Organizational Models for Delivering Distance Learning

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Overview

Confronted by both real and imagined competition from for-profit learning providers, and by the opportunities presented by the constantly changing environment for technology-based learning, multi-campus universities and university systems are creating new organizational models for distance learning. If competitive pressures are not sufficient to promote development of these new models, then the expectations of state executive and legislative branches of government are likely to stimulate a re-examination of how public higher education is structured to deliver distance learning. Recent evidence of these expectations is contained in two reports issued in the summer of 2001 by the National Governors Association, “The State of E-Learning in the States” and “A Vision of E-Learning for America’s Workforce,” which endorse distance learning as well as highlight concerns about quality and assessment.

Distance Learning

Although much of the attention on- and off-campus is devoted to online learning (or e-learning), issues of quality, instructor training, content development, and intellectual property rights transcend all of the technologies employed by most distance learning providers. Accordingly, for the purposes of this Research Bulletin, the definition of distance learning embraces all of the electronically mediated technologies, including Internet- and intranet-based delivery, e-mail, CD-ROM, videotape, compressed video, broadcast video, telecourses, and audio conferencing. Our focus is on the structure and policy questions that enable an institution to provide learning opportunities at a distance, rather than on the alternative technologies.

Approach

This Research Bulletin reports on the organizational models adopted by six university systems or multi-campus universities: the University of Texas TeleCampus, the State University of New York (SUNY) Learning Network, The Pennsylvania State University World Campus, the Kentucky Virtual University, the University of Maryland University College (UMUC), and the University System of Georgia Advanced Learning Technologies Unit. Two of these units—Penn State and UMUC—represent restructuring of long-standing organizations for delivering continuing and distance education, while the remaining four are examples of entirely new entities developed to promote and deliver distance learning.

For each model, we provide a brief background along with a synopsis of the model’s approaches to governance (reporting lines and responsibilities), services (admissions, registration, advising, instructional design support, and training), and funding (revenue sources). The Research Bulletin continues with a brief examination of which distance learning functions are handled centrally and which are decentralized to the individual campuses or institutions, followed by a list of several distance learning policy questions that university systems should consider as they contemplate their future course in distance learning.
Organizational Model Highlights
University of Texas TeleCampus
(http://www.telecampus.utsystem.edu/)

**Background.** The University of Texas (UT) System, comprised of nine universities and six university health campuses, launched its UT TeleCampus in May 1998, following the previous year's establishment of an administrative site and the development of supporting student services. Embracing the motto "Taking the Distance out of Education," the stated objective of the UT TeleCampus is "to provide optimum customer services along with superior learning resources for both the distance learner and teacher." UT TeleCampus offered its first completely online program, an MBA, in the fall of 1999. By fall 2000 the number of programs grew to 10 with over 1,000 enrollments. Fall 2001 included 12 (primarily collaborative) programs and over 2,000 enrollments.

**Governance.** The UT TeleCampus serves as the central service and support unit for distance education initiatives across the UT System. Students who want to enroll in online distance education programs offered by any of the system's institutions access the programs through the UT TeleCampus Web site. The institution delivering the program registers the student, awards credit, and grants the degree or certificate. Tuition and fee levels are also institution-dependent. The UT TeleCampus is overseen by an assistant vice chancellor for academic affairs and director of the TeleCampus, who reports to the executive vice chancellor for academic affairs of the University of Texas System Administration.

Market research, program development, and program marketing are coordinated by UT TeleCampus. New program development is supported through an RFP (request for proposal) process. UT TeleCampus issues an RFP to solicit proposals from interested UT institutions and, once a program has been identified for development and funding, supports and advertises the offering once it is fully developed. Program funding provides for faculty release time and course production assistance, with a typical course development time of 9 to 12 months.

The individual universities are not limited to UT TeleCampus for the delivery of distance learning. The universities retain their own separate Web sites and portals; some maintain other delivery platforms and develop, market, and deliver programs. However, the majority (90%) of fully online programs are offered via the TeleCampus.

**Services.** In addition to providing coordination and the technology portal for accessing online programming, UT TeleCampus supports several technical platforms and provides related technical support for course development. This support includes development and production training, course review, graphic assistance, and contract course production. Students enrolled for distance learning through UT TeleCampus receive scheduling support, online tutoring, and access to 24 x 7 technical support. In addition, students and faculty have access to the UT TeleCampus and UT System Digital Library.

**Funding.** UT TeleCampus is centrally funded through the state's "Available University Funds." In its initial year, UT TeleCampus' budget received $300,000 from this fund.
increasing to $4 million by its third year. Initially, the universities paid a $75 fee to TeleCampus per student enrolled. However, because of difficulty in tracking students, UT TeleCampus subsequently instituted an assessment formula based on institutional participation in UT TeleCampus; the revenues from this assessment make up less than 10 percent of the TeleCampus budget. The assessment model is currently under revision. All state- and tuition-generated revenues attributed to the production of course credits are retained by the delivering institution.

SUNY Learning Network
(http://sln.suny.edu/admin/sln/original.nsf)

**Background.** The State University of New York established the SUNY Learning Network (SLN) as a way to "virtualize" the existing university system to provide greater access and opportunities for learners at any time, anywhere. With more than 53 of SUNY's 64 colleges and universities participating, the SLN is a volunteer collaborative for those SUNY campuses wishing to participate.

The SUNY Learning Network was formalized in 1995-96 and anticipates enrolling more than 32,000 students in more than 2,000 courses in 2001-2002. Students can pursue associate, baccalaureate, and master's degrees from SUNY campuses in more than 40 programs through the SLN. Course enrollments range from half a dozen to over 75. More than 90 percent of the SLN enrollments are in-state students, although out-of-state inquiries, in excess of 50 percent, suggest a much wider market potential. Overall the SUNY Learning Network has successfully moved through three distinct phases—from *proof of concept* in 1995-97 to *proof of scale* in 1997-99 to *proof of sustainability* in 1999-2001.

**Governance.** The SUNY Learning Network is administered through Advanced Learning and Information Services, which is part of the System's Office of the Provost. There is also an Advisory Board composed of appointed SUNY campus presidents and vice presidents. Following some initial market research, the SLN determined the number of programs it would encourage and used an RFP process to determine which institutions would receive such sponsorship of their programs. This is not an exclusive arrangement because all SUNY campuses decide which of their courses and programs to offer through SLN, just as they determine which of their courses to offer in their campus classrooms.

**Services.** The SUNY Learning Network provides students with online registration information, access to library resources, readiness checklists, student orientation for online courses, technical support through the SLN HelpDesk (with an 800 number that is staffed seven days a week), and a searchable Web site, which lists all of the online courses in the SUNY system. Since SLN is not a separate degree-granting structure or the 65th campus, registration and other standard student services are provided by the campuses.
SUNY campuses also benefit from SLN’s operation and management of the technology infrastructure, which is based on a fault-tolerant model with multiple servers in two locations (Albany and Buffalo), which are synchronized so that courses are always available for faculty and students. This has helped SUNY campuses quickly start offering complete online courses without substantial IT investment or implementation. The SLN has a well-defined faculty development process. This comprehensive set of faculty support services is provided to all participating SUNY campuses. The SLN has established mandatory faculty training; provides faculty members with training materials, instructional design support, and ongoing technical support during delivery; and offers an online best practices roundtable.

**Funding.** The SUNY Learning Network is part of SUNY’s Office of the Provost and is funded through the special educational technology appropriation. The SLN has received generous grant support, the largest through the Sloan Foundation’s commitment to technology-enhanced teaching and learning. SUNY campuses also contribute financially to the SLN program. All tuition and fee revenue generated by courses offered by SUNY campuses through the SLN is retained by the delivering institution, and course credits are attributed to the campuses for the state’s appropriation funding formula—just like their classroom-based courses.

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Penn State’s World Campus  
([http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/pub/index.shtml](http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/pub/index.shtml))

**Background.** Although not a system in the sense of the other universities represented in this report, The Pennsylvania State University has 24 campuses and 17 colleges delivering courses, certificates, and degree programs. Penn State launched its World Campus in 1998 to provide a single portal for the delivery of online and technology-based programs to off-campus students. The objective of the World Campus is to promote a lifelong relationship between the learners and the university by offering individual learners and organizational clients convenient access to credit and non-credit programs. Initially targeting certificate programs, the World Campus now offers the full complement of courses for 30 online certificate and degree programs. Through the first three years of World Campus, approximately two-thirds of the enrollments are from outside of Pennsylvania.

**Governance.** Penn State’s World Campus reports to the vice president for outreach and extension (formerly the vice president for continuing and distance education) and provides a central coordinating function for all of Penn State’s distance education offerings. A separate office supports online learning within the residential instruction environment. World Campus also serves as the course and program delivery unit. Students apply through the World Campus, but they matriculate with the offering college and receive their degrees from the colleges.

**Services.** Because the World Campus has broad responsibility for online distance education, it has a staff of more than 90 to provide financial, marketing, technical, and instructional design support services. Under its policy of measured strategic growth, the
World Campus identifies programs for prospective development and makes a request to the appropriate college to participate in program development. For students, World Campus provides online registration, links to library resources, technical support, and offers first-time enrollees an online orientation course called World Campus 101. In addition to technical and instructional design support and training, faculty can also take advantage of Faculty Development 101.

**Funding.** Penn State’s World Campus is a cost center of the university and is required to recover all of its development and operating costs. The World Campus’s established programs delivered by satellite, video, and other media technologies currently generate net revenues. Support for online development and delivery comes from these revenues, tuition, grant support (including the Sloan Foundation), and some university investment. Depending on academic department practices and policies, faculty members developing or instructing World Campus online courses may do so either as part of normal course load, with the World Campus reimbursing the college, or for extra compensation. Once a course reaches the break-even point, net revenues are shared with the sponsoring college.

Kentucky Virtual University
(http://www.kyvu.org/)

**Background.** Kentucky Virtual University (KYVU) was established by legislative action in 1997, along with the creation of the Kentucky Virtual Library. Similar to a utilities company for Kentucky universities, the objective of KYVU is to provide a single point of access for citizens of Kentucky to online learning opportunities (college credit and professional development) as well as statewide student, library, and academic support services.

At the outset, KYVU–promoted programs—two associate degree and three master’s programs—were delivered in August 1999 with 232 students enrolling in the first semester and over 2,000 in the second semester. As of January 2001, 6,100 Kentuckians have enrolled over five semesters.

**Governance.** Organized as part of the Council on Postsecondary Education, KYVU is headed by a chief executive officer. All of the public universities and one private institution offer courses through KYVU. KYVU also has the authority to contract for programs through non-Kentucky providers if no Kentucky institution is able or willing to offer the program. Students matriculate with and graduate from the institution delivering the program, with transferability among institutions tied to a previously developed articulation agreement among the institutions in Kentucky.

**Services.** KYVU serves as a portal that provides access to online courses of participating institutions. KYVU conducts program needs assessments and solicits institutions to participate in program development. Institutions may opt to develop and deliver a program in collaboration with other institutions, or to develop content separately and compete head-to-head within KYVU. Faculty members have access to online
course development resources and are provided with guidelines for effective e-learning development and delivery. Through KYVU, students may apply and register for online courses and gain access to library materials, 24 x 7 online tutoring, a writing lab, 24 x 7 technical assistance, a call center, and an online self-assessment instrument.

**Funding.** The operating costs of KYVU are fully state funded. In 1998-99, $2.8 million was allocated for the start-up of KYVU and the Kentucky Virtual Library (KYVL). In 1999-2000, $6.1 million in state funds supported the operation of KYVU and KYVL, which included $1.6 million that was used to provide Internet access for Kentucky institutions. A $19.4 million bond provided funds to upgrade the technical infrastructure (e.g., increased bandwidth for supporting distance learning delivery and access) as well as a common library management system and all supporting hardware for KYVL. KYVU initially funded several pilot program developments but subsequently established a revolving loan fund for institutions to develop online courses. Individual institutions set tuition levels and retain all revenues.

**University of Maryland University College**

(www.umuc.edu/)

**Background.** University of Maryland University College (UMUC) is one of 13 institutions that make up the University System of Maryland. Founded in 1947, UMUC targets the adult post-secondary and United States military markets. UMUC has a vision of being the Global University in Maryland, setting benchmarks for research, development, and application in pedagogy, learning outcomes, delivery, and support services for online and adult higher education. Through distance learning, UMUC currently offers 32 complete baccalaureate and master’s degree programs and 50 certificate programs. The university enrolls nearly 80,000 students annually in its classroom and online courses.

**Governance.** The president of UMUC reports to the chancellor of the University System of Maryland and is supported by four advisory councils: university, faculty, student, and global staff. UMUC is headquartered in Adelphi, Maryland, and is organized around providing higher education opportunities for adults, including programs associated with workforce and leadership development.

UMUC houses a variety of programs, such as the Office of Distance Education and Lifelong Learning, which administers the Center for the Virtual University; the Center for Intellectual Property, Copyright, and Distance Education; and the Institute for Research and Assessment in Higher Education. Conferring more than 5,000 academic degrees annually, UMUC holds commencement exercises in College Park, Heidelberg, Mannheim, Tokyo, Okinawa, and Seoul.

**Services.** UMUC provides full admissions and enrollment services to its distance learning students. In addition, UMUC students use the Web to access a full complement of library services, including the availability of books and journals in local libraries. The Office of Distance Education and Lifelong Learning sets intellectual property policy and provides, among its services, technology assessment, multimedia services, and pedagogical and instructional applications.
**Funding.** Historically, UMUC has received limited state appropriations. The university charges the same tuition for online courses as it does for traditional classroom instruction. Undergraduate tuition for UMUC courses is $197 per credit for in-state students and $364 for out-of-state students. There are varying rates for executive graduate programs and UMUC’s Doctor of Management program.

**University System of Georgia—Advanced Learning Technologies (http://alt.usg.edu/)**

**Background.** The University System of Georgia (USG) consists of 34 institutions including research universities, state universities and colleges, and community colleges. Distance education delivery is focused in the system's Advanced Learning Technologies (ALT) unit (formerly Distance Education and Academic Innovation (DEAI), whose objective is "to utilize technology successfully, to create meaningful learning experiences, and to expand access to educational opportunities and resources." The ALT unit is supported by 18 full-time staff.

**Governance.** ALT is led by the assistant vice chancellor for Advanced Learning Technologies. The unit, which resides within the system's Academic and Fiscal Affairs Division, is organized into four groups: Emerging Instructional Technologies; Instructional Design and Development; Academic Innovation; and Assessment and Public Information. Through its four groups, ALT coordinates USG efforts to standardize instructional infrastructure and efficiently design instructional opportunities for use by multiple campuses. It develops and implements models for the creation of quality distributed learning courses using a collaborative development approach.

ALT provides strategic faculty development experiences and ongoing support to foster learning communities among faculty and students. It evaluates and documents the quality of distributed learning activities throughout the USG. Through the collaboration of its four groups, ALT assists USG faculty and staff in using technology successfully to create meaningful learning experiences for students.

**Services.** ALT provides distance students and faculty access with a wide variety of services. The System Academic Enterprise Server and Certified Server programs provide all campuses access to the same baseline of reliable technology resources. Faculty and students may access an extended-hours helpdesk. Through SCOUT (Sharing Content Online for University Teaching), faculty can preview and adopt quality online courses and support materials. Multimedia Educational Resources for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT) allows faculty to obtain expert reviews of learning modules that they have created and to easily locate and access materials created by colleagues in related disciplines.

Faculty are invited to participate in specially designed online teaching and learning seminars and in course and program development projects. They are invited to share their experiences in the annual Teaching and Learning with Advanced Technologies
(TLAT) conference. Staff can receive just-in-time technology training online. Students have access to online bookstore services, online tutoring, and test proctoring services.

In addition, a separate entity developed by the Board of Regents in 1999, Georgia GLOBE <http://www.georgiaglobe.org/>, provides the face of Georgia distance learning to the students, including marketing, course listing, and student registration for the system’s eCore courses (the first two years of a college education entirely online).

**Funding.** ALT has an annual operating budget of $3 million, some of which is dedicated to support faculty release time for course development. Originally, distance learning initiatives were supported through specially designated funds, such as Connecting Teachers and Technology and the Statewide Desktop Distance Learning Initiative, which focused USG efforts on building the infrastructure and policies necessary to achieve the Board's guiding principles related to distance learning and technology. From these funds, projects known as the Faculty Development Workshop and Course Development Grants were established to increase the number of technology-supported courses and to promote faculty collaboration. These programs transitioned into a number of institution-based professional development experiences and collaborative online projects, including the eCore™ and the USG WebMBA.

### What it Means to Higher Education

#### Centralization vs. Decentralization

Permeating each of the organizational models discussed above is the issue of what services, policies, and decisions should be provided or determined at the system level and which should remain within the purview of the individual campus or college. The following table provides a summary of how these 6 organizational models have treated 11 distance-learning functions. Four of those functions—develop and maintain a centralized portal, marketing, funding, and establishment of technical standards—tend to be centralized with the distance-education entity. Two functions—course/program selection and student services—are evenly split, with half of the institutions centralizing these functions and half maintaining them at the local level. The remaining functions—intellectual property policies, faculty workload policies, content development, conferring of degrees, and tuition and fee rates—remain almost exclusively at the discretion of the individual institution.
## Distribution of Distance Learning Functions

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<th>Texas</th>
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<th>Penn State</th>
<th>Kentucky</th>
<th>Maryland</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Funding</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Course Selection</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Intellectual Property Policies</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Student Services</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Technical Standards</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Portal Development and Maintenance</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Marketing</strong></td>
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X = resides at system level

The pattern that seems to be emerging, even with very different organizational solutions, is one that calls for providing centralized services to support the development and delivery of distance learning courses and programs. Meanwhile, responsibility for core academic decisions, including course content and development, continues to reside with the individual institutions and their faculty.

### Distance Learning Organizational Policy Questions

Experiences with distance learning in general, and with online learning more specifically, generate a number of questions that university systems should consider as they contemplate molding an organizational structure to develop and deliver distance learning.

- What functions should be consolidated to provide economies of scale?
- How can the institution balance the desire to present a "single face to the market" with the need to retain individual institutional identity?
- What funding model provides sufficient resources for a “service center” while delivering enough funds to the campus to encourage participation?
What policies must be uniform across the system to ensure consistency, and which are best left to local control?

What services should be delivered centrally to ensure a no-hassle, seamless environment for students?

What metrics should be used to assess success or failure? How are these different from the performance metrics for traditional, residential education programs?

How will the distance learning program be financed? What are the right incentives to promote participation by individual campuses or colleges?

What components of quality should be assessed? Is quality determined centrally or left to individual units?

As the cases presented in this Research Bulletin attest, the organizational and delivery solutions to these questions vary depending on distance learning vision, institutional history, and funding, to cite a few. One thing seems very clear: Effective distance learning strategies depend on local campuses conceding some functions to a central entity if they are to be educationally and economically competitive.

Where to Learn More


Council for Higher Education Accreditation Research and Information on Quality Assurance and Distance Learning: http://www.chea.org/Commentary/

The Distance Education Clearinghouse from the University of Wisconsin Extension: http://www.uwex.edu/disted/

EDUCAUSE Information Resources Library section on distributed learning: http://www.educause.edu/asp/doclib/subject_docs.asp?Term_ID=381

EDUCAUSE Information Resources Library section on distance learning: http://www.educause.edu/asp/doclib/subject_docs.asp?Term_ID=382