
Large-scale distance learning initiatives

Diane Vines

The author

Diane Vines is Vice-Chancellor, Oregon University System and Former Chair of the Mission and Academic Policy Committee of the California Virtual University.

Abstract

Multi-campus/large scale distance learning initiatives increase the complexity of issues, and affect the impact of various quality factors that must be considered in the design and implementation of programs. The impact and interactions of distance education quality factors differs when designing large-scale versus smaller-scale distances learning programs. This article will look at the various quality considerations within a large-scale model, and will look at how decisions were made to ensure quality in the design of the California Virtual University (CVU).

Multi-campus/large scale distance learning initiatives increase the complexity of issues, and affect the impact of various quality factors that must be considered in the design and implementation of programs. The impact and interactions of distance education quality factors differ when designing large-scale versus smaller-scale distance learning programs. This article will look at quality, the various quality considerations to be made within a large-scale model, and how decisions were made to ensure quality in the design of the California Virtual University (CVU).

Many resources are available to help build in good practices in distance education. The CVU document, developed by the Mission and Academic Policy Committee of the California Virtual University (see Appendix), is one example.

In large-scale initiatives, the following factors have a positive effect on quality:

- maintenance of currency;
- faculty support services;
- program evaluation;
- library resources;
- accurate marketing and recruiting;
- student ability to deal with the technology; and
- cost effectiveness.

Factors which can have either a positive or negative effect on quality include:

- faculty training/education;
- long-range planning, budget and policy development including fee/tuition issues and articulation;
- timely interaction among students and faculty;
- faculty responsibility/oversight of the education process;
- choice of technology;
- clarity of ownership/revenue utilization policies;
- student assessment;
- strategies for ensuring integrity and credibility of student work;
- appropriate facilities and equipment;
- full range of student services; and
- accurate admissions information.

The following is a closer look at the interactions between quality factors and the scale of operations:

Maintenance of currency of knowledge and skills is essential in this information age with the

explosion of knowledge and the resultant impact on the application of this knowledge. Largeness of scale spreads the responsibility for currency across more faculty in a collaborative environment.

Faculty support services are as essential in distance learning programs as student support services. Small-scale distance learning programs often lack the necessary critical mass of faculty to make support services efficient.

Program evaluation is increasingly important in all academic endeavors. Large-scale distance education programs, where true collaboration exists, provide faculty and administrators the opportunity to draw from the best of existing evaluation criteria and methodologies and a critical mass of data to analyze.

Library resources are essential and more efficient in a collaborative, multi-campus environment as a result of shared responsibility for the electronic library services.

Marketing and recruiting of a critical mass of qualified, well-informed students is essential to the success of distance learning courses and programs. Accuracy or truth in advertising in marketing and recruiting is essential; when a web page is accessible to a large audience of supporters and critics alike, campuses are motivated to guarantee accuracy and are assured of an enlarged marketing effort for the students necessary to allow for class/course sizes that are most desirable to the subject and faculty member.

Student ability to deal with the technology is enhanced through shared responsibility for the development of orientation and training materials and ongoing technical support.

Cost effectiveness requires that a critical mass of students is available for faculty to be able to set and adhere to a maximum and minimum number of students per section of a course. Often too few students is as problematic in distance learning programs since courses must be cancelled or the quality of group and peer learning is compromised.

Quality factors that can be both favorably affected or rendered more difficult by largeness of scale are as follows:

Faculty training and education can be favorably affected only by larger size, and only in a highly collaborative, cooperative multi-campus environment.

Long range planning, budget, and policy development must also be conducted in a highly collaborative environment.

Examples of collaborative strategies include:

- Participation by several campuses in the delivery of credit, certificate and degree programs through a separately accredited institution. The downside to such an approach is that faculty often view it as “competition.”
- A value-added “cooperative” approach, currently followed by the California Virtual University, is designed to facilitate the marketing and delivery of courses. While planning, budgeting and policy development is more complex in such an approach, the long-term, continued cooperation and collaboration of faculty and campuses can be enhanced.
- Under a cooperative approach, allowing each campus to set tuition and fees allows for a free market environment. To ensure a quality student experience, participating campuses must focus on improving the ease of articulation among themselves.

Timely interaction among students and faculty is a key to student retention. With large scale programs, strategies to get each student interacting in the very early days of a course are essential to the student’s successful experience. Care must be taken to design a strategy that facilitates ongoing interaction between faculty and student that does not overwhelm the faculty with large numbers of messages from students. Simple e-mail interactions have been found to create too much demand for faculty.

Faculty responsibility and oversight of the education process, while an essential quality factor, can be negatively affected by size in some distance education models. But faculty must have the responsibility, authority and accountability for quality in all academic programs.

Choice of technology is a critical decision for all distance learning programs. Most experts in distance learning advocate a multiple media approach until the time that such technologies as broad-band width World Wide Web allows the multiple media/multi-sensory delivery of education and training with full interactivity available to all learners. In the meantime, large scale initiatives should assist faculty and

students to utilize the media which best suits their needs and resource availability.

Clarity of ownership/revenue utilization issues are addressed differently under the two models mentioned earlier (separately accredited and cooperative). Complexity and acceptability to campuses and faculty are often juxtaposed in the two models.

Student assessment can be positively affected by size just as program evaluation can be. However, in an uncoordinated, large-scale initiative lacking cooperation/collaboration, student assessment is rendered more fragmented and difficult.

Ensuring the integrity and credibility of student work is the focus of strategies currently being developed. In a coordinated, cooperative environment, a wide variety of strategies can be available to individual faculty to utilize as appropriate. Lacking a cooperative environment, faculty are hard-pressed to have access to a repertoire of strategies for far-flung distance education students.

Appropriate facilities and equipment are the backbone of a distance education program. In large-scale initiatives, the complexity of delivery and interactivity increases but, in coordinated initiatives, the availability of shared facilities and equipment greatly increases, giving faculty and students more alternatives. This is equally true for the campus' ability to offer a full range of student services; such services are essential to the recruitment and retention of distance learning students.

Accurate admissions information can be affected favorably by size in a similar manner as is the accuracy of marketing and recruiting. However, in an uncoordinated, poorly monitored multi-campus effort, accuracy in admissions information is problematic. With the use of a multi-campus Web site for information and front door for campus admission, the central coordinating body must require participating campuses to maintain the currency and accuracy of the campus Web information in an environment that is seamless from the student's perspective.

Ease of articulation among participating institutions, while not on the guidelines list, is crucial to the success of large-scale, multi-campus initiatives. At the very least, large-scale initiatives require an electronic system, easily accessed and used by students, that allows a

student considering a course from another institution to determine whether that course will count toward that degree – before the student enrolls in the course. At a minimum, students will expect complete and accurate articulation information to be available to them.

Ensuring quality in a large-scale model: The California Virtual University

The California Virtual University (CVU) was developed based on the following assumptions:

It would be developed by the participating colleges and universities in all the higher education segments, including faculty leaders from the three public segments.

Offerings would be presented globally as the California "brand" of higher education.

The CVU would be developed with the private sector and key governmental agencies in California, such as the California Trade and Commerce Agency, which markets California industries globally.

Accreditation would remain with the participating public and independent colleges and universities but there would be start-up funds from the state and the private sector.

The institutions that were invited to participate are shown in Table I.

The design team was composed of: California Higher Education including UC, CSU, CCC, private colleges and universities, faculty leaders (Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates), and the California Postsecondary Education Commission. California government and private sector leaders serve as consultants as needed.

The CVU design team identified the following unique California qualities as assets available to the initiative:

Table I Participating institutions

	No.
California Community Colleges	106
California State University	22
University of California	9
Accredited, California Independent colleges	164
Total	301

- high quality public and private institutions of higher education, within one political boundary;
- world leadership in key industries such as information technology and entertainment; and
- a critical mass of venture capitalists, multi-media and telecommunications entrepreneurs and others with special skills.

In designing the CVU, the team identified the following priorities:

- workforce preparation and economic development for California; expanded access within California to postsecondary education; and
- global export of California education and training.

The design team goals included to:

- create a small service-oriented management organization; to conduct cooperative marketing and market surveys;
- create an Internet catalog, intranet systems, and systems for student/faculty interactivity; to recommend public policy;
- serve as fiscal agent to receive private sector and foundation funding;
- provide assistance to campuses on accreditation issues, as requested;
- assist campuses in the provision of student services; to promote creative approaches for articulation and reciprocity;
- develop innovative funding approaches to shared infrastructure and faculty development and training and student support services; to develop appropriate program evaluation processes; and
- work with government agencies and the private and foundation sectors to promote virtual university activities.

The design team established the following standing committees (nominated by the Higher Education Segments): Mission and Academic Policy; Technology Design and Infrastructure; Market Analysis; Fiscal Policy; Budget; and an Ad Hoc Committee on Student Financial Aid.

The CVU Academic Plan was developed by the Mission and Academic Policy Committee, approved by the design team, and is available on the CVU web site. The Academic Plan includes policy recommendations on:

- quality assurance and accreditation;
- articulation and reciprocity;
- faculty development and training;
- student services;
- library services;
- admissions;
- evaluation and assessment; and
- electronic catalog of elements.

In August of 1997, the CVU design team office asked all of the 301 institutions in California what courses and programs of study they already offered in distance education. The inventory responses from 154 campuses are considered to be only a portion of the actual offerings and can be summarized as follows:

- 97 programs of study were reported;
- plus 1,468 individual courses were reported;
- maximum student capacity if all courses and programs were filled to desired capacities (as determined by the campus):
 - 4,900 students in programs of study;
 - plus 51,262 students in individual courses.

The electronic catalog schedule is as follows:

- January 1998: simple listing of courses and program offerings;
- April 1998: launch of pilot catalog;
- August 1998: Fall production catalog online;

The Web address for the California Virtual University is www.california.edu.

Distance learning programs have to make many decisions to ensure the quality of program offerings. Some decisions are rendered more difficult for large-scale, multi-campus initiatives; others are favorably affected by the increased size; and others are both favorably affected and rendered more difficult by increased size.

Appendix. California Virtual University principles of good practice

Campuses agree to the following Principles of Good Practice for courses and programs of study offered through the California Virtual University. Public higher education segments are encouraged to provide additional direction to campuses, where appropriate, for the purpose of enhancing the quality of instruction, promoting efficient use of resources, and meeting student demand.

Curriculum and instruction

- Each program or course of study results in learning outcomes appropriate to the rigor and breadth of the degree, certificate or credit awarded.
- A degree or certificate program or course is coherent and complete.
- The program or course provides for appropriate synchronous or asynchronous interaction between faculty and students and among students.
- Qualified faculty provides appropriate oversight of the program or course.
- All programs and courses, when appropriate, have met the Western Association of Schools and Colleges substantive change requirements.

Institutional commitment

- Campus review and approval processes ensure the appropriateness of the technology being used to meet the course or program's objectives.
- The institution endeavors to facilitate appropriate articulation and reciprocity agreements for students.
- An institution offering a degree or program of study is able and willing to matriculate fully qualified students.

- Appropriate technical support for students and faculty is provided.
- The program or course ensures that appropriate learning resources are available to students.
- Accepted students have the required background, knowledge, prerequisites, technical skills and access to technology to undertake the course or program.
- Advertising, recruiting, and admissions materials clearly and accurately represent the course or program and the services available.
- Students are provided a full range of appropriate student services, at a distance, including registration, admissions, academic and financial aid advisement.

Evaluation and assessment

- Using the institution's existing program evaluation process, the institution evaluates each course and program's educational effectiveness, including assessments of student learning outcomes, student retention, and student and faculty satisfaction.
- The institution provides for assessment and documentation of student achievement in each course and at completion of the program.