

Distance Learning Forum
Sponsored by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia
June 1st and 2nd, 1998

Opening Session

Executive Summary

The opening session offered a series of speakers who welcomed those attending the Distance Learning Forum and set the context for the conference. Elizabeth McClanahan, Chairman of the State Council, posed the specific questions for which the Council was seeking guidance in their efforts to formulate distance learning policy. Robin Zink, Deputy Secretary of Education, discussed the goals of the forthcoming Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education that the Governor will soon appoint. She provided assurance to the participants that the Governor recognized the import of the Forum's deliberations, and that distance learning will undoubtedly play a large role in the Governor's efforts to prepare Virginia's work force for the future.

Delegate Kenneth R. Plum of Virginia's General Assembly made a strong case for Virginia's higher education community to stress educating lawmakers on the opportunities distance learning provides and the costs entailed to do it right. He said that within the new technologies of distance learning, the state has the ability to increase educational access in Virginia's rural areas, and to offer the state's work force the opportunities it needs to keep its skills in tune with the times.

Dr. J. Michael Mullen, the Interim Director of the State Council, followed Delegate Plum with a brief history of distance learning efforts the state has undertaken. He also outlined some of the demographic pressures the state will encounter over the next 15 years that will amplify the importance of distance learning technology. Dr. Mullen also noted that the advent of the new distance learning technologies forces the state's higher education system to deal with a changed environment for higher education.

Dr. Bruce Chaloux, Director of the Southern Regional Electronic Campus (SREC), finished the opening session and introduced himself as the moderator for the panel sessions that would take place the next day. Dr. Chaloux reassured the assembly that Virginia was not behind the rest of the country in its efforts in distance learning, but in fact was looked at as a national leader. He covered the many challenges that distance learning engages and then provided an oversight of what the SREC is all about. He closed with a proposal that Virginia present its finest professors and courses to the rest of the nation as its virtual university offering.

Elizabeth McClanahan
Chairman of the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia,

Robin Zink
Deputy Secretary of Education for Virginia

Chairman McClanahan and Deputy Secretary Robin Zink welcomed the participants and presenters to the Forum, outlining the interest both the Council of Higher Education and the Governor have in exploring the possibilities that distance learning appears to offer.

Kenneth Plum
Virginia House of Delegates
Co-Chairman, House Committee on Science and Technology

Delegate Plum began by pointing out that the issues surrounding distance education will likely find their way to his arena in as much as they involve budget decisions and technology policy.

He reminisced that in his earlier career with the Fairfax County school system he had been involved in outreach education activities. The problems of time and space for providing education in that period were solved by educating tutors who serviced individual clients. He observed that now technology can provide the solution to the demands of time and place that the modern work world puts on adult learners.

In discussing how technology affects public policy Delegate Plum described the history of the House Committee on Science and Technology. In its first year of existence it met only once and had no agenda. In the second year, the then Chairman had an education agenda, so lots of money was recommended by the Committee to enhance technology in education. In the third year the Committee expanded its reach into many areas of legislative responsibility, but particularly in the General Assembly's own use of technology.

Still, Delegate Plum indicated the "go slow" nature of the General Assembly accepting the possibilities of technology. His major point was that the education community needs to do a lot of educating of the legislature about the possibilities—and costs—of applying advanced technology to the delivery of quality higher education.

He sees the opportunity for distance learning technology to have an enormous impact in the arena of access, providing improved higher education services for the Eastern Shore and Southwest Virginia, for instance. However, he counseled the group to use the technology in ways that accent its advantages, and not to simply transmit talking heads.

He stated that the programs that will benefit the most from distance learning technology are those that take into account what people actually need in the way of education. He said the bulk of jobs now available in the state may not necessarily require full degrees; they require very specific knowledge sets and some kind of certification that the worker has received that knowledge.

Delegate Plum said that if the public education system doesn't address the job-related educational needs of Virginia's citizens, the private sector will provide the needed services—and is already doing so. His morning perusal of the Washington Post and Washington Business Journal shows many ads for private sector education providers.

Fortunately, according to Delegate Plum, Virginia has a good grounding in the use of distance learning and associated technologies through the work of Old Dominion University, Virginia Tech, and others, and should have little difficulty in addressing these work force preparation needs.

In closing Delegate Plum said that there was danger that policy makers might focus on the ability of distance learning technology to save money, and it may become an excuse for them to cut budgets. The delegate observed that cost savings is secondary to the primary benefits of distance learning—improved access and improved quality of instruction—upon which all policy should be based.

Dr. J. Michael Mullen
Interim Director, State Council of Higher Education for Virginia

Introduced as someone who brings a sense of history to the issues surrounding distance learning, Dr. Mullen observed that history is important not because it tells what happened, but because it identifies what doesn't have to be done again. He went on that Virginia has been in the forefront of distance learning over the last twenty years because it has treated technology as a tool rather than an end in itself.

The big question, according to Dr. Mullen, is how the state can foster collaboration and yet apply some type of reasonable moderation to inevitable competition. And this question has to be answered in the context of the state switching from a 19th Century regulatory model that focuses on institutions to one which focuses on students as customers. Dr. Mullen likens the situation of the state to a community of “mom & pop” stores where a Walmart has just moved in. The question is whether to protect the local businesses or allow the citizens to have an expanded array of purchase options at potentially lower prices.

Dr. Mullen observed that while the purpose of the conference was ostensibly to look at distance learning, the real purpose was to consider how to deal with a basic sea change in education. Distance learning is the catalyst that will allow the group to cover some basic issues such as whether the higher education system in Virginia will function as a free

market enterprise, or whether the state will continue its approach of protecting each institution's turf.

One element to factor into the deliberations, according to Dr. Mullen, is the demographic reality Virginia faces. The state will show strong population growth, particularly in the area of high school graduates, over the next fifteen years. Consequently many other states and private companies will view Virginia as a potentially productive hunting ground, particularly the sections of the state with sophisticated business and population centers. In this environment, Dr. Mullen warned, the institutions must stay away from the traditional approach of worrying "how will this affect my institution," and ask the question "what can we do to better serve the citizens of the Commonwealth?"

In asking this question, the institutional representatives at the Forum must provide answers that offer Virginia citizens an approach that balances three major concerns:

- Access: the state must increase the choices and options available to citizens, particularly to working adults who must upgrade their education to keep current with work force demands;
- Cost: the costs to students, the state, and the institutions must be kept reasonable;
- Quality: somehow it must be ensured that whatever course from whatever source that students take must be worth the price charged for it.

The state, according to Dr. Mullen, must work to ensure that students are "informed customers." Also, whatever the state itself does in distance learning must be transportable, i.e., courses and programs must be structured so that they will be recognized by other institutions (within and without the state) and can be fit together to fulfill larger scale degree and certification needs.

Dr. Mullen said that the state must stay away from dealing with distance learning as a completely separate entity from other educational formats. The goal of quality must apply equally to web-based distance learning as well as to the on-campus and remote-site educational formats. Too often institutions want to say that "what's done on campus is quality because it is under the control of the faculty, but what's done off campus is uncontrollable and thus not particularly quality-oriented."

Dr. Mullen next provided a history of distance learning enterprises in Virginia over the last quarter century. His summation included:

- 1970's: the origins of distance learning in Virginia date back to this period and before, when the University of Virginia and Virginia Tech provided continuing education through regional centers, extension offices, etc. These efforts focused on agriculture, business, and engineering programs, and overall represented 10-12% of enrollment.
- 1980's: Regional service areas developed, with specified regional consortia controlling the educational efforts in their geographic areas of responsibility. During this period, the VCCS set up many off-campus centers for its programs.

- In 1983, the Council tried to avoid the development of an Engineering School at VCU by encouraging the development of a graduate engineering program using PBS facilities and taught cooperatively in Richmond by UVA and VPI. The program was so successful it was beamed around the state in 1984. This precipitated a state policy turnabout concerning turf-based ownership of students that had resounding implications for distance learning in Virginia, and which has set up the current climate.
- 1990's: three entities that are directly related to distance learning have been implemented: 1) the Virtual Library of Virginia (VIVA), without which, noted Dr. Mullen, the projected future for distance learning efforts in the state by the public institutions could not come to pass; 2) Teletechnet, which is easily the state's premiere current distance learning effort; and 3) Net.Work.Virginia, the handiwork of Virginia Tech, Old Dominion University, and the VCCS, it is enabling the connectivity needed for successful distance learning program provision and cooperation in program development among the institutions.

Dr. Mullen next mentioned the ongoing efforts to create a virtual university for the state. He said those involved in the effort should not leave the private sector institutions (in and out of Virginia) and the non-Virginia public institutions that will undoubtedly play a role in distance learning in the state out of their considerations.

Dr. Mullen considers federal financial aid programs a vital ingredient in the mix required for successful distance learning efforts. He noted that efforts are underway to change regulations to provide students attending such endeavors as the University of Phoenix eligibility for aid. He also stated that the Federal government will undoubtedly change the methodology for calculating the cost of education, which is the basic mechanism by which the amount of aid a student should receive is determined. These changes, he noted, are likely to be very favorable to the development of distance learning.

Dr. Mullen switched gears at this point to go over in more detail the demographic pressures he had mentioned earlier that will play a significant role in Virginia's policy determinations. There will be a 25 percent increase in high school graduates between 1996 and 2011. The majority of this growth will occur in or around Northern Virginia, Richmond, and Tidewater. Dr. Mullen noted that 50 percent of the growth will occur in minority groups that traditionally show a strong proclivity to avoid higher education or—when they do engage the system—stay local.

In spite of these projections, Dr. Mullen predicts that on-campus enrollments in Virginia's public and private institutions will generally stay where they are and that distance learning may offer a way to deal with these enrollment pressures.

According to Dr. Mullen, because of the demographic pressures the press for the next ten years will be on undergraduate education. However, this press will not require the construction of more physical facilities, particularly if distance learning approaches are correctly implemented. The enrollments of the 25-44 age bracket, work force training needs notwithstanding, will likely decline for a while, then stay stable, and then start to

skyrocket by 2005-2010. As this group comes on line there will be an increased emphasis on part-time enrollment and non-credit programs.

Dr. Bruce Chaloux
Director, Southern Regional Electronic Campus

As the moderator for the next day's sessions, Dr. Chaloux provided an overview of the Forum, describing three main themes of the conference:

- Times are changing and real blurs are occurring in the distinctions shown in the traditional categories of higher education (full time/part time; in-state/out-of-state; etc.)
- The shift from teacher/institutional centered model of learning to the learner centered model is changing higher education, although Dr. Chaloux strongly feels that there will always be a place for the residential programs.
- Cooperation and coordination.

Dr. Chaloux cautioned the audience against being too critical of Virginia's efforts in distance learning, stating that it definitely was in a leadership role in the SREB states. He said the policy formulation concerning distance learning in Virginia represents a great challenge for the state since many other states around the country are going to watch closely what Virginia does. His hope is that the two-day forum would result in an agenda for formulating that policy.

He then outlined the areas in which the state is seeking guidance regarding distance learning. They include:

- Regulatory requirements;
- Incentives for open markets;
- New consumer-oriented approaches;
- How the institutions might collaborate;
- How to maximize access for Virginians;
- How to formulate a Commonwealth Electronic Campus;
- How to deal with the overall growth of distance learning.

He then offered some additional thoughts beyond the previous speakers on the context of discussing these issues. His comments took into account his multi-state perspective:

- There are many initiatives throughout the country to develop distance learning programs. This is indicative of the core nature of the change that is happening. He specifically cited California, Florida, and Kentucky's efforts.
- The premise behind all initiatives (including the Western Governors' University) is to service students better, particularly those students whom the higher education system has not traditionally served well.
- Higher education has not done a good job of looking at the business side of their enterprise. It has been estimated that the education market is a \$50 billion marketplace; it is no wonder that the private sector is looking at it so longingly.

- Contrary to Delegate Plum’s and Dr. Mullen’s comments, Dr. Chaloux feels that many people taking distance learning programs will be looking for full degrees.

Dr. Chaloux said he foresees a variety of challenges that the emergence of distance learning is creating. These include:

- Creating the programs in a manner that works towards the cost effectiveness of the institution as a whole;
- How will cooperation and competition co-exist?
- How will the traditions of higher education be handled (he particularly cited “residency”)?
- Determining what support services that will be required for distance learning programs;
- Developing new measures for how work load, cost, and quality are evaluated.

Dr. Chaloux next described the SREC. He first covered the organization’s basic concept, which is to utilize the existing strengths of the 16 member states to create opportunities, access, and a regional market place for student consumers. While the SREC is often compared to the Western Governor’s University (WGU), he said he does not feel they are in head-to-head competition. The WGU is primarily trying to put competency-based degree granting programs in place but this is proving slow to take off. The SREC is functioning more as a brokering agency, connecting distance learning supply and demand in the member states.

Concerning how to assure program quality, Dr. Chaloux stated that the SREC first developed the Principles of Good Practice, and now is applying a three stage review process to all programs submitted to it for consideration. The first step is at the institutional level, wherein the institution itself ensures the program it has developed is in accord with the Principles of Good Practice. The second level of review takes place at a state’s equivalent of the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) office (in Virginia, that would be the State Council of Higher Education). The final review is by the SREC to ensure that all materials submitted are complete.

The SREC will provide over 1,000 courses on-line this fall. It will offer 30 different degree granting programs. Virginia institutions will provide 100 courses out of the 1,000 offered.

Concerning policy areas that will require further consideration, Dr. Chaloux specifically identified financial aid, transfer policies, and support services as those that will require continued work by the states participating in the SREC.

Dr. Chaloux finished his presentation by offering a “modest proposal for Virginia.” Dr. Chaloux cited the example of the James “Bud” Robertson, a popular Civil War historian at Virginia Tech whose classes are always oversubscribed. He indicated that what Virginia should do is develop a program of distance learning courses to offer through the SREC that puts the best professors from its institutions—such as Dr. Robertson—in front of the rest of the country.