Local U Project Narrative

Overview

The health of a 21st century economy relies fundamentally on post-secondary education, while the economic futures of individual citizens depend upon access to high quality higher education opportunities that will translate into marketable skills desired by employers. Traditional brick-and-mortar campuses are typically expensive, with high overhead and little flexibility, putting the cost of a post-secondary education out of reach for many would-be students. Large on-line institutions have lower overhead and can leverage scale to reduce costs, but frequently offer limited degree options and have little ability to respond to the needs of local communities. Local U combines the local touch of a brick-and-mortar institution with the scalability of a large online institution: approximately 80% of the modularized curriculum is offered through a central office that controls production and quality and leverage scale to keep costs low, the other 20% is developed by a local node attuned to the business needs of the local community and the educational needs and aspirations of a local student population. In addition, a strong liberal arts core curriculum builds the soft skills that employers desire, while the modularization of curriculum, mandatory practicum experiences, and the close ties between local nodes and local business allow for the creation of programs specifically designed to move students efficiently from the classroom to the workplace.

Project Plan Components

Charter. Local University is a multi-site franchised institution that, in collaboration with local partners, prepares students for the changing needs of a highly localized workforce by offering a strong centralized liberal art core in combination with career preparation developed by and with local employers. The institution offers hybrid-delivery certificate programs as well as hybrid-delivery associate, baccalaureate, and master’s degrees.

Purposes and Goals. As a complex institution with both centralized and local components, Local University responds to multiple challenges currently facing higher education.

- Graduate Employability—All too often students graduating with associate, bachelor’s, and even master’s degrees struggle to find employment after graduation, while employers complain that new graduates lack the appropriate skills for the workplace, and many have begun to offer their own post-graduate training. Local University partners with local employers to provide modularized project-based learning, workplace training, and internships. For students who may be remotely located and unable to travel to unpaid internships, Local U offers virtual internships through regional and local employers that can lead directly to paid positions.
- Continuing Education and Employee Retooling—The modern workforce demands flexibility, adaptability, and regular retooling and retraining. Because its curriculum is highly modularized, Local U is ideally situated to provide “just in time” training to help individuals and communities retool with shifting workforce needs.
Local U Project Narrative

- **Strong Liberal Arts and Sciences Core**—While many institutions offering a modularized curriculum and an emphasis on workforce preparation have gravitated away from a liberal arts and sciences core, Local U retains a strong commitment to those disciplines and uses modularization to enhance the connection between content instruction and workforce readiness rather than replacing one with the other. A national pool of subject matter experts allows for deep study in traditional liberal arts fields, while project-based assessments synthesizing multiple modules hone students’ soft skills, including critical thinking, problem solving, and communication.

- **Affordability**—Local University’s strong central office serves in part as a distributor of curriculum, providing a centralized liberal arts and sciences core curriculum to its local franchises, coordinating materials developed at franchise sites so that they may be updated and used at other locations, eliminating the need for costly replication of curriculum at each individual site and leveraging scale to reduce cost while greatly increasing the number of available module options.

- **College Completion**—Offering a series of stackable credentials and certificates, leading in turn to associate, baccalaureate, and master’s degrees, Local University offers a number of completion options based on identified student needs and creates incentive to progress to degree completion. In addition, Local University’s high touch student services and holistic student support systems carefully track students, align resources with student needs, and provide intervention as necessary.

*Business Model and Organizational Structure.* Local University is specifically organized to combine the cost benefits of a highly scalable centralized core with the flexibility and targeted curriculum of a locally responsive on-site institution. It therefore consists of two fundamental components: a national center that bears responsibility for curriculum development of the liberal arts core, for assessment and accreditation, and for centralized services including student support services, instructional technology, legal, and marketing; and a local site that identifies business partnerships, designs a workplace readiness curriculum, including internships, and handles local recruitment and enrollment of students. The national center contracts with faculty subject matter experts to develop course content for core liberal arts and sciences courses and provides instructional designers to aid in course development. It also provides course development support for the faculty subject matter experts and business partners at local sites, and coordinates the movement and sharing of course modules to avoid unnecessary replication. It is responsible for assessment of the core curriculum, for monitoring the assessment of local curriculum, and for ensuring federal compliance and interfacing with regional accreditors. It maintains servers, and reduces outlay by centralizing fundamental behind-the-scenes functions in admissions, financial aid, advising and registration and other student support functions, as well as developing national marketing strategies and providing legal support for local sites. Local sites are managed by local entrepreneurs or community groups who are attuned to local needs and local markets, develop local business and community partnerships, and contract with local subject matter experts who provide workplace readiness module content to central office instructional designers.
Local U Project Narrative

The central office and the local sites are related through a franchise business model. Local sites buy into Local University and are provided with a basic start-up kit, franchise guidelines, and access to Local University’s centralized services, including experts who will offer assistance and guidance in cultivating local business and community partnerships. Local franchise sites may be tailored and scaled to local needs, making the establishment of a Local University franchise possible in small and/or remote communities and niche markets such as prison populations, charter high schools, and industrial facilities that might otherwise be too small to support university instruction. Because of the centralization of so many services, local franchise sites require very limited overhead with a physical plant potentially as small as a store front in a shopping mall, and only front-line personnel on the ground. Individual franchisees may choose to establish them as either non-profit or for-benefit locations, permitting them to adjust tuition and fee cost within established ranges as appropriate.

**Stakeholders.** In producing graduates who are workforce prepared and already integrated into the culture of a particular company or industry yet possess the liberal arts and sciences training and soft skills that make them flexible, trainable critical thinkers and able communicators, Local University benefits multiple stakeholders. Not least are the students who receive a high quality, low cost education that leads directly to employment, even if they are remotely located in a community too small to sustain a traditional institution of higher education. Similarly, employers benefit by having a steady stream of potential employees possessing strong soft skills and already attuned to the needs of the employer. The local community also benefits in ways traditionally associated with the much greater cost of traditional higher education as Local University sites drive economic development, make communities more attractive to potential employers, and realize, with a more highly educated workforce, a significant reduction in the social services associated with chronic underemployment. Entrepreneurs investing in Local University sites realize benefits that are both monetary and social. Although Local University does not franchise for-profit sites, those investing in for-benefit sites may realize a limited return on their investment. Those investing in non-profit sites will realize a variety of meaningful returns depending on their initial goals and objectives, whether those be defined in terms of community growth, social good, or the needs of a specific targeted population. In a higher education environment where faculty increasingly find themselves squeezed and even disenfranchised by changing technologies, Local University leverages technologies on a national scale to bring a larger audience to faculty who are valued for their expertise, allowed to specialize in ways increasingly difficult at traditional institutions, and well compensated for the materials they deliver. Overall, Local University’s business model and curriculum design offer a flexibility and responsiveness to stakeholder needs that allows all stakeholders to benefit from their involvement with the institution.

**Strategic Planning for Obstacles and Challenges**

Major dependencies, constraints and mitigations. To ensure sustainability, Local U must rely on initial financiers (investors, non-profit organizations, grants, etc.) to cover start-up costs and to maintain these costs until a cost-neutral student population is reached (approximately 4 nodes at 600 students per node). Until Local U can sustain itself through student enrollment and alumni support, it will be...
Local U Project Narrative

constrained by the views and values of its stakeholders. Local U will also depend on franchisers to expand the college beyond the central office and campus.

One of the key features of Local U is the quick response to community needs for higher education. Thus its success depends on effectively identifying unsaturated markets, specifically communities with economic needs and without access to higher education opportunities appropriate for those needs, necessitating substantial research on the communities into which it would like to expand. Local U will also need to research local businesses to make sure that they would be willing to cooperate with and/or offer internships, training-manuals, or other materials for Local U to develop programs suited to the community’s needs.

Assumptions. To be successful, Local U will need to achieve regional accreditation in each state housing a franchise node. It must also comply with federal and state regulations affecting accreditation, grants, and financial aid eligibility. It must comply with military and veteran policies and procedures as well as any disability services regulations. It will create and maintain an International Review Board so that all campus research that involves human subjects will be properly evaluated. The degree programs at Local U will meet the standards of each field’s regulatory body so that it can provide certification to nurses, teachers, and other occupations requiring professional licensure.

Local U also assumes that its central office will receive non-profit status.

Project Evaluation Plan

The project evaluation plan will utilize multiple evaluation methods and data sets to measure the project’s progress, to identify project strengths and challenges, and to determine strategies for improvement. Data collected will be used to demonstrate the project’s achievements in student learning, institutional health, and stakeholder satisfaction.

Direct Assessment of Student Learning. Local U will regularly employ best practices to directly measure student learning, including both prior learning and learning outcomes attached to the Local U curriculum. Third party reviewers will routinely be used to ensure the reliability and validity of Local U’s student learning assessment measurements.

Administrative Data. Administrative data will help us identify population served, growth in local partnerships, type of progress achieved by partners and participants, financial development, and economic impact.

Survey Instruments. Survey instruments will be tailored to various stakeholders and will be used to measure the impact of the project; the value of the project in local and regional settings, the usefulness of materials, academic instruction, and programs offered, and overall stakeholder satisfaction.
Local U Project Narrative

Qualitative Data. In-depth interviews, focus groups, direct observation and other qualitative data will be used to provide a fuller understanding of the project strengths and challenges from the perspectives of the various stakeholders.

Data collection will start from the implementation of the project and will follow a specific timeline including data collection stages at beginning middle and end of processes. Formative evaluation reports will be generated and discussed every quarter to identify progress and opportunities for growth and improvement.

Summary

With its innovative structure and curriculum design, Local U is ideally situated to deliver low-cost, high quality higher education to underserved communities, stimulating economic growth and helping students achieve both personal and professional goals.