The Virtual University in America: Lessons from Research and Experience

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Myk Garn, Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education
Virtual colleges and universities, as we know them in the United States, were created in the mid-1990s with the principal goal of helping state leaders expand educational access and increase economic development. By the year 2000, almost every state in the nation had created some initiative or entity resembling a virtual university. Now, nearly a decade into the virtual university movement, there are important “lessons learned” that affect college leaders and the strategic directions they choose for distance learning. This research bulletin examines selected findings from a national study of virtual college and university consortia published by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) and the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET) in August 2003.

The virtual college and university (VCU) study was carried out in four phases. Phase I was a literature review and preliminary investigation of all existing VCU initiatives. The second phase included a written survey of 61 VCU organizations identified in Phase I. The survey was conducted between October 2002 and January 2003. Surveys were returned by 51 VCUs representing 40 different states, for a response rate of 84 percent. Phase III (March 2003) consisted of in-depth telephone interviews with chief executives from six VCUs. The final phase included data analysis and reporting through August 2003.

The Virtual University Movement

Virtual colleges and universities were born from three major movements that encouraged the expansion of institutions into distance learning. First, communication and computing technologies were converging rapidly. Second, this convergence opened new ways for workers to learn without having to put their careers on hold. Finally, pressures to contain the cost of going to college intensified as states sought to increase college participation rates.

There was some question as to whether traditional institutions would be able to address these issues if they stuck to their old ways. Just as the idea of “reinventing government” was driving the infusion of corporate practices in government, many leaders felt that higher education also needed an infusion of new approaches to learning. On June 24, 1996, the launch of the Western Governors University (WGU) provided a galvanized vision that caught the attention of policymakers and triggered more than 60 virtual college plans and models over the next several years.

While VCUs differ in many aspects, they developed their models around several core principles. Primary principles of a VCU were that it would (1) use technology (principally but not exclusively the Internet) to deliver coursework; (2) build a new, more efficient and effective model of access to instruction; and (3) be an entrepreneurial entity generally outside the traditional chain of command of colleges and universities. Most public institutions chose not to establish a separate, degree-granting virtual institution, primarily
because this model had been tested and gone down to defeat with the Education Network of Maine in 1995.

Today, VCU
s are, at their core, catalysts of change. A VCU can operate as a disruptive innovation, being the leader out in front of traditional higher education institutions. It can be the incubator for development of online program pilots and new business models, surrounding these new efforts with successful services and support mechanisms. VCU
s can also increase the efficiency of the institutions or the system they serve. They are uniquely positioned to ask difficult questions, expose problems, and create the initiatives to address them. In fact, 10 percent of study respondents indicated that their VCU
s had been established to “create or exacerbate—and therefore force confrontation of difficult policy issues.”

Today’s VCU
s indicate they have accomplished the goal of “establishing a VCU for the state” and have made significant progress toward ancillary goals such as providing online one-stop shopping for higher education. The founding goals of VCUs were relatively consistent: to create an operating virtual entity (however that was defined) and to provide increased access to higher education for the citizens of the state. While still holding to the traditional goals of distance education—providing access and serving the underserved—VCUs appear to be increasing their emphasis on policy goals that improve state/system higher education efficiency (such as increasing collaboration and communication between institutions) as well as meeting state workforce needs. Table 1 compares the top five founding goals for VCUs with current goals.

Table 1. Comparison of Top Five VCU Founding Goals and Current Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Founding Goals</th>
<th>Current Goals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Expand access</td>
<td>Expand access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Serve underserved populations</td>
<td>Increase communication/collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Provide a local VCU for the state’s citizens</td>
<td>Provide for a better educated workforce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Provide one-stop shopping for higher education courses</td>
<td>Serve underserved populations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Improve the higher education response to state needs</td>
<td>Provide one-stop shopping for higher education courses</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The VCU National Landscape

While Internet-based distance learning continues to be a growing enterprise for many campuses, the consortial virtual universities have yet to be fully embraced or understood by the higher education community. State leaders describe them as a critical resource for meeting statewide educational and policy goals. But agreement is not universal. “In some cases, the virtual university has been questioned as a duplication of institutional responsibility and an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy, especially during tight budget years.” Some models continue to be leaders (for example, University of Texas TeleCampus). Some have transitioned (for example, Kentucky Virtual University). Others have ceased to exist (for example, Georgia GLOBE).
The study identified entities (see Table 2) across the United States that met the definition adopted for the study.\textsuperscript{3} Forty-five states were represented by the identified VCU. Only five states and the District of Columbia did not appear to have a system- or state-level VCU: Alaska, Delaware, New Hampshire, New Mexico, and Vermont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MULTI-SECTOR VCUs, TWO- AND FOUR-YEAR (N=37)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama Distance Learning Consortium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California Virtual Campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticutt Distance Learning Consortium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic Campus of Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida Virtual Campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia GLOBE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho Electronic Campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois Virtual Campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana College Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa Learns</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kansas Distance Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KC REACHE (Kansas)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kentucky Virtual University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana Board of Regents Electronic Campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland Online</td>
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<tr>
<td>Massachusetts Colleges Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan Virtual University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minnesota Virtual University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missouri Learner's Network</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>SINGLE-SECTOR VCUs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two-Year VCUs (N=15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona Learning Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado Community Colleges Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EduKan (Kansas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia Virtual Technical College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois Community Colleges Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa Community College Online Consortium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi Virtual Community College</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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<tr>
<th>Four-Year VCUs (N=9)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arizona Regents Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSeCampus (Mississipi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montana University System Distance Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Dakota Electronic University Consortium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UMass Online (Massachusetts)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
VCUs vary widely in the initial and continuing funding they receive. Some entities were initiated with multi-million-dollar investments; some with virtually no up-front investment. Most were initiated with direct or indirect state appropriations and continue to rely heavily on this funding source. A significant number also reported using trade-outs or reassignments of personnel and resources (in-kind support) and levied membership and service fees from the participating instructional providers to support their start-up phase. Table 3 illustrates VCU capitalization ranges.

**Table 3. Initial VCU Capitalization Range (N=29)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capitalization Range</th>
<th>Number of VCUs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than $1 million</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between $500,000 and $1 million</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $500,000</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The amount of funding a VCU receives in its start-up phase is important. However, the funding it receives to maintain its operations is critical in making a sustained impact. Though VCUs were in large part created by state or system leaders, VCUs claim that ongoing support from leaders at high levels has not been consistent or as strong as they perceive they need. Almost 40 percent of the VCUs reported being created “because a leader decided a VCU was needed.” And 10 percent noted they were created “because other states created VCUs.” Now that the frenzy of VCU creation has passed, VCU leaders report challenges to keeping college and state leaders informed about their role and purpose. Table 4 illustrates VCU annual operating funding.

**Table 4. VCU Annual Operating Funding (N=51)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Funding</th>
<th>Number of VCUs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than $1 million</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between $500,000 and $1 million</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $500,000</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget = “None”^4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No budget reported</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study showed that VCUs are beginning to build sustainable revenue streams. Reliance on direct and indirect allocations decreased slightly, while the role of tuition and service fees increased since founding. While there is a wide disparity among VCU funding levels, approximately one-quarter of VCUs are self-supporting. Another 23 percent of VCUs reported plans to become self-supporting in the future, and 52 percent do not intend to become self-supporting (see Figure 1).
Emerging Models of VCU Organization

VCUs differ principally and dramatically in the way they are empowered to carry out their work and in how they are funded. The study proposed using two dimensions to view VCU:

1. The degree to which authority and services were centralized or distributed.
2. The degree to which VCU implemented “business practices,” such as creating revenue streams that enable them to be self-sustaining.

Table 5 shows the two dimensions, along with four VCU types:

- Distributed Agency Model
- Central Agency Model
- Distributed Enterprise Model
- Central Enterprise Model

Results in Table 5 showed that there were superior performers from all four categories.\(^5\)
Table 5. VCU Two-Dimensional Taxonomy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Centralization</th>
<th>Low Business Practice Emphasis</th>
<th>High Business Practice Emphasis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Agency Model:</td>
<td>Provides central student services and academic articulation. Organizational and financially embedded in an academic agency, such as a system office or coordinating board.</td>
<td>Central Enterprise Model: Provides central student services and academic articulation. May be organizationally embedded in an academic agency but behaves as a business enterprise by building revenue streams for self-sustainability and engaging in quality control, performance measurement, standardization, and/or benchmarking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Low Centralization   | Distributed Agency Model: Provides electronic course catalog, little or no services, and no articulation. Organizational and financially embedded in an academic agency, such as a system office or coordinating board. | Distributed Enterprise Model: Provides electronic course catalog, few or no services, and no articulation. May be organizationally embedded in an academic agency, but engages in limited business practices, such as quality control, performance measurement, standardization, and/or benchmarking. |

**Distributed Agency VCU**s have little direct control over services beyond the electronic catalog. On the other hand, these organizations reported greater success than centralized VCU on collaborative measures, such as fostering collaborative program development, decreasing duplication, and being an entity less restricted by policy—goals that seek to increase the effectiveness of higher education through processes that involve shared negotiations and a focus on participation. An example of a Distributed Agency VCU is the Oregon Network for Education <http://www.oregonone.org>. Leaders in Oregon intentionally designed a decentralized model, knowing the state needed a VCU that would serve student interests yet not be expensive to maintain. Initially funded through a Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant, the Oregon Network for Education is operated by staff members of the Oregon University System office. It operates an electronic catalog of distance education courses offered by colleges, universities, and high schools throughout the state. Admission, registration, tuition, financial aid, advising, and other services are handled by provider institutions.

**Distributed Enterprise VCU**s are similar to Distributed Agency VCU in terms of the limited number of services provided through the VCU. However, a group of VCU in the “distributed” category distinguished themselves by taking on attributes that scored high on the “business practice” scale. Distributed Enterprise VCU engaged in practices such as self-sustainability, quality control, performance measurement, standardization, and benchmarking, although in all cases their participation in these activities was lower than that of Central Enterprise VCU. An example of a Distributed Enterprise VCU is the Louisiana Board of Regents Electronic Campus <http://epscor.phys.lsu.edu/lsarec> . The Electronic Campus allows students to search for courses and programs, then instructs them to communicate directly with the institution for all aspects of their online experience. Louisiana qualifies as an Enterprise VCU because it exercises a limited role in both quality assurance and standardization/scalability of courses listed on its site.
Additionally, the Louisiana BOR Electronic Campus actively measures progress toward its goals, scoring in the top five VCU.s nationally for measuring progress.

**Central Agency VCUs** exercise greater management authority than distributed VCU.s by providing direct services to students and formal articulation among campuses. These VCU.s also report greater success than distributed VCU.s in leading technology initiatives, managing distributed resources, and centralizing resources—goals that focus on increasing efficiency by focusing on technology and shared infrastructure. An example of a Central Agency VCU is the Ohio Learning Network (OLN) [http://www.OLN.org/](http://www.OLN.org/). In Ohio, leaders identified a need for an entity that would help institutions collaborate in the development and delivery of distance education. Since its establishment in 1999, the OLN has focused principally on building collaborative degree programs and digital content (via grants to institutions). It also runs an electronic catalog and recently has expanded its reach with student services such as advising and online tutoring.

**Central Enterprise VCUs** discriminated themselves from the Central Agency VCUs by exerting strong management control over their operations and engaging in business practices. Ten VCU.s (20 percent) met the Central Enterprise definition: Colorado Community Colleges Online, Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium, Kentucky Virtual University, Michigan Virtual University, North Carolina Virtual Learning Community, SUNY Learning Network (New York), Tennessee Board of Regents Online Degree Programs, UMass Online (Massachusetts), UT TeleCampus (Texas), and Washington Online Virtual Campus. Each was self-sustaining or planned to become self-sustaining. In addition, they help to improve the efficiency of the higher education system by meeting two or more of the following criteria:

- Plays a strong role in quality assurance
- Plays a strong role in standardization or scalability
- Actively measures progress towards goals
- Benchmarks itself against its peers

The goal of self-sustainability was supported by findings that these VCU.s placed a higher funding emphasis on service fees (from institutions) and revenue sharing (partial tuition), both of which provide revenue streams tied to volume. The Central Enterprise VCU.s were the most likely to take an active role in promoting standardization and scalability of instruction and addressing the issues that might dramatically increase (or impede) growth of VCU user volume, and thus the revenues tied to that growth. An example of a Central Enterprise VCU is the University of Texas (UT) TeleCampus. Launched in 1998, the TeleCampus was designed to serve as a central support system for the distance education initiatives of the 15 campuses in the UT System. Early in its development, the TeleCampus focused attention on building support services for students, collaborative degree programs, and rigorous quality assurance processes. The TeleCampus supports standardization and scalability by providing templates that must be followed in course development and encouraging multiple solutions for large-scale,
high-enrollment (75+) online instruction. Leaders expect to become at least 80 percent self-supporting in the next five years.

**Lessons on VCU Funding and Organization**

**Funding levels vary widely.** Some states created highly funded VCUs. Others created a VCU with existing funding, within an existing agency.

**Authority levels vary widely.** More than half of the VCUs across the nation provide centralized academic and student services in addition to an electronic catalog. Another 41 percent use a distributed service model, with the VCU’s principal service being an electronic catalog.

**VCUs are not instructional providers.** They are facilitators or “brokers” of instruction for the states, colleges, and citizens. No VCU plans to seek independent accreditation, so these VCUs will be completely or largely dependent on the institutions for their content (regardless of how centralized or distributed, how high or low the business practices).

**Self-sufficiency is emerging at some VCUs.** There is emerging evidence that some VCUs are building sustainable revenue streams as reliance on direct and indirect allocations decreased slightly and the role of tuition and service fees increased since founding.

**Use and Effectiveness of VCUs**

“Virtual colleges and universities were created principally to increase access for those students who could not easily come to a campus, i.e., the original ‘distant’ student. The initial idea was that students would be able to find, in one location, information about courses and degree programs available at a distance from institutions across a system or state. The more aggressive VCUs were expected to help pave the way for collaborative degree programs or at least facilitate more effective transfer of courses among the participating institutions.”

This original notion of who would use the VCU (and how) has not played out exactly as VCU creators envisioned.

**The High Percentage of On-Campus Users**

The study showed that about half of the VCUs have as their primary service population those who need geographic access (are place-bound), and about half were supporting on-campus learners as their primary population. This is a common phenomenon for institutional distance learning programs as well as VCUs.

Policymakers and higher education leaders need to understand that campus-based students are taking online courses via the VCU for good reasons. It may help students complete their degree in a timely manner. It may allow them to take courses they otherwise could not take because they are working part time or full time. Their learning styles may be better suited to online courses, and the VCU offers an expanded selection outside their home campuses. Are these students a drag on VCU resources? Do these
high numbers mean that the VCUs are facilitating “convenience” for existing students over providing “access” that will bring new students into higher education?

This perceptual barrier—that on-campus students are co-opting VCU services and inflating VCU enrollments—may be causing a distorted view of actual VCU benefits to the system or state. In fact, the real transformation occurring in higher education is that of distributed uses of technology diffusing into all forms of instruction. This affects VCUs when on-campus students seek online courses. While the VCU was not created with the traditional campus-based student in mind, it is clear that on-campus students are large users of the VCU. And they should be. The goal of expanding access is still being served. Convenience has been criticized as somehow taking away opportunities from those who really need access. But convenience is quickly becoming a new element in the definition of access. While serving campus-based students has often been viewed as an unintended side-effect of the VCU, it also represents a broadening of the definition of access. Furthermore, “a sizable market is needed to drive down costs. That which provides vital access for a few can provide ubiquitous convenience for many. It is not until the economy of scale, created by meeting the needs of the many, is realized—that the solution becomes cost-efficient for the few.”

Progress and Impact

VCUs believe they have made an impact on the academy by (1) creating a functioning VCU (however that is defined for their state/system) and (2) increasing inter-institutional collaboration. The challenge for VCUs in demonstrating their effectiveness is that outcomes are difficult—some would say impossible—to measure. Only one in three VCUs measured the high-priority goal, “serving underserved populations.” Three highly rated and rising goals (increase economic development, provide for a better educated workforce, and improve the higher education response to state needs) were among the goals measured least. In general, the higher a VCU’s funding level and the more the VCU embraced centralizing and business practices, the higher it rated its achievement of statewide, system-wide goals. In addition, centralized VCUs were more elevated in their attention to all types of competition and engaged more frequently in benchmarking against their peers.

The simplest evaluative measure of VCU impact is often, “How many students does the VCU enroll?” In some states, the VCU is a major producer of enrollments (10,000 or more) for its member institutions. In others the numbers are scarcely noticeable (fewer than 1,000). However, using the metric of enrollments to understand VCU is not only too simplistic, it is myopic. Most VCUs do not “enroll” students, though some provide enrollment assistance as a service. In addition, the general practice of relying on the number of students enrolled to measure VCU impact can also be inconsistent with the collaborative role VCUs frequently perform. Many VCUs have counted VCU students as if they were really students of the VCU (implicitly different from and in addition to the students of the traditional institutions), but in fact they were not. The VCUs didn’t offer degrees or “teach” the students—the institutions did. The VCUs provided access to the institutions’ courses.
A better question to assess VCU effectiveness might be, “How many learners are using VCU services?” The study showed the most common services provided by the VCU (either in-house or outsourced) were online catalog, technical help desk, and course hosting. The most common services provided by the VCU in collaboration with institutions were marketing, faculty/staff training, online catalog, and test/lab sites and proctoring. Centralized VCUs were more likely to offer online application, online registration, bookstore, e-commerce, and library services than distributed VCUs. Eleven VCUs (22 percent) indicated they operate a student information system. Twenty-one VCUs (41 percent) operate a course management system or learning management system.

**Lessons on VCU Use and Effectiveness**

**VCU students are “users” of VCU services.** VCU students are more appropriately seen as users of VCU services than as enrolled “students” of the VCU. Traditional measurements such as “number of enrollments” are too simplistic and do not accurately reflect the direct scale for VCU operations or their indirect contributions to the institutions and consortia they serve.

**VCUs make virtual users and problems real.** By aggregating the number of users across institutions, VCUs “uncover” and make significant what were perceived as small, minor issues for individuals. VCUs give identity to a class of students who have no physical presence or voice on campus.

**It’s not just about distance.** On-campus learners who utilize the same courses, programs, technologies, and services that VCUs created for “distant” students are a large, and probably growing, percentage of VCU users.

**Higher centralization and funding increase perceived goal achievement.** In general, the higher a VCU’s funding level, the higher perceived achievement of statewide, system-wide goals. An analysis of goals met (as perceived by VCU leaders) showed that Central Enterprise VCUs felt they had met their goals in every category to a higher degree than other VCUs.

**No clear metrics for performance exist.** What VCUs cost and what benefits they generate is a common question and concern. There are no clear accepted metrics for measuring VCU performance or impact on the state or system of which they are part.

**There is limited evidence of benchmarking or sense of external competition.** The VCUs seem remarkably “internally” focused when it comes to who their likely competitors are.

**Collaboration is happening.** As an explicit agency with the mission and vision to seek inter-institutional collaboration, VCUs have pursued the high-cost (in time), high-risk path of collaboration and report their best progress in this area. Because the horizontal vision of VCUs sees an aggregate view of institutional efforts, it can raise the visibility of duplicate efforts. Thus, collaboration with other institutions via the VCU is more likely to be a consideration for individual institutions during course development.
What It Means to Higher Education

In the game of online programs, if you aren’t different, you are redundant. Have VCU
failed to differentiate/distance themselves from the institutions/systems they were
created to serve? Only six VCU have their own governing boards, meaning 88 percent
of VCU are managed by the same system they are meant to change.

Lessons of the Central Enterprise Model

Many different, and highly variable, models have been established. Which work well?
What can be learned from the models that exist, or have ceased to exist? The Central
Enterprise VCU judged their success highest of all VCU types. It may be that the most
successful VCU adhere to the principles of centralization over distribution as well as
behaving more like a business than an agency.

“The Central Enterprise VCU differentiated themselves by seeking—if not financial
independence—then financial stability that would enable their operations to continue
beyond state/system allocations.” Central Enterprise VCU reported taking a strong role
in the key policy areas of quality, use of standardized course templates, and the
scalability of the courses. Other VCU types were more likely to leave these knotty issues
to the institutions. Central Enterprise VCU were more likely to benchmark themselves
against other VCU and to actively measure progress toward more goals. In many cases
the Central Enterprise VCU were among the most highly funded VCU. Of those
reporting financial data, seven were funded at $1,000,000 or more annually.

Where the Potential Lies

The report on the study asks, “So what do the data and findings of the National VCU
Study suggest about the permanence of the VCU? Are they transitional entities that will
be deconstructed and absorbed into the structure of the large enterprise such as the
GLOBE project of the University System of Georgia? Will they become ongoing internal
entities, providing support and coordination of multi-institutional efforts such as the Ohio
Learning Network? And will a successful subset of self-supporting VCU emerge that
seek to serve and survive based upon their ability to develop new client groups? The
National VCU Study suggests that the ability to succeed in any of the above roles
requires focus on the external or front-end activities (such as electronic catalog and
learner services) and the internal or back-end activities (including policy leadership and
providing a technology infrastructure for providers).” It is interesting to note that almost
all of the VCU leaders interviewed see a time in the future when the VCU is no longer
needed.

“VCU that focus primarily on the external activities and rely on their provider institutions
to provide the internal support can expect heavy competition from accredited providers.
While there was, at one time, opportunity for either non-accredited brokers (or brokers
seeking to become accredited providers), this opportunity is on the decline, if not gone.
The once perceived gap between nimble, entrepreneurial agencies’ ability to get
learning up online and slow-moving institutions has narrowed significantly. If the role of a
VCU was to prompt institutions to ‘chase the techno-hare of the VCU,’ thus increasing
their expertise, experience, and enthusiasm for online learning more rapidly—this has occurred. VCUs with the goal of solely addressing policy and collaboration, while these needs will continue, will likely see their role as conveners, leaders, and thus as entities, decline.”

My prediction is that the only thing that’s going to be left of the Virtual Learning Collaborative that continues to add value after some point is going to be some of the agreements by which students can take programs from other colleges and still get the support services at their home campus.

—Michael Wahl, Michigan Virtual Learning Collaborative

The study describes three possible futures for VCUs, depending on where they focus. “VCUs that focus primarily on the internal activities (those that support institutional consortia and infrastructure) will see themselves increasingly considered ‘part of the infrastructure’ of learning. Successful VCUs may or may not have a visible external presence in the future, but will be adapting and building technology and service solutions, which their constituencies depend upon. In Georgia, for example, the system is investing in a ‘multi-institutional enrollment model’ whereby online courses may be cross-listed in college catalogs throughout the system. Once implemented, students will enroll in any online course as though it is being offered by their home campus. The back-end infrastructure will handle tuition differentials and administrative data exchange between campuses. While Georgia no longer maintains a VCU with a public presence, this more integrated approach may well represent the next generation of VCUs.

“VCUs that take on both internal and external activities, that seek to provide policy leadership, program development, learner services, and instructional infrastructure will have the greatest opportunity of emerging as new, entrepreneurial educational entities. These VCUs will likely succeed most when they successfully differentiate (and focus on) learner populations that are different from (and not in direct competition with) the established instructional providers of the state—thus providing the necessary increase in educational capacity that states need.”

Key Questions to Ask

- What value can a statewide or system-wide VCU bring to my institution? Extending access? Expanding markets and enrollments?
- What are the drawbacks to participating in a VCU consortium? Potential loss of control? Difficulty with collaboration?
- Does my institution have strategic programs that would benefit from collaboration within a VCU consortium? Could a system-wide effort produce economies of scale?
- With the expansion of course management software access to all students, the technology has gone from niche to enterprise. Which services are considered "core" to my campus, and which services might be better provided through a VCU consortium?
What role is the VCU expected to play within the system or state? Should the VCU be an entrepreneur, champion, or manager of change? Should the VCU be a catalyst and convener for collaboration? Should it provide common infrastructure and services?

Where to Learn More


Acknowledgment

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Endnotes


2. Ibid., p. 5.

3. For purposes of the study, the term “virtual college/university,” or VCU, encompassed those initiatives that comprise membership of the public higher education institutions (two and/or four year) within a single system or state. Multi-state initiatives, such as Western Governors University or the Southern Regional Electronic Campus, were excluded from the analysis, as were individual institutions.
4. A notable subset of VCUs emerged from the study. These VCUs (20 percent) reported annual funding of “zero dollars,” indicating the presence of “boot-strapping”—meaning VCUs operate with whatever existing personnel and resources are available. This suggests either an augmentation, addition, or repurposing of existing mission and assignments to encompass new goals and tasks.


6. Ibid., p. 25.

7. Ibid., p. 27.

8. Ibid., p. 56.

9. Ibid., p. 57.

10. Ibid., p. 57.

11. Ibid., p. 57.

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