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### **Is it Possible to Have a Virtual Residency?**

**Abstract:** This paper presents preliminary results of a case study to determine which key elements in the creation of a “virtual residency” option for a forty year old distance undergraduate program for adults. Key indicators of success are reported as 1) excitement and creativity, (2) pressure to boost enrollment, (3) attitudinal shift to accept an online option, (4) preservation of the residential model, (5) early and full involvement of key individuals and departments, and (6) adaptability to other areas of the university.

#### **Introduction**

How does an adult, distance education institution that has been defining itself as progressive and learner-centered for more than twenty years embrace online teaching and learning without “selling its soul?” While many online, for-profit competitors move rapidly to capture the adult higher education market, the faculty members who participated in creating the “experiment” in individualized degrees for adults at Union Institute & University in the early 1960s are only now beginning to reconsider their former Luddite stance.

Steeped in the tradition of John Dewey, Vermont College of Union Institute & University has been offering individualized learning for adults since 1981 when it bought Goddard College’s Adult Degree Program. This paper offers preliminary results of case study observations and interviews with individuals from several academic and service departments working collaboratively to create an online option for the Vermont College Undergraduate Program (formerly known as the Adult Degree Program or ADP). Seeking to work democratically, in much the same way individual faculty members work with learners at Vermont College to negotiate learning contracts, instructional technologists, librarians and writing support staff worked with faculty and administrators to lay the groundwork for an online residency experience. This first online residency is slated to take place in February, 2005 with the expectation that it will have all of the quality and uniqueness of the face-to-face residencies that take place on our historic campus in Montpelier, Vermont.

#### **Description of Online Option Project**

During each phase of the virtual residency project, management has been shared amongst the Director of Lifelong Learning, the Director of Instructional Technology and the Dean of the Vermont College Undergraduate Program. A shared vision and goals were developed collaboratively, including involvement of student services departments and admissions. Designing the scope of the project, identifying key tasks, scheduling and budget preparation were all shared amongst the three main departments involved. Even implementation and monitoring changes to the program became shared responsibilities.

These three individuals brought together additional departments in a shared vision to work on the project of producing the virtual residency option by inviting one or more

individuals from those departments, to weekly brainstorming meetings beginning in March, 2004. At first only faculty members and the dean of the program were invited to participate, but quickly admissions and other learner services departments besides Instructional Technology were added. Because the project had not yet been granted the support and approval of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, the President, and the Board of Trustees, the group and meetings were called, variably “the non-committee,” “Online ADP Sort-of-but-not-really-a-Group,” “non-group” and “our next non-meeting.” An exciting, nearly conspiratorial tone was set from the beginning with this tongue-in-cheek word choice. Later when the project was officially sanctioned and supported, it came to be known as the “Virtual Residency Option.”

Not all of the participants joined at the beginning, so when they did come to meetings, they were advised to review previous meeting notes taken mostly by one faculty member and alternatively by one of the three primary initiators of the project: the Dean of the Vermont College Undergraduate Program, the Director of Instructional Technology, and the Director of Lifelong Learning. Discussions about how to resolve problems and issues with transference of the residency components to the online environment were discussed and sometimes re-visited as new members of the group were added or only sporadically attended meetings. Much of the discussion also took place over email as many faculty members work from home at a distance and even when weekly face-to-face meetings were held, several faculty members participated via conference call and speaker phone. By the summer of 2004 online methods for fulfilling each residency component were developed as part of a truly democratic process in which all those who participated were afforded a voice and all worked toward consensus-building. Ongoing work continues on this project as faculty members are selected to teach in the online option and the Virtual Residency online space is refined.

A pivotal event that took place in September, 2004 was a demonstration of the Virtual Residency itself, as would take place in eCollege, a course management system, as well as through the use of Elluminate, a desktop conferencing software program. This event was scheduled as part of the monthly, day-long faculty and staff meeting for the Vermont College Undergraduate Program. Faculty and staff, most of whom had not participated in the weekly planning meetings and email exchanges, were invited to divide into groups and visit computer stations at which they were offered a guided tour of how eCollege and Elluminate would be used to fulfill specific objectives and components of the familiar face-to-face residency in the online environment. In the discussion that followed the demonstrations individuals commented over and over how impressed they were with the work and design of the project.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of the case study is to identify the key elements in the Vermont College Undergraduate Program, Virtual Residency Option planning experience that made it possible for this academic program to produce an online option. A secondary purpose is to determine how these results might be applied to the other nine undergraduate, masters and doctoral programs at Union Institute & University or at other progressive adult education institutions.

## Methods

Case study observations by a participant observer were taken during planning meetings, email exchanges and through interviews with administrators, faculty and staff in the departments of Instructional Technology, the Adult Degree Program, Lifelong Learning, Academic Support Network, Gary Library, Computer Services, Admissions and Marketing. It was not the intention of the participant observer to conduct a study of the Virtual Residency Option process at the outset of the project. Rather, only after beginning to feel as part of the project planning process as an insider did the idea for a case study come about.

Full participant observation, as Denzin defines it “simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation, and introspection.” (1978, p. 183) The intention of this researcher is to experience the project as both insider and outsider to best understand and describe the setting and events to an outside audience. As Patton explains, “Experiencing the setting or program as an insider accentuates the participant part of participant observation. At the same time, the inquirer remains aware of being an outsider. The challenge is to combine participation and observation so as to become capable of understanding the setting as an insider while describing it to and for outsiders.” (2002, p. 268)

The researcher obtained permission from all faculty, administrators and staff involved in the Virtual Residency Option to use interview notes, email messages and face-to-face meeting notes and observations as part of the study. Responses to an informal survey with open-ended questions sent in an email message were also solicited. Those questions included,

1. What do you think are the primary reasons were successful in moving forward on the virtual residency?
2. Why do you think that the staff and faculty were so receptive and supportive during the demonstration of the Virtual Residency event?

## Results

The primary themes that emerged in reviewing field notes, meeting minutes, interview notes and observations were (1) excitement and creativity, (2) pressure to boost enrollment, (3) attitudinal shift to accept an online option, (4) preservation of the residential model, (5) early and full involvement of key individuals and departments, and (6) adaptability to other areas of the university. The first three themes were the most often cited as key success factors.

Pointing to the excitement and creativity of the project, participants described these ideas in varying ways. One faculty member said that the “ineffable component in all this is the part I’m labeling optimism, creativity, excitement.” and that “working on this task force (or whatever we were) was really fun -- exhilarating, creative, challenging -- all the things you want your work to be. The group, as a whole, had a very optimistic outlook, which was really refreshing...” The dean of the program said that the most important success factor was that “each virtual option task force member has been talking it up enthusiastically at every opportunity,” which underscores the excitement and creativity involved in the process. Similarly, the Director of Lifelong Learning said that

the project is “the most exciting thing I’ve worked on here in the past three years.” The Director of Instructional Technology found the project to be great fun because it is collaborative, intellectually stimulating and engaging.

The pressure to boost enrollment was an unspoken mandate from the upper levels of the administration that permeated nearly all conversations and served as a pivotal force underlying and shaping the other success factors. This pressure was not only to boost enrollment due to external competition from other online undergraduate programs for adults, but also from internal competition from another undergraduate program that is course-based and does not include required residencies. As one senior faculty member said, “we knew we had to do it.” Another consideration related to enrollment was that this new option not “cannibalize” enrollment in other options. Admissions counselors were quick to point out that they were turning away many potential learners from the Vermont College Undergraduate Program because of the residency requirement.

Pressure to boost enrollment is related to the attitudinal shift to accept an online option in that this was one of several forces in play pushing faculty, staff and administrators to think differently about how to best serve learners at a distance. The Director of Lifelong Learning, a former faculty member and director of the Vermont College Undergraduate Program, said that the groundwork for this shift in thinking actually took place over the course of ten years in which the program at Vermont College struggled to define itself in relation to adult and distance higher education and still retain its progressive identity. The conversation had been going on over years of faculty meetings and personal dialogs and at a faculty meeting in February, 2004 the subject of an online option was discussed for the first time without widespread dissent.

The attitudinal shift also took place amid the preponderance of evidence that online learning can be successful. One faculty member said this about her understanding of this shift in faculty understanding, “I feel like I’ve been one of a very few voices in ADP for a long time saying that online interactions can be deep and meaningful and satisfying, but maybe as more and more people actually dabble in the online environment, that reality (because I do believe that online learning does not have to be second-rate) is easier to understand and accept.” Likewise, the Director of Instructional Technology reiterated to the Vermont College Undergraduate Program faculty and staff that “distance education” is understood in the popular consciousness as **online** education, and so faculty could no longer ignore the disconnect between their perceptions of their own program and what prospective learners desire and expect. Finally, one faculty member suggested that the charge of “unwillingness to change” was “leveled at Vermont College generally” and to counter this indictment faculty came to embrace new ideas about how their program might be offered to learners.

The preservation of the Vermont College Undergraduate Program residency structure was a key factor in winning over many of the faculty members and staff who were not directly involved in the Virtual Residency Option planning process. This success factor was suggested multiple times in our weekly meetings, in email messages and following the demonstration event in September, 2004. This factor was cited primarily because many faculty initially resistant to the project were concerned that the model would be altered. They felt strongly that the integrity of the model might be threatened to the detriment of the program and were pleasantly surprised at the respect with which planners treated the need to include all elements of the face-to-face residency.

As the Dean of the program said, “there seemed to be a great sigh of relief that “their” program process is not going to be changed. There is also a belief that the Program may be forced to change in ways they would not condone, and the “virtual option” and the enrollment increase it promises might allow the Program to fend off such pressure to change.”

The preservation of the residency structure was also mentioned for at least two other reasons, unrelated to faculty fears about their program model changing. One was that the structure of the face-to-face residency option allowed the project participants to stay focused within a set structure. A faculty member said that the “well-thought-out and tested-through-practice features of the ADP residencies served as a sort of melody, and we could riff off of it from an online perspective, making it a very creative venture without changing the essential features of the program. Creativity is exciting, and excitement is catching.” The tried-and-true aspects of the program served as the backbone to keep project participants on task as they recreated the residency in a virtual form. Another stated reason by the Dean of the program for preservation of the residency structure was that this is the key of academic quality. “I think the demonstration has made it more widely known that Vermont College Undergrad does indeed have a very regimented planning and evaluation process that is key to academic quality.”

An additional factor was early and full involvement of key departments and individuals. Not only were any and all Vermont College Undergraduate Program faculty and staff invited to participate through weekly face-to-face or conference call meetings and email conversation, but directors and staff in the departments of Instructional Technology, Lifelong Learning, Academic Support Network, Gary Library, Computer Services, Admissions and Marketing participated as well. Several months into the project, a consulting firm hired by the institution to assist in enrollment management became involved in the project as well. As one staff member who works in the Academic Support Network, which provides reading, writing, critical thinking and time management services, said of the project’s process, “It’s important to feel like a valued partner in the process – that all voices were valued.” Bringing in all stakeholders into the process is also necessary to creating the buy-in needed from administrative departments to support the project, i.e., administrative computing, marketing, admissions, financial aid, business office, and registrar.

The final success factor referenced by project participants was the adaptability of the Virtual Residency Option to other areas of the university. The broader implications of the work on this project for the rest of the institution, not only in terms of increased revenue that would support all individuals and departments, but also for online options for the other nine academic programs at Union Institute & University were important especially to the upper levels of the administration. This particular factor was perhaps cited by the Dean and directors more often than faculty members because their roles allow them to view their work in relation to work in other departments, in the larger context of the institution.

## **Conclusions**

As John Dewey said in Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education (1916), “A progressive society counts individual variations as precious since it finds in them the means of its own growth. Hence a democratic society

must, in consistency with its ideal, allow for intellectual freedom and the play of diverse gifts and interests in its educational measures.” The Vermont College Undergraduate Program has been committed to the values of progressive education voiced by John Dewey since its inception at Goddard College. (Goddard College, 2003) This case study found that the integrity of the model and its commitment to the Deweyan values of progressive education- which include democracy, freedom, individualized learning, and recognition of the unique needs of adult learners – was retained because of the key success factors identified in creating a Virtual Residency Option for its distance learning undergraduate program for adults.

It seems at first glance that most of these success factors could be replicated within the other academic departments at Union Institute & University. The pressure to boost enrollment exists across all programs and it appears through comments made in faculty meetings that the attitudinal shift to accept an online option is happening. Perhaps if these departments can learn from the Vermont College Undergraduate Program Virtual Residency Option experience, two other factors will be considered: preservation of the residential model and early and full involvement of key individuals and departments. The most elusive and difficult to re-create of these factors, however, is the excitement and creativity. Much of the excitement came from the enthusiasm of key individuals who built trust and commitment to the project over months of work and in some cases years of working together. This participant observer can only hope that the enthusiasm is contagious.

## References

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