



Online School for Girls



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Abstract

The Online Schools for Girls (OSG) and the Global Online Academy (GOA) have worked over the past three years to forge a new direction for online education, one that is more reflective of independent schools. In this Whitepaper, GOA Director Michael Nachbar and OSG Director Brad Rathgeber create the case for “online independent schools.”

Online Independent Schools: Defining a New Generation of Excellence

Independent schools know what good teaching is, and we know how to create an environment in which students can learn. We know how to engage kids; how to challenge them; how to motivate, support, and connect with them. We know that good teaching does not come from sophisticated software, and it does not happen in large classes. Learning happens when students build relationships with their teachers and classmates, when they get individualized attention, when learning is relevant, and when they feel appropriately challenged and supported—in short, when learning is personal. Good teaching happens when teachers have a hand in what gets taught and how, and when they are supported through quality professional development, ongoing training and support, and regular reflection.

On its surface, independent-school education seems to be at odds with the movement of online education. Today, online education is dominated by for-profit course providers and several universities. Both offer their own unique approaches to online learning: for-profit companies more often than not focus on computer software to present content to students, and some other programs typically rely upon lecture modules ported online. Put simply, these approaches focus on *efficient delivery* rather than on engagement, deep learning and understanding; neither resonates well with independent, secondary school communities.

These all-too-common models of online learning notwithstanding, those of us in independent schools recognize that online education holds great promise. Moreover, we increasingly comprehend that schools should prepare students for online education at the collegiate level and beyond, in much the same way that we have prepared students for other experiences beyond our schools. Thus, while independent-school education certainly can be at odds with online education, some schools have begun to prove that this does not need to be the case.

Over the last few years, independent schools have begun to discover the opportunities online learning offers their students and teachers through collaborative, consortium-based efforts such as the Online School for Girls (OSG) and the Global Online Academy (GOA). In moving to this space, GOA and OSG have realized that

independent schools must forge a new educational direction, one different from the high-profile online schools. One that is true to the roots and principles of independent schools as it takes advantage of the unique characteristics and advantages of learning online. The characteristics that define these consortia, taken as a whole, provide a model for the way that independent schools can and should move into online education.

Mission Driven and Not-for-Profit

When independent schools are at their best, they are mission driven in all that they do. From professional development to classroom teaching, from fund raising to construction, a school's mission influences the questions a school asks and is at the core of how it answers them. As Pat Bassett, President of the National Association of Independent Schools, wrote, "The 'bottom line' for not-for-profit independent schools is not 'the bottom line' as in a for-profit business, but rather, of course, the kids."

We believe that schools having students' best interests in mind are those that are mission driven and student centered. In schools that operate this way, in independent schools, one can see the mission living in every classroom and even in the types of assignments students engage in. The curriculum in an all-girls school will reflect those values and vision in a curricular sequence that is centered around how girls learn best. A school committed to diversity and academic excellence will offer courses that create an environment that enables its learners to share their ideas and diverse perspectives. Having a clear understanding of who we are sets a clear course for what we do and how we do it. For online independent schools, that is no different.

Personal Values and Relationships

Independent schools have always emphasized the importance of relationships, both between students and their teachers and among students in and outside of the classroom. Making sure that students are connected to adults and peers is a critical component in the learning process. Through strong bonds students are held accountable to one another, and these connections help teachers know who each student is as a learner, a teenager, an athlete, an artist, and, most importantly, as a person. Independent schools teach the whole child and our schools hold relationships sacred. Online independent schools are no different.

We believe that in small online classes students should participate in lessons that allow them to collaborate and interact with one another. Teachers should use an array of tools, programs, and honed teaching strategies to ensure that each student connects with the material and with each other. Knowing what a day in the life of an independent school student looks like, our teachers communicate regularly with families and schools so students get the support that they need. We know kids, we know *these* kids, and we know how to connect with and teach them.

Challenging and Academically Excellent

Students need to be appropriately challenged to meet the high expectations set by teachers who know of what they are capable. Intellectually vigorous conversations are the norm in independent-school classrooms. Teachers are experts in their fields and know how to push students appropriately to higher levels of learning and understanding. In independent schools, students are immersed in college-preparatory environments where academic achievement is celebrated.

We believe that online independent school classes should be no different in terms of challenging students. Additionally, these classes hold the advantage of being able to expose students to even more through the regular use of Internet resources. An online school committed to high standards and an academically challenging, college-preparatory environment will create learning environments that stimulate students to engage and that challenge them not simply to know the material and content of the course but to go beyond it to higher levels of thinking and engagement. One of our students recently remarked that participating in an online course has helped her "become a citizen who is more well-rounded... [and to] become more open-

mindful in considering views other than my own.” Her comment speaks to the larger and lofty goals that online independent schools must have—to engage, challenge, and connect with students to help them discover new ways of thinking and to provide a place to voice their thoughts and ideas.

Knowing Our Learners

Independent school teachers and administrators know their learners and are able to create courses that meet developmentally appropriate learning outcomes. Teachers at independent schools are not tied to state standards, allowing them to go beyond the rote and allowing for greater differentiation and unique support. Independent schools handle each student’s situation and circumstances individually, truly differentiating not just the instruction in the classroom for each student, but the overall educational experience for each student.

We believe that online independent schools must connect with the face-to-face community of which students are a part in order to help create an entire learning experience that is best for each individual student. Just as with so many parts of a college-preparatory program, a student needs guidance and support before gaining greater independence at the next level.

Online education is changing how we teach and learn. Our teachers can finally fully utilize the plethora of available tools to support their great teaching, and our schools and students are benefiting from this. As the expectations and context of learners changes, independent schools should continue to respond in innovative ways that build on our traditions of quality education. Independent schools must bring their best strengths and experience in shaping the online world as we have for the last several hundred years.