

# Core4Women

## Where Women Share and Discover Online Learning

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### INTRODUCTION

The Collaborative Online Resource Environment for Women (Core4Women) is a new online community that unites women seeking information about online learning and women who have knowledge of online education. Core4Women.org began in the hearts of women who recognize the advantages of online learning for women. As participants in a doctoral research project, women who had earned an online master's degree were interviewed about their experience as female online learners. Common threads that rose out of these

interviews were; overcoming barriers to education, gaining courage in their personal and professional lives, becoming eligible for jobs or promotions, and becoming role models for their children. They persistently asked why there was not a mechanism for them to share their experiences in online learning with other women still struggling to get an education. Thus, Core4Women was created.

### HISTORY

In the fall of 2007, the findings from the research were shared at the International



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Forum for Women in eLearning Conference by Gail Weatherly, founder of Core4Women. Weatherly received overwhelming encouragement to develop a site that would allow women to share information about online learning with other women who were asking for information. Over 30 women who are engaged in online learning contributed to the writing of a proposal that was submitted to the United States Distance Learning Association.

On August 31, 2008, the executive council of the United States Distance Learning Association applauded the idea and recommended a social networking site be developed for the purpose of helping women learn more about online learning. Council members suggested using Ning because it provided a comprehensive social network environment. Soon after, the Core4Women website was founded at [core4women.ning.com](http://core4women.ning.com).

In the spring of 2009, a group of mentors and participants began piloting the site. The first participants were residents of a nonprofit organization for single parents; all of them were survivors of abuse. Volunteer mentors were women from higher education and business who felt strongly about supporting women who may not be able to access traditional education.

During the pilot phase, Core4Women .ning.com attracted attention from several organizations:

- In April 2009, Marc Parry of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* wrote about Core4Women. The article provided a summary of how Core4Women can contribute to greater awareness of online learning among women seeking education, and also support women initially considering online learning as a means of access to education (<http://chronicle.com/blogPost/New-Project-Enlists-Women-t/4652/>).
- A podcast publicized by the United States Distance Learning Association as

part of the 2009 national conference allowed founders to share the story of Core4Women, describe how the organization became a reality, and the goals of the organization (<http://usdla-org.blogspot.com/2009/06/better-way-women-telling-women-about.html>)

- Get Educated.com signed on as a supporter, offering four \$1,000 scholarships to women who joined Core4Women during the pilot phase and who entered or were enrolled in online programs (<http://www.geteducated.com/guide-to-scholarships-and-free-money/4-guide-to-scholarships-and-free-money/280-geteducatedcom-online-education-scholarships-for-core4women-members>)

In the summer of 2009, residents of the same nonprofit organization from across the state joined the site. Without any publicity other than that already mentioned, Core4Women grew to 35 participants and 46 mentors. These included participants who are survivors of abuse, women in the military, spouses of military service members, and mentors who are presidents of universities, founders of commercial Internet sites about online learning, instructors of online education, former online students themselves, academic counselors and advisors, support personnel for online faculty and students, and so on. Each one has a personal reason for joining Core4Women.

## THE CORE4WOMEN MISSION

Core4Women:

- Supports and encourages those who seek to empower themselves through online education.
- Is a social network where women access information and resources to attain their education goals with the assistance of experienced mentors.

- Values a woman's right to self-fulfillment and increased potential through education, while recognizing the positive impact mentoring can have on the success of women.

Women comprise approximately 60% of online learners (Aud et al., 2010). Because women tend to be relational learners (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997), the challenge for Core4Women was to build a social network that is free and supports online learning through discussion and sharing of resources (Rovai & Baker, 2005). The growth has been substantial: from 27 states and 15 countries represented in November 2009 to 47 states and 28 countries represented and over 340 members as of November 2010.

### MENTORS AND MENTEES

We anticipate great demand and great interest in this site because it makes it possible for women to dialogue about online learning, share resources and information, and provide encouragement to women who may not receive encouragement from anyone to seek education and who find traditional education outside their reach. These are women who need to learn about online learning, and Core4Women, now a partner with Ning, opens the door for them at <http://www.core4women.org> or at <http://www.core4women.ning.com>

The mentor group began with the original group of 30 supporters who wrote the initial proposal. Additional mentors have been recruited through conference presentations, listserv postings and word of mouth. As of February 2011, there are over 390 members of the social network site with over 60 serving as mentors.

Testimonials within Core4Women, which are confidential, affirm several things that motivate those who give to Core4Women. Women want and need guidance about online learning, informa-

tion about accredited online programs is still opaque to women unfamiliar or out of touch with academia, and women value mentors who provide encouragement, information, and share outcomes of their own learning experiences. Technology now allows us to reach and assist a broader, more diverse group of prospective students whose decision-making about education is more complex than that of a traditional learner.

There are many leaders in distance learning who are supporting Core4Women. Among the supporters are: Julia Teahen, president, Baker College Online, founded a group just for Baker College learners who are also Core4Women members. She personalizes mentoring with students who have questions about online learning. Her introduction to Baker College Online is found at <https://www.baker.edu/departments/admissions/presidents/julia.cfm>. Stella Porto, program director, master of distance education and e-learning, University of Maryland University College, joined the effort to support Core4Women at the International Forum for Women in eLearning conference in November 2010.

Porto and students in her master of distance education program and e-learning students at University of Maryland University College are planning to host live discussions on a variety of topics related to online learning that will benefit members of Core4Women. Vicky Phillips, founder, GetEducated.com, a first generation college graduate, was immediately interested in Core4Women when *The Chronicle of Higher Education* publicized the forum in 2009. To date, Vicky and her organization have granted four \$1,000 scholarships to eligible Core4Women members. Information about Core4Women scholarship recipients is online at <http://www.geteducated.com/online-degree-financial-aid/free-college-scholarships/280-online-degrees-for-women>.

## HOW IS CORE4WOMEN GROWING?

Members of Core4Women span the globe. There are members representing 28 countries; however, the numbers change rapidly. The mission of this forum, which includes empowerment of women through online learning, may offer a unique opportunity for women who cannot openly seek knowledge or self-fulfillment. This includes women who have been disenfranchised by violence, abuse, or social mores that do not give them voice.

The Turkish American Women Association in Dallas, Texas, welcomed Core4Women speakers in December 2009; within days, several Turkish American Women Association members joined Core4Women to learn more about online learning. The warmth and friendship of that face-to-face meeting was something to be emulated online! Information about the presentation and photos of that meeting are on the Turkish American Women Association website at [http://tawadallas.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=105:tawa-december-luncheon-online-education](http://tawadallas.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=105:tawa-december-luncheon-online-education).

## THE FUTURE OF CORE4WOMEN

Core4Women is a volunteer organization. Women, and men, have given hours of their time to utilize social media to support a virtual community that reaches out to some of the most vulnerable learners—women, many times single mothers, who are balancing a job, a family, and course work in order to serve as a role model to their kids and to make life better for their families. In 2010, an application for 501(c)(3) nonprofit status was submitted to the Internal Revenue Service. The application, which was completed by a lawyer and a certified public accountant, was received by the Internal Revenue Service and is pending approval by late spring of

2011. After approval is given, Core4Women will be eligible to pursue grants, and donations given by individuals will be tax deductible. Revenue will then allow Core4Women to implement scholarships, in addition to those given by GetEducated.com, and also to conduct a self-study with web analysts in order to continually improve service to women seeking information about online learning.

Core4Women was born out of a need and desire for women to connect with women about online learning opportunities and to provide and receive support for the challenges that are unique to women online learners. Core4Women provides a secure, social networking site to facilitate this mentor/mentee relationship, as well as the sharing of resources and information. In this way, it is hoped that Core4Women will touch the lives of those who are seeking to improve their lives through pursuing higher education through online learning. To find out more about Core4Women, please see [www.core4women.org](http://www.core4women.org)

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