

REPORT OF A FOCUSED VISIT

TO

The Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative

Lansing, Michigan

March 18-19, 2002

for the

The Higher Learning Commission

of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

EVALUATION TEAM

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SECTION I.

The Introduction

This is the team report of a focused visit on March 18-19, 2002, to the Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative. The visit was held at the request of the participating institutions. The visit focused on an on-line collaborative for e-learning programs.

The Commission policy relevant to this change request is Policy I.C.2.b, which indicates that Commission approval is required to extend accreditation to include: “4. Degree programs offered through distance delivery methods.”

The Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative (MCCVLC) is a project of the Michigan Community College Association (MCCA), which has as members all 28 publicly funded Michigan community colleges.

This request to extend accreditation to include degree programs offered through distance delivery methods was prepared collaboratively by 22 of the 28 MCCA member colleges and seeks approval from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools for each of the 22 participating colleges to offer programs of study at the associate degree level that would be made available to students through the MCCVLC via distance education technologies.

The 22 participating colleges are: Alpena Community College, Bay de Noc Community College, Delta College, Glen Oaks Community College, Grand Rapids Community College, Henry Ford Community College, Jackson Community College, Kalamazoo Valley Community College, Kellogg Community College, Kirtland Community College, Lake Michigan College, Macomb Community College, Mid Michigan Community College, Monroe County Community College, Montcalm Community College, Muskegon Community College, North Central Michigan College, Northwestern Michigan College, Oakland Community College, St. Clair

County Community College, Wayne County Community College, and West Shore Community College.

The Collaborative does not offer programs of study but rather facilitates delivery of online programs of study that are developed and offered by individual member colleges in the Collaborative. If a college decides to develop an online degree program independent of the MCCVLC, that institution will need to obtain approval from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association.

In conducting the two-day long focused visit the four person evaluation team utilized a combination of face-to-face and of interactive television conferencing to meet with: Collaborative college presidents, Collaborative college academic administrators, observed a demonstration of courses and of registration, distance learning coordinators, reviewed infrastructure and met with Student Services personnel. In addition, the team held a breakfast meeting with the following state officials:

James H. Folkening, Director, Postsecondary Services
Michigan Department of Career Development

In his role as director of postsecondary services, he oversees the community college services unit in the department. This unit has responsibility for processing federal funding for postsecondary education. It is also the department that collects enrollment, tuition, and employment data for community colleges, data which is in turn used by the legislature in preparing state budgets and other legislation.

Thomas K. Schumann, Vice President of Academic Affairs
Michigan Virtual University

He is the senior vice president at MVU with oversight of academic services including both secondary and postsecondary education.

Perrin Fenske, College and University Liaison
Michigan Virtual University

He is responsible for coordinating MVU activities with colleges and universities. The MCCVLC works with Perrin on such projects as joint professional development initiatives.

Michael G. Hansen, Fiscal Analyst
Michigan Senate Fiscal Agency

He analyzes proposed legislation for the Michigan Senate in order to advise Senate committees on the fiscal impact of such legislation. Mike regularly analyzes the community college budget for the Senate subcommittee on community college appropriations.

In the course of conducting its focused evaluation visit, the team reviewed numerous documents from the Commission and from the institution with its main emphasis upon the following documents: *Request for Institutional Change - Collaborative Delivery of Online Programs of Study* and *Document in support of the Request for Institutional Change - Collaborative Delivery of Online Programs of Study*.

Further, much information concerning the Michigan community colleges collaborative in online learning was available on the website: <http://mccvlc.org/staff/>. Clicking on the left link “*About MCCVLC*” provides a wide range of information about the collaboration of the institutions. No password is required to access this information.

The two documents were well organized and prepared, and together with the very useful website provided much helpful and readily accessible information to the team.

SECTION II.

Evaluation of the Proposed Change

1. What is the change being proposed?

The Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative seeks approval from the Commission for each of its 22 participating colleges to offer programs of study at the associate degree level that would be made available to students through the MCCVLC via distance learning technologies.

The expected outcome includes improved access and increased enrollment to community college education by including complete programs of study made available to students via distance learning technologies. Further, the proposed change will enable the colleges to better serve their communities because additional programs of study will be available to the residents. In every case, offering distance education programs of study will permit the participating colleges to better meet their respective missions by making programs available to learners who would otherwise not be able to enroll in the programs offered.

In addition to the availability of a variety of online programs to learners in communities around the state, approval of this proposed change is expected to contribute to continued growth in enrollment in online courses. Enrollments in online course has been increasing greatly each semester over the previous years' semester, e.g. Winter 2001 to Winter 2002, enrollment in the online courses listed in the MCCVLC online course schedule increased from 5200 to over 12,000 (over 100% increase). These enrollment patterns are expected to persist for the foreseeable future.

The Commission policy relevant to this change request is Policy I.C.2.b., which indicates that Commission approval is required to extend accreditation to include:

“4. Degree programs offered through distance delivery methods.”

2. Factors which led to the proposed change.

Several factors led to the request for the proposed change. One was the Michigan community colleges' history of collaboration and the involvement of various constituencies to address initiatives. Analysis of market demand and competition also played a part. Another factor was the availability of funding for initial costs. The following sections address each of these factors.

In regard to collaborative approaches for addressing technological and other academic needs, the Michigan community colleges have a long history of implementing collaborative initiatives. The "Request for Institutional Change" describes major events in that history. The Michigan community colleges have a history of utilizing technology to address educational needs, with distance education beginning in the 1970's. Michigan also has a history of cooperating together in educational outreach. The Educational Teleconsortium of Michigan (ETOM) was begun in 1981 by eleven colleges; currently all Michigan community colleges participate in the teleconsortium. All the public community colleges are also involved in the Michigan Community College Association, which received funding in the 1980's and 1990's for development of satellite downlinks and addition of interactive video classrooms at each campus. In addition, the community colleges participated in the statewide purchase of a Virtual Private Network. The Michigan Virtual University (MVU) also worked cooperatively with the community colleges in the areas of professional development, technical assistance, and infrastructure support. A visit to the Michigan Virtual University headquarters allowed the team to not only view the teleconference facilities, but also to utilize them for meetings with staff from various colleges and to actually participate in teleconferences like those used for the MCCVLC. According to the "Request for Institutional Change," the Michigan Virtual University also worked with the MCCVLC on articulation issues with 4-year universities and with the Michigan Virtual High School.

In the "Request for Institutional Change" it was stated that the MCCVLC has worked with the Michigan Department of Education and the Michigan Department of Career

Development in the development of staff training. The Michigan Legislature, the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, and the Department of Management and Budget have been updated regarding the development of the MCCVLC. The involvement with these groups was evidenced by the participation of two (02) representatives from the state departments and one (01) from the legislature, as well as two (02) from the Michigan Virtual University, at the meeting for state officials.

Demand for online courses was a major factor in the development of the Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative. The Michigan Community College Association established a taskforce in 1995-1996 to investigate and to identify methods for serving Michigan residents who did not live in one of the college's district. According to the "Request for Institutional Change" and to interviews with MCCVLC staff and trustees, 50% of the state and 20% of the state's population are geographically outside the districts so there was a market not being served. During meetings with presidents, trustees, MCCVLC staff, and academic officers, several participants noted the increase of for-profit online academic program providers, so increasing competition was also a factor in the development of the MCCVLC. Meeting participants' comments also emphasized the current growth in demand for the online courses being offered. During the meeting with the external constituents, two (02) representatives from the Michigan Virtual University stated that as more students utilize the Michigan Virtual High School there would be increasing demand for online courses at the community college level by these students accustomed to online course delivery. They also stated that they see increasing demand from the workplace; currently online training is being offered at no cost to small businesses through workforce funds. Thus, another market for online delivery of educational programs will be developed. Representatives from the Michigan State Department of Education were also present at the meeting. They discussed the need for developing the MCCVLC to address the underserved population in the state and the demand for online courses and programs.

Three recommendations came from the task force, with one directly addressing technology.

“Immediately convene a planning group to develop detailed plans for a Michigan community college partnership which would provide programs delivered through various forms of technology. All Michigan community colleges could collaborate in this effort, provide programs to the extent each is willing and capable, and proportionately share in the expense and revenue. Major issues which would need to be addressed in the comprehensive planning effort include: funding, technology, curricula, delivery, student support, community support and legal.” (“Request for Institutional Change,” p. 12)

With this recommendation the Michigan Community College Association Presidents’ Taskforce created a staff task force to make operational recommendations for developing a Michigan Virtual Community College. From that task force came a draft mission statement and core beliefs document for establishing the Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative (MCCVLC) in 1996. A new community college was not being created; it was to be a collaborative network. In 1997 the Michigan Community Colleges Association unanimously approved the collaborative, with an assessment fee for each institution to assist with operational costs. Additional plans were drafted with approval of the strategic and business plans in 1998. An Executive Director was appointed and a governing committee was formed with four (04) community college trustees and four (04) presidents. Two (02) staff members joined the Executive Director and the staff taskforce became an advisory council that represents all institutions. Various statewide professional associations and groups, including the following, also assisted development of the initiative:

- Michigan Community College Business Officers Association
- Michigan Student Financial Aid Association
- Michigan Community College Student Services Association
- Michigan Community College librarians
- Michigan Community College chief academic officers

This information included in the “Request for Institutional Change” was verified through live and teleconference interviews with representatives of the various groups. All groups were

active in addressing issues or concerns that would be resolved through their direction. Throughout the meetings participants emphasized the collaboration and sharing that was occurring in this initiative. The community colleges' individual plans for distance delivery programs were also considered in the development of the MCCVLC. Plans were included in the "Request for Institutional Change," and the academic officers and presidents who were involved in meetings with team also discussed their plans. Plans were quite varied in respect to involvement in distance delivery of programs and courses. With this type of variance, the colleges believed that a collaborative would work best for sharing resources, faculty development opportunities, and courses/programs, as well as for best serving students.

Funding opportunities were another factor in the development of the Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative. All community colleges are assessed a fee to assist with expenses. Due to external funding, the annual fees paid to date have only needed to be half what was assessed, totaling \$ 90,500.00. Presidents attending meetings with the teams stated that the full fees would be assessed if necessary to maintain the collaborative when grant fees were exhausted. However, the assessments would not equal the amount of the external funding. They also stated that the collaborative would be seeking other grants.

The Michigan Virtual University (MVU) provided funding of \$ 250,000.00 for the MCCVLC. These funds were verified from the MCCVLC budget and through interviews. Faculty development, technical assistance and infrastructure support were additional supports provided through the university. During a meeting with external constituents, two (02) representatives from the Michigan Virtual University both stated that additional funding would be given to the MCCVLC, assuming funds were available. An e-mail from the Executive Director of the MCCVLC noted that there was a current memorandum of understanding between the Michigan Community College Association and the Michigan Virtual University regarding funding. He also stated that it was expected to continue, but that it is " . . . assured only through

the 2002-2003 fiscal year, during which Michigan will elect a new governor.” (E-mail correspondence from Michael Wahl, 03/11/02)

Another funding source was a 1999 grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to the Michigan Community College Association, allowing for professional development of staff and faculty, as well as for curriculum development. The Kellogg grant, directed toward the development of online programs of study, was for \$ 1,950,000.00. Thus, major funding for program development and operations came from external funding.

The presence and the interaction of these factors led to the request for institutional change to the Higher Learning Commission. The history and current status of collaboration, analysis of market demand, and existence of funding sources contributed to the development of the Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative.

3. **What necessary approvals have been obtained to implement the proposed change?**

A. **Internal Approach**

The team examined three documents approved by the Michigan Community College Association Board of Directors: MCCVLC Memorandum of Understanding (July 17, 1999), MCCVLC Program Guidelines (July 20, 2001), and MCCLVC Program Agreement (July 20, 2001).

In addition, each of the 22 member colleges participating in this collaborative request for institutional change has submitted a letter signed by each college chief executive officer specifically requesting that the MCCVLC include their college in this change request proposal process with the Higher Learning Commission. The team examined copies of all 22 letters.

B. External Approach

The legal authority to submit this change request to the Commission rests with the member colleges above under the authority provided to the colleges by The Michigan legislature under Public Act 331 of 1966 (the Community College Act of 1966).

Therefore, the letter of request from the duly appointed CEO of each of the 22 member college represents the authority required to seek approval of the institutional change from the Higher Learning Commission. No external approvals are necessary to change the delivery method for associate degree programs.

4. What impact might the proposed change have on challenges identified as part of or subsequent to the last comprehensive visit?

§ Identify any challenges directly related to the proposed change.

§ Describe how the institution has addressed the challenge.

This is not applicable to this focused visit as this is the first visit and the visit is focused on extending the Collaborative colleges accreditation to include degree programs offered through distance delivery methods.

All 22 member colleges of the consortium are already accredited by the Higher Learning Commission.

5. What are the institution's (Collaborative's) plans to implement and sustain the proposed change?

The Collaborative's leadership consists of an Executive Director, Director of Academic Programs, and the Coordinator of Student Services, all of whom enthusiastically support the change. The Collaborative's director and staff provide leadership for the coordination of distance education for the colleges and they report to the Governing Committee consisting of Trustees and college Presidents. The Collaborative provides an opportunity to design and implement

selected services to students for all of the colleges. It was thought that this opportunity could be expanded in the future.

Perhaps the Collaborative could consider coordinating appropriate items from the following:

- § Renegotiate a more satisfactory price and service from Blackboard.
- § Coordinate the negotiation of a state license for a new platform to replace Blackboard.
- § Research other available enhancements for distance delivery such as the Wisconsin On Line Resource Center Digital Library coordinated by Kay Chitwood at Fox Valley Technical College, Appleton, WI.
- § Meet with staff from the colleges to share best practices such as “Test Proctoring” procedures, etc.
- § Continue using the list serve to resolve problems and processes.

Limited financial data was provided for the operations of the Collaborative and no current data was provided that documents the Collaborative’s capacity to sustain the proposed change. It was very positive that the Trustees and Presidents indicated a strong commitment to continue financing the Collaborative.

However, with the Kellogg Grant funding ending soon, there is a pressing need to develop a current strategic/business plan projecting future financial needs and future sources of funding. This plan must include a redefinition of the priorities and roles of the employees of the Collaborative.

Progress Report One

A report is to be filed by April 01, 2003, with the Commission detailing the implementation of a strategic plan for the Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative. The plan must address the following:

- § Collaborative objectives, including plans for faculty development.
- § Evaluation of objectives.
- § Activities and persons responsible.
- § Timelines.
- § Financing and budgetary projections.
- § Evaluation of the role of the Collaborative staff to accommodate future changes as the Collaborative enrollment grows and to maximize the utilization of the

Collaborative with the support of the Advisory Council.

Appropriate faculty and experienced staff at each of the twenty-two autonomous colleges are currently providing instruction, learning resources, and student support services to all students including distance students. Each college is responsible for curriculum development and oversight, evaluation of instruction, and assessment of learning outcomes. It is a strength that staff from the areas of instruction, student support services and technology from all of the colleges are actively involved in and support the project. The consideration of quality assurance was in the forefront as the colleges in the Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative developed a systemic and systematic set of “*Online Course Development Guidelines and Rubric.*”

The *Guidelines* document addressed the issue that the faculty at the Michigan community colleges involved in the collaborative would address as they developed, implemented, and evaluated online courses to be offered through the MCCVLC. This provided assurance that the courses on the MCCVLC website are of the highest quality and provide exceptional learning experiences for the student involved.

The *Rubric* document was designed by a Task Force of MCCVLC Advisory council members and faculty. The intent of the rubric was to accompany the *Guidelines* and to provide further explication and to facilitate implementation of the *Guidelines*. The *Guidelines* and *Rubric* are utilized by member institutions in developing, monitoring, and evaluating online courses to assure a quality operation. These very thoughtful and helpful documents are utilized as a self-assessment tool by faculty when developing courses for offering online. The instrument is used to review, evaluate and subsequently modify courses already developed. The instrument is used in conjunction with student evaluations to function as a tool for peer-to-peer review and evaluation of courses within an institution or with other institutions.

Therefore, the team finds that the Collaborative and the respective member institutions

have in place the necessary *Guidelines* and *Rubric* document and process to appropriately assist them in assessing and assuring quality in the courses they offer through the MCCVLC.

In addition, the Presidents are playing a leadership role in the change. One strength that enhances the completeness of the curriculum is that the Colleges are converting to using a curriculum design system, the Wisconsin Instructional Design System (WIDS).

Information was provided from several colleges addressing assessment of student learning outcomes. However, there was a lack of complete documentation and supporting evidence for the assessment of student outcomes from most of the colleges involved in the Collaborative. In addition, there was minimal documentation as to the effectiveness of the activities of the Collaborative.

Progress Report Two

A report is to be filed by April 01, 2005, on the assessment of the Collaborative effectiveness and the assessment of student learning. Measures to evaluate the effectiveness must include:

- § Data and evidence of feedback from each of the 22 colleges on the assessment of student learning and distance delivery.
- § Student retention rate in classes offered through the support of the Collaborative.
- § Student satisfaction in the following areas:
 - < Technology support
 - < Advising
 - < Tutoring
 - < Admissions/registration
 - < Library services
 - < Bookstore services
 - < Financial aid

6. What are the institution's strategies to evaluate the proposed change?

The proposal prepared by the 22 colleges states that “the plan for documenting the achievement of outcomes for this request derive from the objectives of the initiative, from the objectives of the participating colleges and from the mission and guiding principles of the collaborative.” (p.40)

The mission, supported by the principles of the Collaborative, is to enhance access to associate degree programs from Michigan community colleges by providing programs of study through distance delivery methods. Evidence that online programs are available to students around the state will be the number and variety of programs available to students through the MCCVLC. The collaboration will also evaluate access by reviewing enrollment patterns in courses and programs of study.

A fundamental requirement for participation in the collaborative is that each college will maintain accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association. Furthermore, each college will have a strategy and methodology for ensuring that programs of study address the general education core requirements as well as for assessing student achievement. Thus, although the community colleges are collaborating to provide online associate degree programs of study, each remains autonomous in its delivery and assessment of student learning.

The collaborative has established program guidelines of common expectations for program development and support, but it does not include a common method of evaluating student achievement in online programming. Since, at this time, the collaborative online offerings do not share common curricula, courses, or even common course objectives, the colleges have chosen to incorporate the assessment of online courses and programs of study in the existing individual assessment plans.

Team discussion with the academic leaders indicated that the twenty-two colleges were at various levels of assessing online student learning. Since, to this point, there have been only individual courses posted, no program assessment has been possible. The individual plans for program assessment were not shared with the team.

From a general discussion regarding quality control, the following universal, informal measures emerged:

- § A large cadre of talented, capable faculty have been trained by the collaborative.
- § Market demand will prevail where students won't continue to take courses that do not have value.
- § The members of the collaborative will self-police in order to prevent a "black-eye" with the public.
- § Students have e-mailed college administrators with complaints allowing quick adjustments to courses as needed.
- § There is a means for student feedback in all courses.
- § Course content is identical to face-to-face instruction; difference is in technology.
- § All of the colleges have committed to building courses through WIDS (Wisconsin Instructional Delivery system).
- § The collaborative articulation agreement is considered a measure of quality assurance.
- § In response to a question regarding quality assurance at other colleges, faculty responded that they have to trust the integrity of other faculty.

Individually, the colleges varied in the extent that they have embraced online delivery of courses and, therefore, that they have begun to assess delivery and student learning. Although the academic administrators spoke of assessing online learning, they did not present any hard evidence of that assessment to the team. The descriptions of college plans for evaluation of outcomes provided in the request generally speak in the future tense which is understandable since programs have not yet been offered.

A common theme that carries throughout the request's description of individual colleges' plans is that the online assessment will be the same as that for the face-to-face courses and programs. However, since the instructional delivery methods are different and the interaction between students and faculty, as well as the interaction between students and their peers, is different due to the technology used to provide instruction, some colleges have stated that the results from the online sections of a course will be aggregated separately from the assessment results obtained in traditional format sections. Then, it will be possible to conduct data collection/research in order to determine if there are differences between face-to-face and online students' retention and academic achievement.

In addition to assessing the academic aspect of student learning and distance delivery, data should be collected that reflects the student retention rate in classes offered through the

support of MCCVLC. Also, the colleges should show online student satisfaction with technology support, advising, tutoring, admissions/registration, library services, bookstore services, and financial aid. All of the above impact student learning and need to be assessed.

Although the Michigan community colleges have decided that it would not be desirable, at this time, to establish a common method of evaluating student achievement in online programming, the collaborative could provide the method for sharing data and lessons learned from the individual assessment efforts at the site for administrators, faculty and staff (<http://www.mccvlc.org/staff/>).

SECTION III.

Strengths and Challenges

A. Institutional Strengths

1. The long history of collaboration enabled the development of the Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative composed of 22 autonomous community colleges to improve delivery of distance education to students.
2. The Trustees and Presidents indicated a strong commitment to continue financing the Collaborative.
3. The Collaborative involved each college's staff from the areas of instruction, student support services and technology.
4. The colleges utilize a complete curriculum development system that includes student learning outcomes, identified assessments, etc., such as the Wisconsin Instructional Design System (WIDS).

B. Institutional Challenges

1. There is not a current strategic/business plan, particularly in terms of planning for future funding.
2. There is a lack of documentation and supporting evidence for the assessment of student outcomes.
3. Kellogg grant funding will end and will require redefinition of the priorities and roles of the three (03) employees of the Collaborative.

SECTION IV.

Advice and Suggestions for Institutional Improvement

That the Collaborative consider coordinating appropriate items such as:

1. Renegotiate a more satisfactory price and service from Blackboard.
2. Coordinate the negotiation of a state license for a new platform to replace Blackboard.
3. Research other available enhancements for distance delivery such as the Wisconsin On Line Resource Center Digital Library coordinated by Kay Chitwood at Fox Valley Technical College, Appleton, WI..
4. Periodically meet with staff from the colleges to share best practices such as “Test Proctoring” procedures, et al.
5. Continue and expand the use of the list serve to resolve problems and processes.

SECTION V.

The Team Recommendation and Rationale

Recommendation:

The 22 member community colleges participating in and as supported by the Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative be approved to offer programs of study at the associate degree level that would be made available to students via distance education technologies and that are facilitated by the consortium.

Progress Reports Required:

Progress Report One

A report is to be filed by April 01, 2003, with the Commission detailing the implementation of a strategic plan for the Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative. The plan must address the following:

- § Collaborative objectives, including plans for faculty development.
- § Evaluation of objectives.
- § Activities and persons responsible.
- § Timelines.
- § Financing and budgetary projections.
- § Evaluation of the role of the Collaborative staff to accommodate future changes as the Collaborative enrollment grows and to maximize the utilization of the Collaborative with the support of the Advisory Committee.

Progress Report Two

A report is to be filed by April 01, 2005, on the assessment of the Collaborative effectiveness and the assessment of student learning. Measures to evaluate the effectiveness must include:

- § Data and evidence of feedback from each of the 22 colleges on the assessment of student learning and distance delivery.
- § Student retention rate in classes offered through the support of the Collaborative.
- § Student satisfaction in the following areas:
 - < Technology support
 - < Advising

- < Tutoring
- < Admissions/registration
- < Library services
- < Bookstore services
- < Financial aid

Rationale:

Each of the 22 colleges participating in the Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. The colleges have a long and successful history of participation in collaborative activities with each other. The colleges have a highly successful experience in offering of online courses and programs.

The institutions, their trustees and their presidents are very committed to the maintenance of quality educational offerings and to the financial support of the Collaborative's activity. However, since the team was especially directed by Commission staff to focus on the quality of the offerings and on the financial support for the offerings, the progress reports are to be filed as the Collaborative experiences the next few years of its operation:

A progress report is to be filed by April 01, 2003, with the Commission detailing the implementation of a strategic plan for the MCCVLC including the future financing and budgeting projections.

A second progress report is to be filed by April 01, 2005, on the assessment of the Collaborative's effectiveness and the assessment of student learning.