

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

Conference Summaries

Dr. Bruce Chaloux, the director of the Southern Regional Electronic Campus and the Moderator for the Forum, and Dr. J. Michael Mullen, Interim Director of the State Council, provided summaries of what they had noted as significant in the presentations and discussions that had taken place during the Forum.

Dr. Bruce Chaloux

Dr. Chaloux provided a summary of what he felt were the issues and his own thoughts for future action that emerged from the Forum.

- Distance learning is enough a part of the landscape now that higher education cannot dismiss its importance, and must be prepared to deal with its challenges at the institutional, state, regional, and federal levels.
- Collaboration is the best approach to realizing distance learning's promise and avoiding its pitfalls.
- It appears that there is little interest in strong regulation of distance learning at this point. Most participants wanted the free-market to allow consumers to choose courses and programs based upon quality and cost.
- However, Dr. Chaloux would like Virginia—and all other states participating in the SREC—to have some mechanism whereby the state applies a stamp of approval to distance learning courses and programs. This stamp would serve as quality assurance for those taking the course or program both within and without the Commonwealth.
- The notion of a state level clearinghouse for information on distance learning courses and programs had support among all those attending the conference. Dr. James Koch's idea of SCHEV serving as a "Consumers Reports" agency seemed to catch everyone's imagination.
- A Virginia Virtual University should act as a mechanism to pull together consumer information and to coordinate the student support services distance learning requires.
- Dr. Chaloux said he does not know how to ensure that the higher education community doesn't relegate distance learning to an incidental status, which is a fear that Dr. William Durden, the Forum's Keynote Speaker, expressed in his presentation. He said the state should centralize program coordination, information, and support service functions.
- Dr. Chaloux said he very much liked the idea of a distance learning venture capital fund provided at the state level. He suggested that reprioritizing institutional budgets may be the source of money for such a fund.

Comments from Participants on Dr. Chaloux's Summary

Minnis E. Ridenour, Executive Vice President & Chief Business Officer, Virginia Tech

- Virginia Tech is looking for a greater role for distance learning in their educational efforts, and the Forum has been a great help in seeing opportunities.
- Dr. William Durden's concept of developing distance learning from the institutional level rather than from the state level is helpful advice to all parties considering the subject.
- If the Forum had a weakness, it was that it didn't cover the academic issues related to distance learning in enough depth. The faculty have to be engaged in any discussions and decisions related to distance learning in the future.
- Overall, Dr. Ridenour said that perhaps no one has a complete understanding of what's possible/not possible with on-line education, and the nature of the market for it is also not well understood. In light of this he suggested that perhaps it is not prudent for the state to invest significantly in distance learning at this point. As an example he cited Durden's assertion that the market for distance learning is working adults and not undergraduate education. "Why," asked Dr. Ridenour, "should parents of undergraduates subsidize through their tax dollars working adults getting an education rather than their children?"

Anne Raymond Savage, Associate Vice President, Old Dominion University

- The Commonwealth should be proud of its efforts in distance learning so far and for the leadership the Council has shown in the area over recent years. Virginia is uniquely positioned to deal with the issues of distance learning. Although the general sense is that no one thoroughly understands the full opportunities and problems that distance learning engenders, at least Virginia is in a position to get it right.
- Dr. Chaloux reinforced these sentiments with the added weight of his regional perspective. "Most states aren't even in a position to hold a Forum such as this."

Anne-Marie McCartan, Vice Chancellor for Academic Services and Research, VCCS

- The VCCS favors collaboration and cooperation over state regulation with regard to distance learning. SCHEV should issue a report within a year detailing collaboration and coordination efforts and successes.

Anne Moore, Director of Information Technology Initiatives, Virginia Tech

- The fast and impressive impact of technology on access to learning and on learning itself has left most with a sense of dislocation. Dr. Moore said that participants need to accept anxiety as a natural part of the environment right now, and not let it

deter them in the effort to move forward with the use of new technologies for learning.

- The provision of a “venture capital fund” would be great thing to encourage the experimentation that will be necessary for the growth of distance learning.

Dr. J. Michael Mullen

Dr. Mullen provided the following observations on what he had heard over the course of the Forum and his own thoughts for the future:

- The participants should step back and realize that Virginia has one of the finest higher education systems in the country. Part of the reason is that distance learning has been incorporated as an integral part of the Commonwealth’s institutions for a good while now. Virginia is far ahead of many other states that have also invested significant funds into the hardware and software of distance learning.
- The state actually has some breathing time in sorting out and dealing with the issues of distance learning. The growth in the student population over the next seven years has the potential to provide the state increased marginal revenues to pursue distance learning.
- What the state is dealing with is similar to the circumstances in the late 1970’s. At that time the Council, General Assembly, and Governor decided that the state should get rid of time and place distinctions in its budget and funding practices. Prior to that, everything done educationally off-campus received no General Fund support. The decision made a credit hour a credit hour, no matter where it originated. The lesson for the present is to stop talking about distance learning as something separate and apart, and begin to just discuss learning. The approaches to funding and measuring quality should be the same for all modalities, and if a distinction is made between distance learning and traditional there will be many problems.
- After several years of good funding and support for technology, Dr. Mullen said now is the time to get out of capacity building and into implementation. Unfortunately he said a lot of the issues that had been discussed at the Forum were disguised calls for more capacity building.
- Another message to which the participants should pay great heed is that of “not putting all your eggs in one basket.” It is clear that no one delivery mechanism is going to satisfy every need for either all institutions or all students. Efforts and funding to keep options open and continue development of other educational approaches besides distance learning must be on-going.
- Dr. Mullen said that, in spite of his reputation as a cynic, there are some good signs in the Commonwealth regarding the future of cooperation related to distance learning. As long as the institutions don’t get locked in the “not invented here” syndrome, Dr. Mullen said that cooperation and collaboration will characterize the Commonwealth’s efforts in distance learning.

Dr. Mullen concluded his summary with some predictions on the future of distance learning:

- Those living in Virginia's major metropolitan areas can expect to see the course and program options available to them double within the next year, and then double every six months thereafter.
- Somebody is going to challenge Virginia's or some other state's institutional approval statute on electronic course delivery, and the states will lose. The concept of not constraining competition is in such ascendancy now that no argument will defeat it.
- However, the state will be able to ask questions about customer/student information, quality assurance, and consumer protection. The Council and its staff are working hard to deal with responsibilities in this area.
- Participants need to step back and consider what stance works best for them in dealing with the new reality of a free-market environment for distance learning and higher education in general. The positions and proposals made to the group by the presenters at the Forum lead in every possible direction. Contradictory opinions and proposals will be the order of the day for the foreseeable future, and participants are best served by understanding their own needs in the confused state of affairs of higher education.