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Women and Education: Making a Difference

By Mary Ann Holladay
Director, Utah Women and
Education Initiative

I live in Utah, a state that is beautiful and attracts people to live and work here because it is relatively clean, safe and offers an abundance of career and living opportunities. We pride ourselves on frequently making the lists of “best places to live” for many reasons. Yet we also find ourselves topping the list of states in the United States with the biggest gap (six percent) between men and women in terms of completion of college degrees at the bachelor’s level. Why is there such a disparity and, more importantly, what can be done to make completing college more attainable for women?

It is important to acknowledge that everyone’s situation is different and that to lump an entire state’s population into a single explanation is overly simplistic. However, we do know there are a number of factors that contribute to a young woman’s ability to start and finish college. Topping the list are the “influencers,” those people who con-



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tribute to a person’s self-esteem, goals and ambitions, and who send myriad messages about the importance of postsecondary education. Among the influencers are mothers, fathers, teachers, counselors, religious leaders, friends and significant others. Helping those people to understand the importance of their support from a very early age has been shown to make a huge difference in overcoming the barriers unique to women in higher

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education. Beyond that, ensuring that women are aware of the many resources available to assist in surmounting personal and financial issues is perhaps the greatest challenge that we, as a culture, face.

Are colleges and universities doing enough to address the issues women disproportionately face? From my perspective as a business person, I can honestly say a lot is being done and many steps have been taken in a relatively short period of time. The explosion of online courses, women's resource centers, financial assistance, flexible scheduling and child care options certainly are helping.

What, then, is missing? If I could wave a magic wand in a way that could make a difference, I would work to remove the silos that currently exist between institutions of higher education and the communities they serve. When I am out in my community talking with people who are trying to make a difference, I often hear about a lack of flexibility in the higher education system. For example, few programs offer flexible attendance options and credits for prior learning. These are frequently cited as barriers for non-traditional students seeking to complete a degree. However, when I raise these issues with higher edu-

cation representatives, they cite a number of ways they are working to provide the flexibility that is being sought. They express frustration at the lack of awareness of the progress that has been made. Somehow, the word just isn't getting out to those who can benefit most.

As with many of today's toughest problems, the "heart" of the issue appears to be communication. When administrators, students, non-profit organizations, businesses, parents, teachers and religious organizations can begin to communicate collaboratively and break down their collective silos, a truly innovative approach can be taken and new insights will occur. We need to work to create better forums for creative discussions and thinking "outside the box." Of course, accountability and incentives to work together must also be in place. To the extent that each spoke in the education wheel can interface with diverse constituents and embrace diverse perspectives, new solutions can be identified and implemented. In that regard, this is not only a women's issue, it is an issue that can impact our ability to get all individuals the education that will help to fulfill their dreams and make them positive contributors to our society.



AUTHOR PROFILE

Current Position and Past Experience

Mary Ann Holladay currently serves as the Director of the Utah Women and Education Initiative. She concurrently serves as the President and CEO of Holladay and Associates, a firm specializing in strategic planning and organizational assessment. Prior to her current position, Holladay served as the Vice President of Human Resources at ATK Aerospace Systems.

Education, Honors and Achievements

Holladay has a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and an MBA from the University of Utah. She is a member of the honor societies Phi Beta Kappa and Phi Kappa Phi. She is also a member of the Society for Human Resource Management.