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This We Believe About Virtual Learning Environments

Today's learners live in the Web 2.0 world. They communicate via blogs, wikis, text messaging, social networks, and web conferencing. Their laptops and their web-enabled devices travel with them, and they expect high-speed broadband Internet access—continually. Because they live in a world of unlimited technological possibilities and virtual realities, these learners expect a congruent learning environment. **We believe that** the use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) should be an important part of the educational process in today's ever-changing, technologically advanced 21st Century.

Virtual Learning Environments

All educational environments strive to support teaching and to assist learners in the acquisition of the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes necessary to function successfully. Virtual learning environments consist of mobile, electronic, distance, hybrid, and web-based instruction. Virtual learning environments are constantly evolving and vary in the level of interactivity and services provided. Virtual learning environments can be synchronous, asynchronous, or a combination. They can be entirely virtual or hybrid (combination of face-to-face and web-based instruction).

Virtual learning environments provide numerous advantages for learners, the most significant of which is aligning the instructional environment with their expectations for learning in virtual environments. Virtual learning environments also

- provide opportunities for learners to participate within their comfort levels;
- encourage learners to become more engaged in the learning process and more fluent in the content;
- support a variety of learning styles;
- assist learners in enhancing critical thinking and problem-solving skills; and
- allow learners to participate in courses that may not otherwise be available.

In addition to the advantages for learners, VLEs offer educational providers flexibility, mobility, connectivity, and interactivity. Educational providers have the ability through VLEs to enhance course offerings, increase enrollment, and use facilities and other resources more efficiently. Additionally, VLEs allow and encourage instructors to interact with learners on a meaningful level, to provide individualized instruction, and to become reflective practitioners.

We believe that virtual learning environments assist learners in the acquisition of the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes necessary to function successfully in the 21st Century business and economic environment.

The Structure of Quality Virtual Learning Environments

Intentional, well-planned design, development, delivery, and implementation are imperative in the creation of any successful learning environment. In order for VLEs to be successful, they must provide opportunities to learn independently and collaboratively. Virtual learning environments must be easy to navigate, logically sequenced, learner and knowledge based, assessment driven, and community centered.

We believe that virtual learning environments must be engaging, adaptable to multiple learning styles, and use appropriate technology for specific activities. Technology is an essential component of virtual learning environments; however, quality VLEs depend primarily on the design, development, and implementation of instruction. An instructor presence as an active participant within the environment is essential. Constructive interaction among learners and instructors is also a critical component of quality VLEs. The environment must be safe, regulated, and encouraging. While VLEs promote freedom of expression among participants, guidelines and expectations should be established to govern behavior.

Partners in Virtual Learning Environments

The partners in VLEs include learners, instructors, technology support personnel, and administrators. Each partner plays a vital role in the success of VLEs.

Learners. Learners must adapt to VLEs by becoming aware of the impact of their own learning styles within these environments. This awareness must be combined with a commitment to be self-sufficient, responsible, and actively involved in the learning process. Virtual learners need to engage in ongoing, critical discourse with the instructor and with other learners. They must understand the technology tools and programs being used as well as where to find assistance when problems arise.

Internal motivation, time management skills, productive study habits, and effective communication are keys to learner success in VLEs.

Instructors. Instructors must adapt their instructional, communication, and assessment methods to suit the special requirements of this teaching environment. When developing a virtual course, instructors must be aware of the time commitment necessary to infuse quality. Instructors need to engage in ongoing self assessment to direct their professional development activities and efforts as they relate to the pedagogy of virtual learning.

Technology Support Personnel. Technology support personnel should facilitate the virtual learning process by creating a transparent technical environment. Assistance must be accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week through the use of a school-supported help desk. Procedures and routines for technical assistance must be communicated using a variety of methods. Collaboration with administrators, instructors, and learners throughout the virtual learning experience is essential for technology support personnel. In addition, they need to engage in ongoing technical activities and efforts related to the entire virtual learning environment.

Administrators. Educational administrators must commit to the exploration, development, implementation, and maintenance of VLEs. Their support should encompass guidance, resources, and professional development opportunities to facilitate technological, pedagogical, and instructional design changes. Administrators must provide and support the technology platforms needed to contribute to quality education. They must also be committed to hiring only qualified, dedicated faculty. Most importantly, administrative decisions made concerning VLEs must be based primarily on sound educational foundations rather than solely on financial considerations.

All partners—learners, instructors, technology support personnel, and administrators—must work together to make effective use of VLEs. Therefore, **we believe that** a concerted, collaborative effort must be made by all partners in order to maximize the potential inherent in virtual learning environments.

Conclusion

Virtual learning environments enhance the value of business and economic education by promoting learner collaboration and the use of relevant 21st Century technologies. **We believe that** business and economic educators must embrace and implement quality virtual learning environments.