, male students pursuing fields of study where they are underrepresented, such as nursing, elementary education, and mental health, have faced significant challenges that have led to a higher dropout rate. These challenges include inadequate mentoring, social isolation, and the perception of discrimination (Lou et al., 2011; Severiens & ten Dam, 2012).

To address these challenges and enhance male students' learning experiences in female-dominated academic courses, virtual learning environments should be tailored to accommodate diverse learning styles among men, ways of relating to classmates, and styles of interacting with course material. This can be achieved by better equipping virtual educators to connect and support male students, and offer engaging content, and incorporating collaborative activities that may be more appealing to men's interest and learning styles.

Research examining male students and how masculinity relates to the online learning experience has been under-researched (Sbaratta & Tirpak, 2015), particularly in terms of how educators can effectively connect with and support male students. In this chapter, we will review an expanding body of research that sheds light on male students' learning outcomes and explore how educators can adapt their approach to better connect with, support, and meet the educational needs of male students in female-dominated online learning environments.

## **Rapid Adoption of Virtual Learning in Response to COVID-19**

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual education had a history spanning several decades, and distance education dating back to the late 1800s (Maeroff, 2003). However, the mandated national lockdown in the United States compelled a swift and widespread transition to online learning platforms across all educational levels. Between 2012- 2017, total enrollment in online courses in the United States jumped from 26% to 33.7% (Snyder et al., 2019). As of the latest data, approximately one-third of all college students are participating in at least one online class, with 15% of students being enrolled in fully online programs (Snyder et al., 2019). For the majority of college students, this transition was far from smooth, with learning new systems and technologies, often referred to as learning management system (LMS), becoming a significant source of stress (Aslan et al., 2020).

This unprecedented shift placed an immense burden on students, institutions, and educators alike. Educators were suddenly forced to adapt to unforeseen circumstances, primarily delivering their instruction in a virtual environment, even if they had little or no prior experience with online teaching. This adjustment often required providing instruction synchronously, asynchronously, or through a hybrid of both approaches, all while attempting to forge meaningful relationships with students.

Zamarro et al. (2022) reviewed studies that identified that teachers' attitude towards leaving their profession increased during the 2020-2021 academic year. In their analysis of a sample consisting of 1045 teachers, Zamarro and colleagues (2022) found compelling evidence of the pandemic's impact on teachers. Roughly 42% stated they considered departing or retiring from their current position during the last year, the majority of which cited stress from the pandemic being their primary reason. Relatedly, Pressley et al. (2021) found that the delivery of online teaching was a strong predictor of teacher's anxiety.

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