



Blackboard Institute



Fully Online Programs in K-12:

A Snapshot of Effective Practices at Virtual High Schools



Introduction

The Blackboard Institute initiates programs and projects that advance K-20 progression – and offers actionable guidance drawn from Blackboard’s proximity to a large body of practice at all levels. By bringing together stakeholders from K-12 and higher education, and by sharing effective practices between the segments, we hope to foster an environment in which schools and institutions learn from one another and, together, improve the K-20 student experience.

The Institute’s initial research project studied effective practices in online programs. The research distilled insights from leaders of successful fully online community colleges, four-year institutions and a K-12 virtual school for educators across the spectrum to draw upon.

That research identified nine areas of common focus among these high-performing schools and institutions as they built their online programs: strong leadership, flexibility and openness to change, tailored financial models, defined target audience, sales and marketing, controlled course creation process, quality course delivery through professional development, student services that cater to the unique needs of the non-traditional student, as well as continuously measuring for success.

As part of that effort, we sought insight from Liz Pape, CEO of Virtual High School Global Consortium (VHS) to get a closer look at effective practices in K-12, to identify the cross-over between segments and to build the foundation for the next phase of research focused on K-20. Here we highlight some of the key factors for success we learned in that interview – most of which are clearly correlated to the effective practices we identified in fully online programs in higher education.



VHS is focused on two lines of business: supplemental course offerings for global students and teacher professional development

1. Defined Target Audience

From its beginning in 1996, VHS focused on a well-defined target audience that exhibited a strong demand for online programs and was not currently served well by the systems already in place. Based on the initial work done by VHS to identify a target population, VHS is focused on two lines of business: supplemental course offerings for global students and teacher professional development. The former educates students from 32 states and 35-40 countries in the subjects they cannot get in school. The latter teaches high school and middle school teachers from around the world. Of particular interest, VHS's 21st Century Teaching Best Practices courses for classroom teachers take lessons learned from preparing teachers to teach online to helping classroom teachers with blended learning.

"For the most part, we're supplementing what the schools are offering and not supplanting the schools' ability to provide students with a high school diploma."

2. Quality Course Delivery

Like its high-performing counterparts in higher education, VHS emphasizes quality course delivery, as evidenced by their professional development requirements for course creators and instructors. Those requirements are balanced by a variety of options to meet the teachers' needs. This includes a 22-week long professional development course on how to write online courses and teach online. At the end of the 22 weeks, teachers can develop and instruct an online course the following semester. The alternative is a 10-week course, which informs teachers how to instruct online using existing VHS courses.

"The teacher is teaching a course section that we don't put more than 25 kids into because otherwise it becomes a virtual lecture hall."

3. Controlled Course Creation

VHS implements clear online course design standards to ensure high-quality courses. Course-writers clearly understand the standards because they were evaluated against the same standards in their professional development courses. In addition, VHS keeps a master of the course; teachers can make changes within the limits of VHS policy, but the master course remains the standard.

"Our online professional development course modeled the type of course we wanted them to write. It modeled the activities of the students so that the teachers understood what their high school students would do in their online course."

4. Student Services

VHS emphasizes student services as the key to high course completion, including:

- An on-site coordinator - a person and place students can go with questions and for support.
- Real-time grading system where teachers are required to update the students' grades every two weeks.
- Pre-course survey to gauge students' readiness for online learning. That survey is followed-up with an in-person discussion.
- A five-hour student orientation in each course; including navigational tips, time management advice, and parent notification.

"You cannot assume that because high school students know how to get on a computer and do their social networking sites or do their gaming sites that they know how to learn online. It's the same for teachers. Charismatic classroom teachers don't necessarily make good online teachers. So, we never presumed that kids could just automatically do well in an online course. We build a tremendous amount of infrastructure around these courses so that kids can succeed."

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5. Sustainable Financial Model

Because of their framework, VHS can consistently offer low membership fees.



VHS is unique in that it is set up like a cooperative. Because of that framework, VHS can consistently offer low membership fees. As part of the cooperative, member schools do two things in order to access VHS's 200+ courses. Member schools nominate at least one of their own teachers to instruct at VHS in place of part of that teachers' face-to-face course load. The number of students that teacher instructs is the maximum number of students a member school can send to VHS. As classes max out at 25 students, if a member school wants to send more than 25 students to VHS, they must nominate at least two teachers. Additionally, member schools pay a membership fee based on how many seats they want.

"You trade off your environmental science teacher teaching 25 kids, but you get 25 virtual teachers coming in and teaching 25 of your kids. One kid wants to do 21st Century American Female Authors; another wants to do DNA Biology; another wants to take AP Computer Science. Now you are getting courses to your kids that they want and can't have otherwise."

Next Steps

In the next phase of research, beginning winter 2010, the Institute plans to expand upon these effective practices in higher education and K-12 by working across the K-20 spectrum in fully online programs to:

- Delineate the value proposition in creating full-time online programs
- Drill down to the persistent challenges in providing student services to full-time virtual students, which we found in earlier research to be closely tied to a program's success
- Surface and share effective practices that address the persistent challenges in providing student services to full-time virtual students
- Demonstrate commonalities between full-time online program operations in various segments
- Recommend ways to build bridges between segments based off the commonalities in full-time online programs identified

Contact us at blackboardinstitute@blackboard.com for more detail on Phase 1 findings and information about planned Phase 2 research.

About the Blackboard Institute

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Jessie Woolley-Wilson
President, K-20 Strategy

"20 million students worldwide look to Blackboard as a partner in teaching and learning. We take that opportunity and responsibility seriously and continuously seek out solutions that increase student achievement. To improve student progression, we're building consensus on common approaches for tackling tough education issues, sharing those approaches across the education community and tying successful approaches to education policy discussions to help create meaningful and lasting change."



Gordon Freedman
Executive Director, Blackboard Institute

"Without addressing roadblocks throughout the entire learning process, student success will continue to be compromised. We seek to increase accessibility for all students by supporting policies and programs that make the journey through school and into higher education efficient and productive."



Garen Singer
Program Director, Blackboard Institute

"At the Blackboard Institute, we showcase effective practices in the field through the support of our partners on the ground. But we also bring K-12 and higher education together to flesh out promising practices and articulate common approaches. By highlighting shared challenges and opportunities, we seek more far reaching solutions to the problems that plague all educators."

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