



VCU

Online Strategy Task Force
Final Recommendations Report

Table of Contents

<u>Executive Summary.....</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Academic Integrity in Online Exams Workgroup Recommendations</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>High Quality in Online Education Workgroup Recommendations.....</u>	<u>8</u>
<u>Innovation in Teaching and Learning Workgroup Recommendations.....</u>	<u>19</u>
<u>Marketable Online Credentials Workgroup Recommendations.....</u>	<u>35</u>
<u>Student and Faculty Experience Workgroup Recommendations.....</u>	<u>42</u>

Executive Summary

Taskforce Appointment and Charge

In November 2021, Provost Sotiropoulos appointed the Online Strategy Taskforce (OST). The OST was charged with developing strategy recommendations that will accelerate, scale and advance VCU's sustainable competitiveness in credit bearing courses and programs:

- Ensuring VCU offers high quality online courses and programs
- Improving the student experience with online instruction at VCU
- Improving the faculty experience with online course development and instruction
- Increasing and accelerating the development of marketable online credentials (i.e., degrees certificates, micro-credentials)
- Expanding online education to support teaching, learning and innovation in undergraduate and graduate courses
- OST charge was later expanded to include academic integrity in online exams

Organization and Membership

The OST was guided by the Online Strategy Steering Committee, which included senior administrators and faculty senate leadership. Details of the Steering Committee Leadership can be found on the [website](#). The 24 member task force included faculty, staff, and students, and was organized into five workgroups based upon the taskforce charge:

- High Quality Online Education
- Student and Faculty Experience
- Marketable Credentials
- Innovation in Teaching and Learning, and
- Academic Integrity in Online Exams.

Workgroups were encouraged to engage additional content experts across the University in their discussions as needed which often included an additional 30 or more individuals from various areas engaging with the OST. This often resulted in robust discussions and dialogue on a bi-weekly basis.

To better understand the needs and preferences of future online students, the OST partnered with VCU RVA Views on a [Survey of Online Higher Education Preferences](#), a survey exploration of attitudes towards college attributes delivered through online modalities across national, regional, and state samples. This information informed workgroup discussion and recommendations, in addition to listening sessions with leading universities in providing online education in Virginia and other states (i.e., Old Dominion University, Arizona State University, and Central Florida University) and other research performed by workgroup members.

The OST Report is inclusive of the reports from the five workgroups. This executive summary provides the high-level recommendations for each workgroup. The detailed report provides greater depth on each recommendation.

High-Level Recommendations List by Workgroup

I. Academic Integrity in Online Exams (AIOE)

The Academic Integrity in Online Exams Work Group was charged to: evaluate VCU's current online exam tools and identify gaps in their capabilities, make recommendations for how to scale the use of these online exam tools, and consider if any additional tools should replace existing ones in order to facilitate this scaling.

The AIOE Workgroup determined a single solution does not exist, and can never exist to eliminate academic dishonesty in online exams. The workgroup recommended that VCU do the following:

1. Provide the resources needed to obtain what would work best for each schools' programs and related assessment modalities.
2. Be upfront about the institution's commitment and intolerance towards academic dishonesty.
3. Require Student Honor Code Training/Acknowledgement
4. Provide training and resources for faculty to better understand and discuss academic integrity and honor code violations and consequences.
5. Increase support for faculty development regarding pedagogical strategies for assessments of learning that reduce the motivation to engage in academic dishonesty and make it more difficult to do so.
6. If a decision is made to use proctoring software to minimize academic dishonesty, the committee recommends several actions to ensure: student awareness, feedback, and training is considered in the process; maximization of existing resources, tools and platforms, and the "opportunity" factor for academic integrity issues is address with minimal privacy challenges.
7. Any new product be run on a trial basis for a full semester in conjunction with the current products before a final decision is made.
8. Investigate the possibility of proctoring reciprocity agreements with other universities and community colleges.

II. High Quality Online Education (HQOE)

The High Quality Online Education Work Group was charged to make recommendations that will *accelerate and ensure* VCU offers high quality and *scalable* online courses and programs to include: methods for assessing quality of online courses and an established review cycle, approaches to ensure program assessment for online programs follow the approved University program assessment process, and expectations for online course development that meet quality expectations, and the quality assessment can be affirmed during course approval process.

In response to the charge the HQOE Workgroup recommends VCU do the following:

1. Universally adopt and implement the newly revised VCU Course Quality [asynchronous](#) and [synchronous](#) rubrics that provide clear expectations of seven (7) areas of importance: clear and organized, engaging, interactive, collaborative, timely and high-quality feedback, timely evaluation to assess course success, and rapid response system to address course evaluation feedback.
2. Identify a person or department on campus to manage and support faculty with developing accessible materials that are American Disabilities Act (ACA) and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) compliant, preferably central to

other faculty support entities (i.e. technology, teaching, accessibility, course design, professional development, etc.).

3. Ensure online programs follow the University requirements for assessing student learning outcomes and academic program review. The university policies regarding assessing student learning outcomes in degree or certificate programs and the university process for academic program review must apply regardless of program delivery.

III. Innovation in Teaching and Learning (ITL)

The Innovation and in Teaching and Learning Workgroup was charged to develop recommended strategies to expand online education infrastructure and scaling to support innovation in teaching and learning in undergraduate and graduate courses.

In response to the charge the ITL Workgroup recommends VCU should continue to build its internal capacity (and not outsource) to offer innovative teaching and learning opportunities in ways that are: consistent with the institution's mission, learner- and learning-focused, and equitable and accessible. The ITL Workgroup therefore provided eight (8) detailed recommendations:

1. Develop a digital learning strategic plan consistent with VCU's strategic plan and that adopts and adapts the best practices of leading institutions.
2. Go beyond traditional courses and credit-bearing programs and have mechanisms to recognize dual enrollment, prior learning, and competency-based pathways.
3. Review of the organizational structure and policy ecosystem around online and digital learning and a restructuring to best achieve overall organizational efficiency and to build internal capacity.
4. Increase in online programming centers issues of equity, inclusion, accessibility, affordability and the needs of our diverse learners, particularly from marginalized populations.
5. Provide comprehensive faculty support for full- and part-time faculty to develop and design high quality learning experiences in various modalities.
6. Upgrade the academic technology infrastructure to provide greater support to the faculty and students.
7. Conduct a gap analysis and designing a clear and transparent process for program adoption, and approval process.
8. As VCU pursues innovation in teaching and learning and growth opportunities via distance education, it also invests in related research and decision support services to support continuous improvement.

IV. Marketable Credentials (MC)

The Marketable Credentials Workgroup was charged to develop recommendations inclusive of infrastructure to:

- increase and accelerate the development of marketable online credentials (i.e., degrees, certificates, micro-credentials) that engage employers, meet future workforce needs (e.g. competencies) and are attractive to new and existing student markets
- provide quality control, approval and enterprise support (responsibility and accountability) and the ability for micro-credentials being transcribed.

In response to the charge the MC Workgroup recommends VCU:

1. Designate an office for oversight (i.e., Office of Micro-credentials).
 - Define graduate credit-inclusive micro-credentials to have a minimum of 6 credits and a maximum of 11 credits. The range for undergraduate credit-inclusive micro-credentials should be 1-8 credits.
2. Develop infrastructure for University-Level review and approval of micro-credentials. Establish a representative committee responsible for the rapid (1-2 months after proposal submission) review and approval of new micro-credential proposals.
3. Develop a One-Stop Public Facing Website. The creation of a one-stop website will be critical to the organization, marketing and processing of micro-credentials. The website will need to detail the types of micro-credentials available including the level, eligibility, credit/noncredit and instruction method.
4. Develop process and documentation for how faculty can create micro-credentials.
5. Establish a Targeted Market-Based Programs approach. Marketing strategies should be undertaken that specifically target segmented markets, including a) pipeline to undergraduate programs (e.g., dual-enrollment in HS, job skills to a degree), b) pipeline to graduate programs (e.g., undergrad stackable to graduate programs), and c) standalone credentials (e.g., specific skills and credentials). Six detailed market considerations include: (1) develop a comprehensive business plan, (2) clearly articulate and inform the public, (3) targeted identification and reaching prospects, (4) create recognition and nomenclature, (5) embrace the student funnel, and (6) retention.

V. Student and Faculty Experience (SFE)

The Student and Faculty Experience Workgroup was charged to develop recommendations that allows VCU to understand and assess the student and faculty experience concerning online education.

Based on the findings, the SFE workgroup provided general recommendations for assessment, academic success, online course development, and instruction metrics for the student and faculty experience; and provided guidelines on how to move forward to make online education a successful enterprise:

1. Centralization of faculty support resources for online instruction
2. Standardize online faculty onboarding and training
3. Develop an intentional, comprehensive, and ongoing process to collect and evaluate student and faculty experience data to ensure a Culture of Care
4. Establish a One Stop Student Success Center
5. Create a “Culture of Care” (Online Student Experience)
6. Provide dedicated infrastructure and resources
 - human capital investment
 - dedicated marketing, multimedia and communications resources
 - dedicated information technology team
 - personnel expansion remains proportionate to student expansion
7. Develop consistent University policies and guidelines
8. Establish a skills assessment option that accepted students can opt into as a way to determine their readiness for online learning programs.

Online Strategy Taskforce

Academic Integrity in Online Exams Workgroup Final Report

I. Workgroup Membership

Workgroup Chair(s):

- Dayanjan Wijesinghe
- Colleen Bishop, Co-Chair Jun 9th 2022

Workgroup Members

- Kim Case
- Laurie Cathers
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- Sterling Hundley
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- Arthur Reber
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- Tammy Williams

II. Introduction and Overview

Academic integrity refers to the commitment to the fundamental values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility and courage (ICAI-Fundamental-Values_R12, 2019). Ensuring that students and staff are acting with integrity upholds the reputation of an academic institution and ensures that the measure of academic success reflects the gain in knowledge and skills by those who earn it. While relatively low levels of academic dishonesty have always been present in institutions of higher education, with the introduction of new technology enabling online exams and assessments, opportunities for academic dishonesty have increased exponentially. The shift to online courses is becoming more commonplace with at least 30% of students in degree granting institutions in 2017 taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2017) and at least 44% of faculty reporting teaching at least one online course in 2018 (Lederman & Jaschik, 2018). Following the shutdown of the university from COVID 19, all instruction moved to online modalities. As we return to normalcy post COVID19, the number of online courses is expected to increase significantly.

With the increase in online courses comes the need for online assessment, and greater risk for academic dishonesty in such assessments. Examples of academic dishonesty in such settings include but are not limited to: collaboration among students

during the exam to find the correct answers, publishing exam banks online, using forbidden resources to answer questions and getting help from outside experts. Several technological solutions have been developed as a result. This includes active online proctoring, lockdown browsers, use of the webcam for monitoring the environment, screen recording as well as the use of 360 degree cameras for capturing the student's exam environment. Keeping pace with such technologies requires a proactive and creative use of evolving technologies in order to stay ahead of attempted cheating. Entire online communities are being formed with the primary goal of bypassing existing exam security, leading to an electronic warfare between faculty and students. As such, technological solutions alone are unlikely to yield long term results in governing online cheating.

This endless cycle of technology chasing technology presents a central question: why do students cheat in the first place? Understanding the answer to this question is critical in developing a holistic approach in safeguarding VCU's integrity in online exams. Four factors have been identified in literature as contributing to academic dishonesty by students.

II-a. Individual factors: Research demonstrates that in order for cheating to occur, three conditions referred to as the fraud triangle need to be present (Auditors' Responsibility for Fraud Detection, 2003; Becker et al., 2006; Holden et al., 2021).

II-a1. Opportunity

Where students perceive that they can cheat without being caught. This is reinforced if they know that others are getting away with cheating or that instructors are overlooking incidences of cheating (Auditors' Responsibility for Fraud Detection, 2003).

II-a2. Incentive, pressure or need

This is multifactorial with contributions towards the need to succeed at any costs coming from peers and/or relatives, institutional attitudes, as well as a student's perception of self-worth being closely associated with their academic grades (Becker et al., 2006; Holden et al., 2021).

II-a3. Rationalization or attitude

Where a student's morality justifies or rationalizes academic dishonesty. Rationalization can occur if students believe that other students are cheating, perceive unfair competition, or perceive acceptance or indifference to cheating by instructors (Becker et al., 2006; Holden et al., 2021; Varble, 2014).

II-b. Institutional factors: The pervasive perception of a cheating culture at a university has been identified as a primary contribution to the existence of a cheating culture (Tolman, 2017). Of note, the perception of a tolerance towards cheating as a part of the institutional culture may have become ingrained during the challenges of COVID and online assessments. The workgroup agrees that the institutional policies outlining academic dishonesty need to be articulated and defined up front, explained in detail to students and reiterated continuously.

II-c. Medium related factors: Prior studies demonstrate that 42-74% of students believe that it is easier to cheat online (C. King & Guyette, 2009; Watson & Sottile, 2010). In addition, students were found to be cheating at a higher frequency in online exams compared to in person exams (D. King & Case, 2014). Additionally, cheating is reported to be more prevalent in higher stake exams and varies among the different disciplines (Lanier, 2006). However, these findings are contradicted by other studies demonstrating lower incidents of cheating (Stuber-McEwen et al., 2009) or no difference in online exams compared to in person exams (Grijalva et al., 2006; Ladyshevsky, 2015). Methodological

differences do exist between these studies. A valid question remains whether the equivalent or lower rates of cheating observed in online exams compared to in person exams is the reality or a function of not being able to identify the full repertoire of tools by which students were cheating in an online setting.

II-d. Assessment specific factors: The type of assessment has an impact on the ease of which students can cheat in an online exam. Varble (2014) found evidence that cheating is higher for questions associated with memorization and recall, the kinds of questions most easily linked back to their original sources (Varble, 2014). Further, Watson and Sottile (2010) demonstrated that students were significantly more likely to cheat through collaborating with other students by exchanging answers in online exams (Watson & Sottile, 2010). Our personal anecdotal evidence from the School of Pharmacy corroborates this fact. In this case study, individual students studied specific sections to be covered in an exam in detail and then collaborated to exchange answers during the exam.

III. Detailed Recommendations

- ***A single solution does not exist, and can never exist to eliminate academic dishonesty in online exams***

Recommendation 1. Provide the resources needed to obtain what would work best for each schools' programs and related assessment modalities

- Undertake a needs assessment to determine the specific resources needed by the different schools and departments that match their form of online learning assessment.
- In a single website, provide faculty with a complete list of all the tools and links to them available for managing academic integrity in online exam setting.
- Provide information regarding the different types of online assessments that are possible together with strategies for minimizing academic integrity violations such that faculty has choices to select what will work best for their testing needs.

Recommendation 2. Be upfront about the institution's commitment and intolerance towards academic dishonesty. *The Work group recommends that VCU should increase the awareness and importance of the Honor Code by:*

- Clearly communicating the institution's commitment and intolerance towards academic dishonesty.
- Messaging regarding honor code violations in online exams and their consequences should be consistent across the university.
- Adding a section on the online.vcu.edu about academic integrity in online exams.
- The Honor Code should be a part of the university mission statement.
- Providing examples to demonstrate that honor code violations are taken seriously and that the consequences are not worth the risk.
- Consider increasing penalties for honor code violations in online exams to act as a deterrent.
- Having in place honor code advisory faculty for each school/department that both students and faculty have access to.

- Making all faculty aware of the legal protection provided to them by VCU when reporting honor code violations.

Recommendation 3. Require Student Honor Code Training/Acknowledgement

- Create required student training about VCU's Honor Code.
- The training should be consistent across the university.
- The required training could be included in every fall semester and if not completed, would put a hold on the students' spring semester registration.

Recommendation 4. Provide training and resources for faculty to better understand and discuss academic integrity and honor code violations and consequences.

- Explore the possibility of Talent training modules for faculty on managing academic integrity in online environments.
- Create a resource with case studies for faculty to better understand how to manage academic integrity in online settings. Include in these case studies examples of how to incorporate discussions addressing why the honor code is needed, how it creates fairness to all students, why we need to abide by it, as well as the repercussions for not following the established guidelines, into individual classes.

Recommendation 5. Increase support for faculty development regarding pedagogical strategies for assessments of learning that reduce the motivation to engage in academic dishonesty and make it more difficult to do so (e.g., authentic assessment). As the pedagogical development hub for VCU, CTLE staffing increases will best serve this expanding need among faculty teaching online and across modalities. Further considerations for this recommendation to note are:

- Provide guidance to faculty on how to create a narrative regarding honor code and academic integrity in online settings that is relevant to the class being taught to be incorporated into the syllabus.
- Can incentives (financial or counting towards service) be provided to faculty to undergo special training on managing academic integrity in online settings?
- Can the resources of the Alt Lab be brought to bear on this?
- Reiterating the prior recommendation of having a trained person at each unit that specializes in matters related to academic integrity in online settings to be used as a resource. It is recommended that these advisors get significant service credit for doing this duty.

Recommendation 6. If a decision is made to use proctoring software to minimize academic dishonesty, the committee recommends the following.

- Ensure that students are made aware of privacy issues and that their concerns are taken into consideration prior to a decision.
- Investigate means of not placing additional financial burden to the students.
- Investigate the use of existing resources such as Zoom as much as possible. Other strategies when using such resources include providing students with a

standard background to increase their privacy and minimize intrusion into private space.

- Investigate the possibility of using open source software for proctoring such as the Open Broadcaster Software OBS Studio (<https://obsproject.com/>).
- Provide students with the training to make them comfortable using this technology.
- Address the contribution of “Opportunity” for academic integrity in online exams via non vendor driven approaches where possible.
- Addressing the opportunity factor with minimal privacy challenges
 - [VCU-SOP Online Exam Proctoring Policy.pdf](#).
 - It should be noted that this adds a significant burden on faculty.

Recommendation 7. Any new product be run on a trial basis for a full semester in conjunction with the current products before a final decision is made. Running products simultaneously would allow faculty the opportunity to try the new product as it would be used, while also having a back-up option if the new product does not meet their needs.

Recommendation 8. Investigate the possibility of proctoring reciprocity agreements with other universities and community colleges.

Online Strategy Taskforce High Quality Online Education Workgroup Report

I. Workgroup Membership

Workgroup Chair(s):

- Elaine Reeder, Interim Director of Curriculum Development

Workgroup Members

- Kristine Artello, Associate Professor, Wilder School
- Jean Bailey, Associate Dean, Faculty Development
- Mike Flanigan, Associate Vice President for Strategic Initiatives and Project Management
- Jill Gordon, Interim Senior Vice Provost, Faculty Affairs
- Zachary Hilpert, Director of Interdisciplinary Studies
- Monty Jones, Associate Professor, Teaching and Learning
- Carly Phinizy, Department Chair, Art History
- Valerie Robnolt, Associate Professor, Teaching and Learning
- Meredith Weiss, Vice President for Administration
- Wenli Yan, Associate Professor, Wilder School

II. Introduction and Overview

Current VCU Landscape

Currently, academic programs are reviewed through a number of possible mechanisms — by internal academic program review and accrediting bodies. At this time, the extent to which individual courses within a degree program are assessed for quality is unclear. There are mechanisms in place for periodic assessment of course content, delivery, and overall quality to be examined, as encouraged in the Annual Assessment of Faculty Performance and Faculty Promotion and Tenure Policies and Procedures. In addition, we currently encourage the use of the VCU Course Quality Rubric (modeled after the OSCQR scorecard) to assess online course delivery.

A question was posed by the workgroup: Should online course quality be assessed differently than in-person course quality? The workgroup believes that assessing the process of course and program creation is probably as important as assessing the quality of the programs or courses themselves. Online and in-person learning both can achieve exemplary educational outcomes, therefore, assessment of both modalities should recognize good teaching practices.

Leading Institutions assessment of Quality Online Instruction

Arizona State University (ASU) evaluates online course quality using a condensed online course evaluation that they adapted from the Quality Matters rubric. ASU also incorporates equity and inclusion rubrics from Peralta Community College Group.

Faculty that are interested in developing and teaching an online course are required to participate in training.

Old Dominion University (ODU) assesses quality in online learning using the UPCEA, Hallmarks of Excellence in Online Education. This document includes a holistic approach for institutions considering a move to online teaching and learning. ODU also requires programs offering both online and face-to-face courses to comparatively assess student outcomes in both modalities (Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment, n.d.).

University of Central Florida (UCF) works with the State University System of Florida to offer a two-tiered course quality assurance program. Courses can be designated as a “Quality Course” or as a “High Quality Course.” To be evaluated, faculty developers must participate in training programs and instructional design (ID) consultations. Courses with these designations can also apply for one of two teaching awards (Center for Distributed Learning 2016). Florida State University, a VCU Aspirational Peer in our Strategic Plan, uses the same two-tiered course certification system (Office of Distance Learning n.d.).

UCF also has a separate team within their Division of Digital Learning assessing the impact of online and blended learning. This Research Initiative for Teaching Effectiveness (RITE) reports to the Vice Provost for Digital Learning.

Central Michigan has a unique method of developing quality online instruction; they go through their Global campus. Faculty are required to go through training programs before they are permitted to teach online. They also offer dual appointments to both the global and physical campuses.

The University of Buffalo (another Aspirational Peer in the VCU Strategic Plan), as a part of their course development plan, makes sure faculty developers have a data collection plan so they can assess student success and perceptions after course iterations (Curriculum, Assessment, and Teaching Transformation 2022).

Modality and Interaction in Online Courses

Summary:

- Evaluation of online course modality and engagement should consider student success/outcomes and retention in addition to student satisfaction
- Studies over the past two decades have shown that student-student interaction increases student success and retention.
- Asynchronous courses should include student-student interaction in addition to independent work to ensure student success and retention.

Research on Student-Student Interaction in Online Courses

Student-student interaction can improve online course quality in a number of ways, according to research on online learning. Such studies must first define what is meant by “course quality,” with definitions including:

- Student success (i.e., grades on specific assessments or courses).
- Student retention (i.e., course or program completion).
- Student satisfaction (including expressed preference or student-perceived outcomes).

At VCU, evaluation of the role of student-student interactions in online courses should focus on student success and retention, as VCU Online is committed to align its goals with the Student Success strategic theme in the **Quest 2028 One VCU: Together We Transform Strategic Plan** Moreover, increased student-student interaction aligns with the VCU REAL initiative in promoting integrative learning experiences and project/performance-based learning.

1. Student Success

In general, student-student interaction aids in providing student feedback that bolsters faculty feedback, which is particularly important in large-enrollment courses in which faculty cannot provide sufficient individual student attention. Moreover, student interaction provides for the sharing of diverse perspectives and experiences. Online learning does not always provide spoken and visual communication cues, and students report they felt isolated and unsupported by their peers in classes that do not incorporate student to student interaction (Aversa & MacCall, 2013; Hammond & Shoemaker, 2014; Pinchbeck & Heaney, 2017). This is true for both synchronous and asynchronous online courses, as asynchronous learning should not be understood as learning that occurs completely independently; rather, interaction among students and faculty occurs asynchronously.

Recent work has indicated that student-student interaction supports increased student success across disciplines. Lee and Recker (2021) reported that students in 72 introductory math and statistics courses had better final grades in courses designed with open-ended, graded discussion boards, confirming prior research on the subject. In general, student engagement in online courses (including student-student interaction) is such a reliable predictor of student success at the course level that lack of interaction on the part of individual students can be used as an early-warning system (Shelton, Hung, & Lowenthal 2017).

2. Student Retention

In a literature review, Lee and Choi (2011) summarize studies demonstrating that increased student-student interaction supports increased student retention. More recently, Aldowah et al (2019) confirmed recent studies that decreased student-

student interaction correlates with increased dropout rates in large-enrollment formats such as MOOCs (see also Eriksson et al. 2017). Indeed, much research on MOOC and low retention rates has focused on how MOOCs struggle to create student-student interaction, a sense of community, and associate cognitive benefits, such as that found in the traditional classroom. Online courses at VCU can avoid the MOOC phenomenon by assuring that students interact with each other regardless of course enrollment.

Finally, retention rates increase when learning environments promote DEI efforts and efforts at cultural responsiveness. Culturally responsive courses rely on student dialogue, including student sharing of backgrounds and perspectives (Baron & McNeal 2021).

In general, broad research on retention rates regardless of modality emphasizes the importance of student integration in the university community (Flynn 2014), especially for historically underrepresented students (particularly in math courses; Musoba and Krichevskiy 2014).

Because student-student interaction is vital for retention in both face-to-face and online courses, a campus that offers online courses to residential, commuter, and online students should not omit student-student engagement from its courses. As the RVAviews (2022) survey indicated, potential online students would prefer to take online courses that are also available to in-person students. In such a “hybrid campus” environment, online courses should offer the same opportunities for student-student interaction that in-person students would have in face-to-face courses to ensure integration of the academic experience across modalities.

Ensuring alignment of online programs to in-person courses

Researchers and higher education stakeholders who implement online quality assurance argue that increased attention to online course quality, when compared to in-person course quality simply because of the perceived novelty of online education, is inequitable and potentially caused by the trepidation concerning online teaching implementation (Hinck et al, 2019). Other studies have found that online course quality rubrics implicitly review student supports that are external to the course (e.g. tech support, advising, student success) (Baldwin and Trespalacios 2017). Even if institutions measure online quality at the course level, program and course quality begin with online infrastructure.

Quality assurance is a process

The process for quality assurance can include faculty training, intentional design, and/or review. These are not necessary steps, but having a process is the only way to remain sustainable (Zimmerman et al 2020). A sustainable quality assurance process works better if:

- High-level administrators support the process and acknowledge success.
- Multiple stakeholders have buy-in.

- Faculty participation is not mandatory but incentive-based. (Simunich, McMahon, Hopf, Altman, Zimmerman, 2021; Altman, Shattuck, Simunich, Burch, 2020).

Many institutions align course and program quality with institutional vision statements or strategic plans. (Simunich et al 2021; Britto et al 2013). Program assessments are currently looking at the quality of the academic program, which includes a set of standards but does not consider modality.

Many institutions ensure quality at the program and course level. Individual departments align their program-level goals and objectives to best practices, accreditation standards, and institutional strategic goals. Centralized online support offices then incentivize program and faculty participation through RFPs (Britto et al 2013; Rucker et al 2015).

III. Detailed Recommendations

Recommendation 1. *Course Quality Evaluation Rubric Universally Endorsed by the Campus Community*

- The high-quality rubric will be utilized to develop new or refreshed online courses. We strongly encourage current online courses to work with VCU Online to assess the structure, engagement and clarity of the course through the high-quality rubric. Faculty should report alignment or identification of a high-quality class(es) as part of the annual evaluation process and promotion or tenure consideration.
- The recommendation is to use the new VCU Course Quality Rubric revised by the workgroup to evaluate online course quality
 - The Workgroup reviewed the [VCU Asynchronous](#) and [Synchronous Course](#) Quality Rubrics and made recommendations for changes in language and parameters to fit the needs of VCU faculty.
 - Thoughts that should be included in the definition of a high quality online course:
 - Engaging - the extent to which there is a strong mix of active learning through multiple methods that is content relevant and strengthens understanding of the material.
 - Interactive - the extent to which online learning provides the application of knowledge through meaningful activities and timely feedback.
 - Collaborative - a commitment to connecting students to create a community of learners, develop networks, and exchange ideas to strengthen knowledge on the topic and instill a sense of “community”.

"as well as clear links."

- Privacy policies were moved to a separate row in the rubric.
- More information must be provided to students when incorporating different technology tools.
 - Cost of any non-university supported tools.
 - Ensure clear instructions for using the tool.
 - Someone must explore the accessibility of each tool.
- Course Alignment
 - The workgroup recommends visuals be added to show the idea of learning content and activities aligning with assessments and module/unit/lesson objectives.
- Content and Activities
 - Examples of Direct and Indirect Learning activities were added to this section of the rubric.
 - There were extensive discussions regarding video content in the online environment. A survey of the workgroup members was conducted and the results concluded:
 - *Original Text "Course videos follow --best practice in using video for online courses, including but not limited to:"* **Revised text "video length chunked into 5-8 minute increments,..."**
 - The workgroup recommends the definition of synchronous Online Learning be discussed in depth to remove the ambiguous interpretation of the definition on the VCU website.
- Assessment and Feedback
 - **Added text "frequency TBD by instructor, internship/clinical advisor)."**
- Accessibility
 - The workgroup recommends that the University offer faculty support in making all of their course content accessible.
 - Support for captioning live Zoom sessions must be taken into consideration. Faculty need support to caption live lectures.
- Engagement
 - The workgroup recommends updates to the student Code of Conduct policy to be inclusive of students participating in online classes.
- Recommendations with regard to high quality online courses reviews
 - Review cycle

- The review should take place at the time of the online course development and when a substantive refresh of the program occurs.
- The workgroup recommends a joint review from the academic unit and VCU Online.
- Existing review cycle models at VCU
 - REAL Curriculum Committee course reviews
 - After initial review by REAL committee, programs must reapply for REAL designation every three years.
 - GECC Course Review and Assessment
 - Annual call for course proposals; review by GECC subcommittee
 - “Periodic” review of courses to ascertain if they continue to meet program objectives and retain their quality
- Accreditation program reviews or Academic Program Review <https://provost.vcu.edu/academics/acadreview/>

Recommendation 2. *Accessibility in Online Courses*

- It is the recommendation of the Workgroup that one place/department on campus be identified to manage and support faculty with developing materials that are ADA and WCAG compliant. It was stressed that faculty would like all support entities (i.e., technology, teaching, accessibility, course design, professional development, etc.) located in one place.

Recommendation 3. *Ensure online programs follow the university requirements for assessing student learning outcomes and academic program review.*

- The university policy regarding [Assessing student learning outcomes in degree or certificate programs](#) must apply regardless of program delivery.
- The university process for [Academic Program Review](#) must apply regardless of program delivery.
- It is recommended that the Provost's office shares their message with Deans, Chairs, and Faculty about the need for online course offerings, to boost the faculty's' comfort level with taking the leap to the online learning environment. Also, encourage faculty to reach out to VCU Online for support and resources explaining best practices for online program modality as distinct from residential or in-person program modality.
- The Office of the Provost and/or the VCU Assessment Council should ensure programs have adequate support for online program planning, enhancement, and self-study during program approval and review process.
- The university student evaluation system should be enhanced to include questions specific to the student experience in asynchronous online, synchronous online, and hybrid courses.

- Faculty teaching online courses will be encouraged to assess adherence to the revised online rubric each semester the course is offered. Achievement and delivery of a high-quality course should be recognized in the assessment of faculty.
- We support financial incentives for the creation of a high-quality online quality course. Additionally, non-monetary incentives should be considered for online course development and delivery.

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Online Strategy Taskforce Innovation in Teaching and Learning Workgroup Final Report

Executive Summary

Over the Spring and Summer 2022 period, the Innovation in Teaching and Learning workgroup addressed two directives:

- 1) Identify leading institutions for innovation in teaching and learning (inclusive of experiential) as hybrid universities of the future, with a specific focus on those providing important considerations for VCU.
- 2) Develop recommended strategies to expand online education infrastructure and scaling to support innovation in teaching, learning in undergraduate and graduate courses.

Following a review of the work of leading institutions, and identifying a core set of dimensions that undergird the work of those institutions as well as VCU's prior and current work in learning innovation, the workgroup developed the following **top-line recommendation**:

VCU should continue to build its internal capacity (and not outsource) to offer innovative teaching and learning opportunities in ways that are

- 1. Consistent with the institution's mission**
- 2. Learner- and learning-focused**
- 3. Equitable and accessible**

To this end, the work group identified eight detailed recommendations which are outlined in the following comprehensive report.

Recommendation 1. Without outsourcing core academic functions to online program management companies, we recommend continuing to learn from leading institutions and develop a digital learning strategic plan that is consistent with VCU's own strategic plan and that adopts and adapts the best practices of leading institutions.

Recommendation 2. We recommend going beyond traditional courses and credit-bearing programs and have mechanisms to recognize dual enrollment, prior learning, and competency based pathways.

Recommendation 3. We recommend a thorough review of the organizational structure and policy ecosystem around online and digital learning and a restructuring to best achieve overall organizational efficiency and to build internal capacity without the use of a third party, for-profit provider.

Recommendation 4. We recommend that an increase in online programming centers issues of equity, inclusion, accessibility, affordability and the needs of our diverse learners, particularly the needs of learners from marginalized populations.

Recommendation 5. We recommend the provision of comprehensive faculty support for full- and part-time faculty to develop and design high quality learning experiences in various modalities.

Recommendation 6. We recommend upgrading the Academic Technology infrastructure to provide greater support to the faculty and students.

Recommendation 7. We recommend conducting a gap analysis, designing a process for understanding viability of program adoption, and setting a transparent program approval process.

Recommendation 8. We recommend that as VCU pursues innovation in teaching and learning and growth opportunities via distance education, it also invests in related research and decision support services to support continuous improvement.

I. Workgroup Membership

Workgroup Chair(s):

- Jonathan D Becker, Associate Professor, Educational Leadership

Workgroup Members

- Colleen Bishop, Director, Academic Technologies
- Elizabeth Miles, eLearning Developer, School of Nursing
- Brianne Jackson, Associate Director of Professional Development, VCU Online
- Kim Case, Director of Faculty Success and the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence, Office of the Provost
- Singith Perera, Adjunct Professor of Creativity & Innovation VCU School of Business
- James Gahagan, Director, VCU LEAD and VCU Transform
- Erin Webster Garrett, Assistant Vice Provost for REAL
- Jan Altman, Executive Director of IExcel Education

II. Introduction and Overview

The Innovation in Teaching and Learning workgroup was charged as follows:

Charge:

Identify leading institutions for innovation in teaching and learning (inclusive of experiential) as hybrid universities of the future, specifically providing important considerations for VCU. Develop recommended strategies to expand online education infrastructure and scaling to support innovation in teaching, learning in undergraduate and graduate courses.

This report responds to those two charges, and starts with a foundational recommendation that VCU must clearly articulate its purpose for investing resources into high quality innovative teaching and learning practices. One way to think about this is through the concept of institutional logics, a core concept from the fields of sociology and organizational studies.

Friedland and Alford (1991) stated that institutional logics are the “organizing principles” that organizations use to guide decisions within a particular area (p. 248). These organizing principles crystallize at certain periods of time in ways that both enable certain kinds of actions while also constraining the set of options available to an institution or organization. Logics enable individuals and organizations to make sense of environmental ambiguities by prescribing actions that reenact institutional logics and make them durable. Rigby (2014) has argued that within institutions, there is a

generally accepted and practiced set of beliefs called the “prevailing logic.” Similarly, Bastedo (2009) says that institutional logics become “convergent” when they gain legitimacy among different types of actors within a field or an organization.

This workgroup recommends that the logic that prevails around the growth of distance education is the same prevailing logic of the institution as a whole. Specifically, [VCU's mission statement](#) holds that we are “dedicated to the success and well-being of our students... through... Real-world learning that furthers civic engagement, inquiry, discovery and innovation...” and through “[d]eeply ingrained core values of diversity, inclusion and equity that provide a safe, trusting and supportive environment to explore, create, learn and serve.”

Based on a review of the work of leading institutions and identifying a core set of dimensions that undergird the work of those institutions as well as VCU’s prior and current work in learning innovation, we have developed the following **top-line recommendation**:

VCU should continue to build its internal capacity (and not outsource) to offer innovative teaching and learning opportunities in ways that are

- 1. Consistent with the institution’s mission**
- 2. Learner- and learning-focused**
- 3. Equitable and accessible**

III. Detailed Recommendations

Recommendation 1. Without outsourcing core academic functions to online program management companies, we recommend continuing to learn from leading institutions and develop a digital learning strategic plan that is consistent with VCU’s own strategic plan and that adopts and adapts the best practices of leading institutions.

More specifically, VCU should:

1. Ensure a values-driven, mission focused goal: Connecting current operations to a specific challenge or set of challenges for which online education provides a solution; ensuring that the investment directly aligns with supporting the access and opportunity mission of an institution.
2. Adopt technology aligned strategies: Engaging in a global vision of technology solutions including ongoing engagement and robust communication strategies between partnering units responsible for aspects of the enterprise.
3. Holistic approach: Understanding online in the context of the overall educational ecosystem with implications for physical space, faculty development and governance, DEI, and learner engagement.

The VCU administration identified three leading institutions to whom we could listen and from whom we could learn what it looks like to achieve innovation in teaching and learning at scale. Those three institutions are: Arizona State University (ASU), the

University of Central Florida (UCF), and Old Dominion University (ODU). The Online Strategy Task Force had the opportunity to engage with leaders at those institutions through listening sessions. The Innovation in Teaching and Learning Workgroup reviewed the information from those sessions and delved a bit more into what we can learn from those institutions. From that review, a thematic analysis yielded the specific recommendations above.

We also add that those leading institutions largely grew their capacity without the use of online program management (OPM) companies. And, we note institutions like the University of Florida, [who started working with an OPM and then canceled the contract](#), are now thriving in the online learning space. According to the most recent U.S. News & World Report rankings, they are the #1 provider of online bachelor's degrees.

We recognize that many of the recommendations below have financial costs attached to them. And, that is the allure of an OPM; they advance capital upfront on the promise of a percentage (often a significant percentage) of revenue from tuition they helped to generate. If there are organizational trends to follow in this space, however, we should look to two recent major announcements of university systems that chose not to outsource online program management companies and instead chose to develop their own "in-house OPMs." Both [the University of North Carolina system](#) and [the City University of New York](#) recently announced the use of pandemic relief funds to take this internal capacity-building approach. Though we do not recommend scaling up by purchasing a for-profit entity like Purdue University did with the purchase of Kaplan U., we note that Purdue has managed to keep tuition flat for over a decade in part by finding savings "[from a couple of big things, and lots of little things](#)" including moving on from outmoded systems such as landlines and printers. We believe that if VCU is to prioritize the growth of online learning, the initial costs can be found and generated internally through the use of, say, relief funds and administrative efficiencies.

It is also worth noting that [the OPM ecosystem is changing rapidly](#). Amidst this diversification of companies offering services around online learning is the growth of fee-for-service companies that offer specific services and not just the full package of services that OPMs offered in their early days. There may be some value in VCU contracting with providers who can meet immediate needs in areas such as, say, marketing and market research. Per [a report on OPMs from The Century Foundation](#):

A school that does not want its programs to develop the predatory behaviors that often emerge at for-profit colleges should insist on contracts that prohibit changes to pricing, recruiting, or admissions standards based on enrollment actuals or projections, or on the fiscal performance of the program. Contracting for short-term, specific, discrete services instead of for a long-term, all-in-one program manager is an excellent way to curtail a college's inadvertent complicity in such behaviors.

Marketing and market research are examples of the sorts of discrete services that are more palatable as contracted services. Core academic activities such as instructional design should be the province of the institution and its faculty.

Recommendation 2. We recommend going beyond traditional courses and credit-bearing programs and have mechanisms to recognize dual enrollment, prior learning, and competency based pathways.

More specifically, VCU should:

1. Explore programs that provide online pathways for new students to access VCU so as to streamline their enrollment and eventual degree seeking path.
2. Partner with the VCU School of Education and local and regional school divisions to create online dual enrollment programs that make higher education ultimately more attainable and accessible to high school students across the Commonwealth.
3. Explore consortia and other ways to partner with other institutions of higher education in Virginia to make degree seeking less institution-specific and to afford citizens of the Commonwealth to complete courses and programs outside of what any one institution can provide.
4. Consider offering online competency-based programs that reward students for prior learning and that break outside the constraints of seat time requirements. These might include those within VCU that need scheduling alternatives and those external consumers such as military students who may relocate periodically and need an option that gets them closer to degree completion.

In our exploration of lighthouse institutions and practices, we noted programs like the University of Illinois-Chicago's (Quest Peer) [Online Pathways Program](#) and George Mason University's [Online Minors Program](#). According to the UIC website, "Online Pathways offers General Education courses across a broad spectrum of disciplines, allowing students to take the path toward completing a college degree - at UIC or elsewhere." Furthermore, "Taking Online Pathways classes at UIC allows you to satisfy prerequisites, apply for admission, and seamlessly transition to one of UIC's Online Degree Completion Programs. The GMU Online Minors programs gives students an opportunity to use the flexibility of online learning to explore areas of interest beyond their major. For example, the online business minor is for non-business majors who might want to learn basic business principles to complement their major.

As is the case with educational technology writ large, most of the variance in online learning practice is within institutions instead of between institutions. That is, there are pockets of innovation in teaching and learning across the country and the globe that can be identified and documented. Therefore, in addition to the leading institutions documented above, we identified a set of innovations that are worthy of VCU's consideration.

- **Online dual enrollment.** Dual enrollment programs make higher education more accessible and more affordable for students. [The University of Kentucky's Next Generation Leadership Dual Enrollment Program](#) leverages distance learning technologies and a Deeper Learning Framework. VCU should tap into the connections of the VCU School of Education and work with local and regional school divisions to create online dual enrollment programs that make higher education

ultimately more attainable and accessible to high school students across the Commonwealth.

- **Online course/program consortia.** The Commonwealth of Virginia does not have a system of higher education and the result is standalone institutions of higher education competing for students, particularly in-state students. This lack of a system could hurt the citizens of the Commonwealth vis-a-vis distance learning. That is, to get a degree, students in Virginia are essentially confined to whatever is offered at any one institution. Consortial arrangements and partnerships between universities in Virginia could be a tremendous asset. Rather than playing a zero-sum game, institutions could come together to make it easier for more residents to start and/or complete degree programs. There are a number of models for these kinds of arrangements, including the [CIC Online Course Sharing Consortium \(CIC-OCSC\)](#) for undergraduate students and [NEXus](#) for doctoral nursing education.
- **Competency-based education.** According to Educause, [competency-based education](#) “allows students to advance based on their ability to master a skill or competency at their own pace regardless of environment. This method is tailored to meet different learning abilities and can lead to more efficient student outcomes.”

Recommendation 3. We recommend a thorough review of the organizational structure and policy ecosystem around online and digital learning and a restructuring to best achieve overall organizational efficiency and to build internal capacity without the use of a third party, for-profit provider.

More specifically, VCU should:

1. Re-imagine the existing organizational structure to best achieve efficiency and transparency to the community. We strongly recommend phasing into a new structure with faculty development aligning under one umbrella division within faculty affairs. We strongly advise against reducing staffing; in fact, we recommend expanding staffing within VCU rather than outsource to an OPM.
2. Continue to build internal capacity by taking stock of the existing instructional design talent across the university, figure out how to best take advantage of that collection of talent, and hire instructional technologists and instructional designers to fill in any existing gaps to support faculty and students.
3. Ensure that student support services (advising, tutoring, writing, etc.) are staffed to meet expanding diverse needs and resourced to support any fully online enrollment increases.
4. Draft a comprehensive distance learning-focused policy that covers important areas including, but not limited to:
 - a. Quality assurance
 - b. Intellectual property
 - c. Funding
 - d. Faculty composition
 - e. Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)

Based on our review of leading institutions and the collective experience of those in this working group, VCU is not currently organized or staffed well enough to effectively scale up innovative teaching and learning opportunities. The organizational structure is too confusing and inefficient. Consider the modal faculty member at VCU who wants to transition a face-to-face course to an online course. Do they approach VCU Online? ALT Lab? CTLE? Libraries? Academic Technologies? The answer might depend on if they are looking for pedagogical tips or technological tips or both. But, the answer should be clear and a more streamlined organizational structure would help. We recommend a restructuring to best achieve overall organizational efficiency.

Organizational efficiency does not, however, mean we need a leaner organization. Leading institutions like Old Dominion University have large organizations staffed comprehensively to support faculty members. For example, for faculty who want to teach using HyFlex or Simulcast methods, there is a dedicated support person in the classroom with that faculty member. Also, VCU has hired a number of instructional designers in recent years. That is good progress, but we also need instructional technologists to work with faculty members in the classrooms and course builders who do the work of building out well-designed, programmatically coherent course sites in Canvas. We need more personnel devoted to faculty development, relevant to current ALT Lab and CTLE units, and more creative video designers.

VCU would be well-served to streamline and grow the existing capacity and talent of VCU Online and ALT Lab to a more fully-faceted unit that is integrated into the university so that we can become the Hybrid University or the University of the Future, as Dr. Sotiropoulos recently put it. This integration means staffing up and adding financial support to auxiliary units to support online student success. Fully online students need access to offices such as the Campus Learning Center, the Writing Center, the Career Center, Counseling Services, etc.

Those offices are currently strong and we do not want to recreate the wheel and start separate student support units just for online learners; instead we should build on their strengths.

A distance learning-specific policy should be crafted as well. Here in Virginia, [Virginia Tech has such a policy](#), as does [George Mason University](#). Such a policy would define important terms around distance learning, point to other related policies (including the intellectual property policy, for example), and codify important processes and protocols around distance learning.

Recommendation 4. We recommend that an increase in online programming centers issues of equity, inclusion, accessibility, affordability and the needs of our diverse learners, particularly the needs of learners from marginalized populations.

More specifically, VCU should:

1. Develop flexible online/hybrid/hyflex programming that better meets the needs of our increasingly diverse population of learners and an increasingly diverse group of potential learners.

2. Offer tuition for fully online out-of-state students at the same level as fully online in-state students.
3. Charge tuition and fees for fully online students that are no higher than they are for face-to-face in-state students.
4. Continue and expand on efforts of VCU Libraries to help faculty create and implement open educational resources (OER) so as to keep the cost of books and learning materials as low as possible.
5. Ensure that online/hybrid/hyflex programming is developed to align with national accessibility standards and tools needed to ensure compliance (such as captioning services) be supported and funded at a university level.
6. Encourage participation in professional development to faculty, staff, and administration to understand current legislation surrounding accessibility in online courses and to promote greater understanding of principles of inclusive learning for an increasingly diverse population.
7. Create a department focused on online accessibility that would be staffed with the appropriate personnel who are knowledgeable in accessibility and can assist faculty in accessing services such as closed captioning, document conversion and other necessary accommodations.

VCU's mission to serve as a model for the core values of diversity, equity and inclusion lends itself perfectly to the expansion of online offerings. As more and more non-traditional students enter the realm of higher education, VCU needs to consider that many of these students prefer online learning or are unable to attend traditional on-campus courses. There are a growing range of situations that make online learning attractive to diverse students, such as having work hours or childcare responsibilities that would conflict with full-time on-campus attendance, students needing accommodations to complete their degrees away from campus, and a multitude of health concerns and inequities that have been revealed by the pandemic. Students need flexibility, and online and hybrid courses can broaden the options. According to the BCG report, "the most successful institutions have developed a portfolio of digital delivery models tailored to the particular needs of different student populations."

Presently, SAEO, Student Accessibility and Educational Opportunity, offers accessibility and accommodation support for students on the VCU campus, however, does not provide any faculty facing services. If faculty are in need of assistance in making course content accessible or having video close-captioned, there is no office that is designated as a place to get this assistance. While VCU Online and VCU Libraries offer training in this area, there is no assistance in using technologies to convert course content to an accessible format (such as captioning service or pdf conversion tools) nor has the university adopted such technologies at a university level that faculty can utilize. paragraph about accessibility. If VCU wishes to remain compliant with current ADA regulations, such a department needs to be created to assist faculty.

Recommendation 5. We recommend the provision of comprehensive faculty support for full- and part-time faculty to develop and design high quality learning experiences in various modalities.

More specifically, VCU should:

1. Restructure to consolidate faculty development across modalities under one unit.
2. Evaluate and then address gaps in terms of VCU faculty development staffing in CTLE and VCU Online instructional designers by comparison to peer and aspirational peer institutions as well as research institutions with a similar FTE faculty. These staffing gaps are directly predictive of faculty success, and therefore student success.
3. We strongly urge VCU to focus on hiring staff to support faculty development rather than outsourcing to an OPM.
4. Establish a target % of courses that will be taught by full-time faculty for any fully online programs. Things to consider include accreditation standards, avoidance of exploitation of part-time instructors, positive impact of incorporating part-time professors of practice, etc.
5. *(If faculty will be required to complete training to teach online)*, establish a teaching development requirement across all modalities for all teaching faculty. Treating all courses the same, regardless of delivery modality, sends a clear signal that all teaching can be enhanced via development and that VCU values student success in all courses.
6. Provide a clear articulation of who has ownership over course materials and under what conditions. This faculty concern may be reduced if there is a clear policy in place. What happens to ownership when a faculty member is compensated with funds or course release? What about when an online course is developed with staff support? What about when developed independently?

The university's current priorities related to increasing online programs and course, hybrid course offerings, providing students with options of coming to class in person or taking advantage of synchronous streaming (HyFlex), and delivering in high quality in-person courses all connect back to broader questions about how best to design the VCU faculty development infrastructure for maximum success in teaching and learning. The current faculty development organization presents challenges to exceptional teaching and learning experiences across modalities. There are several units providing various forms of faculty development (CTLE, Academic Technologies including the Learning Systems department, ALT Lab, VCU Online, VCU libraries and individuals within units). This causes confusion among the faculty, among academic leadership (e.g., chairs, deans), and even among the units striving to provide quality support to the faculty. The current separation of faculty development support across many units needs a new and innovative organizational structure approach.

Universities strategizing to expand their online offerings sometimes struggle to carefully plan for the faculty staffing needs necessary for exceptional teaching. Core decisions related to whether new faculty lines will be created to expand unit capacity to offer online courses with instructions by full-time faculty will be crucial to program cohesion and student success. When students have access to full-time faculty, they

have deeper access to the hidden curriculum, gain from broader connections to VCU at large, and are more likely to benefit from developing a sense of belonging. The adjunct professoriate includes dedicated instructors, yet part-time faculty experiences range from deep connection to an institution all the way to unfortunate disconnection from the university community. In contrast to previously popular approaches to online programs, an emphasis on full-time faculty involvement is key to student success. VCU may consider naming a target percentage of courses taught by full-time faculty for each online program.

Recommendation 6. We recommend upgrading the Academic Technology infrastructure to provide greater support to the faculty and students.

More specifically, VCU should:

1. Maintain a structured collaboration committee of pedagogical and technical professionals to implement an innovative educational framework that is sustainable, scalable, and sanctioned by VCU administration. The framework should be consistent, but also incorporate some variants that can be adapted to a spectrum of implementation conditions and learning preferences. (i.e. "one size does not fit all")
2. Consistently and proactively analyze the usage of the [instructional tools integrated in Canvas](#) and develop a budget stream specifically for newly required ones approved by VCU Online. (ex. Hypothes.is, H5P, Cidi Labs, Packback and MATLAB, which have a fee-based Canvas LTI)
3. Dedicate resources for development of academic tool integrations. Some built-in functions of Canvas and Canvas Catalog are fairly limited without purchasing a third-party tool or custom development (API) including Taskstream, EAB Navigate, Banner and other large university systems.
4. Restrict/prohibit course-level implementation of Canvas tool integrations, both free and fee-based. Third party tools implemented system wide by the Academic Technologies unit are reviewed by [VCU IT Governance](#) which includes accessibility and security reviews. Tools implemented at the course level by a course developer are not reviewed.
5. Enhance the faculty and student just-in-time support of Canvas & communication with guides, videos, tips and other resources embedded in the system.
6. Require that all courses (not just online) utilize VCU's supported Learning Management System, Canvas. Without this requirement, it ultimately creates challenges for supporting a unified solution from a support staff perspective, learning to use the tool and delivering content from a faculty perspective, and for students oftentimes a consistency issue arises when multiple LMSes are utilized or when content is not delivered consistently even through one LMS.
7. Create a software management team with dedicated roles and functions to oversee and guide ALL software purchasing, establish clear goals and objectives that create value for the VCU community, serve to help achieve and maintain compliance with established policies/statutes, and assist the VCU community with the entire software asset management lifecycle from start to finish.

8. Require all VCU schools to establish computer/laptop device specifications and other objective criteria such as compatibility to specific software used on a departmental/program level ([examples of this already occurring are in the Schools: Arts, Engineering, Pharmacy and Medicine](#)).
9. Evaluate all VCU classrooms and meeting spaces to determine if they meet the university's standard for hybrid and HyFlex capabilities, and what it would take in time, cost, and resources to bring those classrooms outside the standard requirements into conformance. The following program details a pathway to Hyflex standardization at VCU.
10. Centralization of system and service standards is the key to increasing quality, efficiency, and customer satisfaction. VCU Academic Technologies recommends the creation of a Policies and Procedures document to detail centralized standards for user and system support services provided to centrally managed learning spaces classified as "classrooms" at VCU. The goal of these Policies and Procedures is a centrally managed standard for classroom types and requirements, support services and providers, and the relationships between support providers and stakeholders. The output of this process is to improve the overall quality of classrooms and their management and support, and the collection of data on the status and condition of centrally managed classrooms.

VCU's Academic Technology Infrastructure faces the growing challenge of providing robust yet flexible centralized solutions that are well-supported with adequate resources. Though there is a portfolio of centrally-supported academic tools available, there are oftentimes duplicative and/or niche academic tools adopted campus-wide. The adoption of these tools is difficult to track and monitor in the absence of a centralized software procurement process.

The rise of free-to-use and open source tools, while exciting in the opportunities they present for access and innovation, come with associated support challenges. Given their sheer number the resources required to review all free-to-use plugins and integrations are significant, and oftentimes requires support from groups with accessibility and security expertise. In some cases, tools are lacking the appropriate accessibility and security functionality which has implications for VCU's academic environment as a whole, creating vulnerabilities and barriers within the learning experience itself. When tools are adopted outside of the support scope of Academic Technology groups, this requires faculty and staff to learn and provide support for the tool on their own which is inherently limited. In turn, students experience the inherent inconsistency of an environment without clearly established tools-of-use and support mechanisms for these tools should they experience issues related to tool performance or user error.

Currently, VCU has no formalized (or policy-driven) and centrally-managed standard for software management. There are individual processes, policies, and procedures that have been developed and maintained by individual units within Technology Services, many of which interface directly with VCU Procurement and Contracts, but otherwise do not flow through a single point of accountability for ensuring software is managed

according to a defined set of software asset management standards and processes. This presents a major challenge to individual units both within and outside of Technology Services who look for both guidance and direct assistance with discovery, evaluation, solicitation, procurement, implementation, support and training, and retirement/replacement of software on an on-going basis.

VCU Academic Technologies supports and maintains the centrally managed classrooms utilizing a standard set of system designs, capabilities, and equipment to provide a consistent user experience across all classrooms and sustainable support. As the need for HyFlex classroom capabilities has increased, so has the need for standardization of those capabilities. In order to better serve the users of VCU learning spaces, VCU needs to develop standards for the HyFlex high-tech classroom of the future in both central and non-centrally managed spaces.

Recommendation 7. We recommend conducting a gap analysis, designing a process for understanding viability of program adoption, and setting a transparent program approval process.

More specifically, VCU should:

1. Identify all possible demand drivers, both external and internal, through an analysis of the gaps in services/programs desired but not met in our area.
2. Determine what new demand forecast channels are needed, what capabilities should a channel possess to highlight the demand for a program as well as a policy for the measuring and monitoring channel efficacy.
3. Develop a process for checking viability of a demand and approval process for onboarding programs, setting a transparent approval process and criteria that are driven by policy. Evaluate the current list of key stakeholders in checking viability and approving the programs and deciding if any new stakeholder engagement is needed.
4. Outline the requirement of infrastructure for an approved program, the efficacy of the program with current infrastructure and what gaps need to be checked.
5. Set mechanism for periodic audits of programs to identify technology needs, industry trends, changes in technology and finance allocations for continuous upgrades.
6. Solidify a process to match design with diverse student & faculty experience requirements.
7. Determine the point of financial feasibility of adopting a program, channels of promoting, personnel required for marketing and required expertise and skills gap.
8. Keep abreast of technology changes, monitor user engagement of technologies, types of tech support requested and glitches over period. Take the learnings to refine the product and process.

Before moving forward with any additional major online program initiatives, VCU must determine the process by which is most prudent to launch fully online degrees in

alignment with VCU overall goals to become a Hybrid University. VCU needs to develop a comprehensive plan by which program viability is determined and the process for deciding which new online programs and courses should be developed and which online programs and courses that are currently offered face to face should be moved to an online or blended modality.

Recommendation 8. We recommend that as VCU pursues innovation in teaching and learning and growth opportunities via distance education, it also invests in related research and decision support services to support continuous improvement.

More specifically, VCU should:

1. Establish formal relationships between VCU Online, Institutional Research and Decision Support (IRDS) and VCU faculty with research expertise to establish protocols for the conduct of research and evaluation around problems of practice in digital learning and distance education at VCU for diverse learners and teachers.
2. Establish protocols for regularly assessing, among other things:
 - a. VCU student demand for courses in various modalities, including needs of our neurodiverse and disabled learners and students from various marginalized populations
 - b. Student success in courses disaggregated by course modality
 - c. Faculty and student perceptions of teaching and learning online (see other work group reports)
 - d. Which students are choosing which course modalities and why
3. Explore the affordances (and constraints) of learning analytics for continuous improvement and innovation in teaching and learning.
4. Establish protocols for sharing data, information and reports with faculty and units including the Center for Teaching and Learning Effectiveness (CTLE) so that interventions that address any challenges and opportunities yielded by the research and evaluation can be put into practice. Decisions about teaching- and learning-related improvements must, though, respect shared governance at VCU.
5. Create an internal grant competition for VCU faculty to propose to do Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) projects around digital and fully online learning that also centers DEI.

One of the lighthouse institutions that this Task Force and Work Group has learned from is the University of Central Florida (UCF). One of the reasons UCF has been so successful and a forerunner in this space is their commitment to internal research and evaluation. If VCU is to be successful as an institution committed to distance and hybrid learning, we should borrow ideas from the [UCF Research Initiative on Teaching Effectiveness](#) and their [Distributed Learning Impact Evaluation](#). That is, VCU should commit itself to taking advantage of data already collected in a variety of ways as well as the scholarly expertise of faculty, staff, and administrators at VCU for data-driven and DEI-informed improvement in teaching and learning.

Possible areas of inquiry and support would include, but not be limited to:

- Evaluation research across teaching modalities
- Learning analytics
- Institutional decision support (student, faculty, staff surveys)
- Naturalistic research on the VCU online student experience, including [phenomenological research](#)

There is no shortage of research expertise at VCU and the Office of Institutional Research and Decision Support is primed to provide the data and analytics expertise in that office so that VCU can build the internal capacity to make evidence-based decisions about distance learning.

IV. Conclusion

Per the charge to the group, the Innovation in Teaching and Learning Workgroup reviewed the work of leading institutions and identified a core set of dimensions that undergird the work of those institutions as well as VCU's prior and current work in learning innovation. As a result, the workgroup developed the following **top-line recommendation**:

VCU should continue to build its internal capacity (and not outsource) to offer innovative teaching and learning opportunities in ways that are

- 4. Consistent with the institution's mission**
- 5. Learner- and learning-focused**
- 6. Equitable and accessible**

The report includes eight recommendations with detailed sub-recommendations. Those recommendations can be summarized as ultimately recommending an approach to online learning that:

- Prioritizes restructuring and infrastructure development to achieve overall organizational efficiency and internal capacity
- Limits or eliminates relationships with Online Program Management companies (OPMs)
- Focuses on the needs of today's faculty and of tomorrow's diverse learners
- Leverages existing Academic Affairs protocols and develops new processes for identifying and prioritizing new online program adoption and ensuring transparent curricular approval
- Uses an assessment protocol with quantitative and qualitative measures to support continuous improvement.

We thank the Provost's Office for giving us the opportunity to engage in this work.

Online Strategy Taskforce Marketable Online Credentials Workgroup Final Report

I. Workgroup Membership

Workgroup Chair(s):

- Tracey Gendron
- Dan Bullard

Workgroup Members

- Micheala Bearden
- Kevin Best
- Stevara Haley Clark
- Joshua Cole
- Jodie Ferguson
- Marcus Messner
- Peter Nguyen
- Aimee Walters
- Andrew Arroyo
- Edward Howard

II. Introduction and Overview

Charge 1. Understand the landscape of VCU marketable online credential opportunities

A survey of academic units at VCU in 2021 identified a small number of for-credit micro-credentials currently offered at VCU. Of the four programs identified, three are certified by external agencies, and one badge is issued by VCU but oversight remains with the Capital CoLAB. To date, there are no micro-credentials that are fully developed and operated by VCU.

**Student Status: N=non-degree-seeking, U=undergraduate, G=graduate					
Name	Student Status **	Certification	Certifying Agency	Administering Unit	Active Status
Change Management	G	✓	ExperiencePoint /IDEO	daVinci Center	✓
Design Thinking (2)	U, G	✓	ExperiencePoint /IDEO	daVinci Center	✓
River Studies and Leadership Certificate	U,G		River Management Society	VCU Life Sciences	✓

Generalist Digital Technology Credential – Capital CoLAB go.vcu.edu/cs-fundamentals https://egr.vcu.edu/departments/computer/academics/undergraduate/cs-fundamentals/	U,N	Generalist	College of Engineering	VCU Continuing and Professional Education	✓
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Charge 2. Develop recommended strategies (inclusive of infrastructure) to increase and accelerate the development of marketable online credentials (i.e., degrees certificates, micro-credentials) that engage employers, meet future workforce needs (e.g. competencies), are attractive to new and existing student markets

The workgroup focused on the following focal areas:

1. Infrastructure for one-stop public-facing site

This will include the need for maintenance of the site, review of inactive programs for closure, registration systems. Currently, the noncredit micro-credentials are located on the Credly university page with the VCU badge collections <https://www.credly.com/organizations/virginia-commonwealth-university/collections> and badging FAQ on the VCU Continuing and Professional Education website: <https://ocpe.vcu.edu/badges>; view the [sliddeck](#) from a recent community series.

2. Need for targeted marketing and branding
3. Critical questions and potential barriers for further discussion

As well, the committee identified critical questions that may pose potential barriers including

- an application fee for non-degree-seeking students
- out-of-state tuition for online-only programs.
- All non-degree-seeking students taking graduate-level courses are assigned to the College of Humanities and Sciences. This results in some of the tuition revenue being allocated to CHS even if the student takes a course taught by an instructor in another School/College

- Will we offer/market one larger micro-credential program to students with credit and noncredit offerings being part of this? Alternatively, will we have separate programs- micro-credentials (credit-bearing) and digital badges (noncredit bearing)? The key will be to not confuse our potential customers.
- Focus on Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) or transferability of credentials, so they will stack with credit-bearing programs,
- Discuss incentives for faculty for the development of micro-credentials/ how development/treating of these courses will impact faculty workload and/or compensation.

Charge 3. Understand and build on the previous VCU work on micro-credentials. Develop recommended strategies for quality control, approval and enterprise support (responsibility and accountability), infrastructure, and the ability for micro-credentials being transcribed.

The committee revisited the recommended strategies developed by the previous workgroup efforts completed in 2020 which can be located in the [Academic Affairs Handbook](#) and include:

- The development of working definitions of micro-credentials,
- Guiding principles for micro-credentials,
- A determination for allowable credit limits for micro-credentials.

The workgroup used this foundation work to develop recommendations inclusive of the following:

- developing a shared governance university-level review and approval process for micro-credentials
- a university-level measurement and tracking system for-credit microcredentials,
- developing a one-stop public-facing site for credit-inclusive and noncredit micro- credentials

III. Detailed Recommendations

Recommendation 1. Designate an office for oversight (i.e., Office of Micro-credentials).

The committee recommends the designation of a central unit that provides comprehensive services for proposing, developing, and implementing credit- and non-credit micro-credential programs. The Office will coordinate/interface with the Office of Continuing and Professional Education, VCU online and with existing Continuing Education programs/initiatives in Schools/Colleges/Units. The Office will develop and maintain the website and serve as the central marketing unit. The Micro-Credential office will be responsible for coordinating with appropriate units (e.g., schools/colleges;

academic affairs; VCU Graduate School; SEMSS) to develop a measuring and tracking system for credit-inclusive micro-credentials including:

- Types of earners (e.g., degree-seeking, non-degree-seeking)
- Completion rate (i.e., starters vs. finishers)
- Badge productivity (e.g., number of earners during a specified period of time)

Recommendation 2. Infrastructure for University-Level Review and Approval of Micro-credentials

The development of unit-level processes for pre-checks for compliance and School/College approval will be critical. University-level approval pathways that rapidly evaluate (within 1-2 months following the submission of a proposal) the quality of micro-credential proposals will need to be implemented. The work group recommends the development of a representative committee to provide oversight for the approval flow and process, with additional responsibilities to review existing micro-credentials to ensure non-duplication across the institution. The Council of Members for Continuing and Professional Education committee was suggested as one possible group that could be involved in the review and approval of micro-credentials.

Recommendation 3. Development of One-Stop Public Facing Website

The creation of a one-stop website will be critical to the organization, marketing and processing of micro-credentials. The website will need to detail the types of microcredentials available including the level, eligibility, credit/noncredit and instruction method. Resources for website infrastructure will include the need for site maintenance, review of programs and registration systems. The committee recommends examining the [University Of Buffalo Office of Micro- Credentials](#) as an exemplar.

Recommendation 4. Faculty Support

The development of a guiding document that provides clear definitions and processes on how faculty can create a micro-credential will be necessary. The guiding document will include how to leverage an existing for-credit course, bundle for-credit courses, and develop an application and acceptance rubric. The supporting documentation can build upon the definitions in the [Academic Affairs Handbook](#), which include:

- *The development of working definitions of micro-credentials,*
- *Guiding principles for micro-credentials,*
- *A determination for allowable credit limits for micro-credentials.*

Recommendation 5. Targeted Market-Based Programs

A targeted approach to marketing will be necessary. Marketing strategies should be undertaken that specifically target segmented markets, including a) Pipeline to

undergraduate programs (e.g., dual-enrollment in HS, job skills to a degree), b) Pipeline to graduate programs (e.g., undergrad stackable to graduate programs), and c) Standalone credentials (e.g., specific skills and credentials). The committee also recommends seeking an enhanced understanding of how micro-credentials are valued by employers.

Detailed Marketing Considerations and Guidelines

Stage 1 (Strategic foundation)

Develop a comprehensive business plan that details;

- *Desired success outcomes*
- *Prioritize opportunity academic programs to offer and promote*
- *Enrollment goals*
- *Competitive tuition pricing*
- *The funnel infrastructure that guides messaging as prospects navigate through coursework and credential completion*
- *Prioritize strategy for aggressively marketing or passively messaging microcredential program*
- *Determine marketing/recruitment costs and central funding source(s)*

Stage 2 (Clearly articulate and inform)

Education will be key in marketing to prospective students. Due to the recent designation of micro-credentials, prospective students may not know what a microcredential is or that a microcredential is the product they need to meet their needs. A robust and user-friendly website is key. Providing clear, contemporary, user-friendly messaging on the website – both in desktop format and smartphone formats - needs to provide detailed information and guide the prospective student into the recruiting funnel. In making budgeting decisions, it is recommended that the website and communications budgets are well resourced.

Since students may not know what label of programming they need to meet their needs, we should take as much of the guess-work burden off their shoulders. Thus, in addition to a well-crafted website, we recommend sourcing a vendor to manage a sophisticated search tool for the website. This search could take into consideration the prospective student's inputs (e.g., time commitment, prereqs/admission process, trialability) and desired outcomes (e.g, credit-bearing, stackability, badges, online/in-person, etc) to find the microcredential for that student. One way this initiative could work would be a multi-question quiz that walks the student through attributes/benefits they are looking for and then at the end of the quiz, a list of microcredential options with links to learn more about those microcredentials.

An informative promotional campaign in which descriptive information about microcredentials could be helpful to educate prospective students.

SUNY "Find a Microcredential":

<https://www.suny.edu/microcredentials/microlist/>

Stage 3 (Identifying and reaching our prospects)

Micro-credential learners have unique and varied learning needs. They lead complex lives and the thought of adding something else to their plate can be paralyzing. In viewing VCU as a solution for their learning aspirations, we must address issues of the heart (overcoming barriers/obstacles) before we can influence the mind (sharing the benefits of pursuing microcredentials at VCU. They must view VCU as a place that gets them and understands their

realities. We must be an option that has abundant programs, resources and support to help them move on to the next level of their learning path.

Strategic and tactical priorities;

- *Identify primary geo targeted audiences and territories for messaging (prioritize alumni and VCU staff as key prospect audiences)*
- *Efficiently drive prospect engagement, applications and conversion*
- *Leverage proven media platforms and first party data to drive responsiveness*

Stage 4 (Creating recognition and nomenclature)

Create an overarching name to describe all non-degree options available at VCU. Build off of Continuing and Professional Education's efforts to unify all digital badges, certificates, CEU, as microcredentials, by choosing a name that all communication would follow. The name could simply be "Micro-credentials" (see LSU MicroCreds website for example), or the name could be something tangentially related or descriptive (such as playing off our mascot Rodney and/or brand colors). This new nomenclature would be featured on all communication to create consistency, reduce uncertainty for the prospective student, and create a foundation for all future marketing efforts.

Within the overarching brand, there might be published categories that clearly designate credit-bearing, non-credit bearing, time to complete, stackability, prerequisites/admission process, etc.

Example in Practice:

Louisiana State University's "MicroCreds" initiative:

https://online.lsu.edu/lsu-microcred-programs-gp/?utm_source=youtube&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=microcred

Stage 5 (Embrace the funnel)

Develop a communication plan that uses the marketing funnel as the messaging blueprint for pushing and pulling prospective and existing students through the micro-credential process through completion. Then, rinse and repeat!

- *Prospects | engage them*
- *Recruiting | convert them to applicants*
- *Admissions | welcome them, encourage them and create excitement*
- *Enrollment | feed their need for information, guidance and resource support*
- *Sustained | remind them of upcoming deadlines and next steps for continuing their microcredential journey*
- *Program Completion | congratulate them and begin retention message for continued learning opportunities*

Stage 6 (Retention)

Capture and share reliable data on prospects and students that provide insights on who is engaged and how those interactions take place. Maintain accountability by continually monitoring and reporting on how the microcredential line of business supports our Quest priorities.

Recommendation 6- Additional Items for Consideration

1. *Graduate credit-inclusive micro-credentials should have a minimum of 6 credits and a maximum of 11 credits. The range for undergraduate credit-inclusive micro-credentials should be 1-8 credits.*
2. *Credit-inclusive micro-credentials can require the completion of additional co-curricular activities.*
3. *Students can receive a notation on their transcript after completing all the requirements for a credit-inclusive micro-credential.*
4. *Students should also receive a digital badge for completing a credit-inclusive micro-credential.*
5. *Students will not automatically receive a notation on their transcript and a digital badge for a credit-inclusive micro-credential if the work required for completion is built into the curriculum of a certificate, masters, or doctoral program. Students enrolled in one of these programs will need to request that a notation and digital badge be granted to them following completion and documentation of the requirements.*
6. *Faculty, academic units, and administrative units (e.g Office of Institutional Equity, Effectiveness, and Success) will be responsible for developing credit-inclusive micro-credential program proposals. Faculty and academic units must obtain approval from their School/College leadership before submitting a proposal.*
7. *The credit-inclusive microcredential program director or program committee will make admissions decisions.*

Online Strategy Taskforce

Student and Faculty Experience Workgroup Final Report

I. Workgroup Membership

Workgroup Chair(s):

- Karla Mossi
- Ian Kunkes
- Michael Forder
- Maggie Tolan

Workgroup Members

- Natalie Barr
- Peyton Burgess
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- Michael Forder
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- Hope Kelly
- Monal Patel
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- Maggie Tolan
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- Shuchi Jain

II. Introduction and Overview

The overall charge is to understand and assess the student and faculty experience concerning online education. Based on the findings, the workgroup provides general recommendations for assessment, academic success, online course development, and instruction metrics for the student and faculty experience and provides guidelines on how to move forward to make online education a successful enterprise. It's important that these recommendations are considered in the context of VCU's specific online programs and align with each program's objectives and their respective student and faculty needs.

III. Detailed Recommendations

Recommendation 1. *Centralization of faculty support resources for online instruction*

VCU relies on multiple siloed units supporting various components of the online learning experience. Additionally, some schools and colleges are investing in individual personnel and resources outside of centralized services to support a narrow group of stakeholders. This

structure has led to duplicative efforts, inconsistent messaging, varying quality of instructor support, and a lack of clarity in seeking support for online instruction.

To address the challenges of this dispersed support environment we recommend centralizing all personnel, training, technology, support resources, and engagement opportunities into one center in an effort to create a closer alignment of these services to the strategic mission for online education and to better ensure that faculty are provided with the support necessary to excel.

The specific organization structure of the centralized support model is a decision best made by senior leadership at VCU, as the decision to move personnel and departments has a far reaching impact.

However, we recommend the following three actions to help guide the reorganization process:

1. Query faculty to determine their specific needs in terms of online teaching support. Consider what support is needed for those teaching in multiple modalities and how this may differ from fully online instruction. The faculty feedback should be influential in defining the goals of the new centralized support unit.
2. Collect information on the current personnel and resources embedded within units that play a role in supporting online teaching and programs. Use this list to identify gaps in support so that the reorganization process is aimed toward filling those gaps.
3. Ensure that staff operating in different units, but within the same job family (ex. Instructional design) coordinate and communicate across units to ensure that consistent practices are utilized. For example, this would mean instructional designers function as assigned liaisons to schools and departments, while reporting to a centralized unit or team within VCU Online / ALT Lab.

There is also a question about how this newly established center will support in-person, hybrid, or hyflex courses. The centralization of online instruction resources does not have to be at the expense of or separate from resources available to support faculty teaching in other modalities. With consideration for the organizational structure selected and goals of the unit, it may be advisable for the new unit to serve as an umbrella that houses a new online-focused resource center, as well as existing resources, like the CTLE and the ALT Lab, focused on instruction that includes an in-person component. Doing so brings all of the related initiatives under one division, with a dedicated AVP/VP and unified strategic plan addressing the faculty and student experience irrespective of the selected course modality.

Recommendation 2. *Standardize Online faculty onboarding and training*

At present, VCU offers a range of training opportunities to prepare faculty for creating effective, accessible, and equitable online learning experiences. The majority of the openly available training opportunities are provided by VCU Online / ALT Lab with additional collaborations with the CTLE and Technology Services ([examples](#)). VCU does not require completion of this training as a prerequisite to teach online. While some units have their own training expectations for faculty engaged in online instruction, this further contributes to the variance in

experience and support between faculty teaching online. Without a standardized training program, the quality of instruction, understanding of effective online teaching pedagogy, and level of competency in online instructional and technical design will remain inconsistent, which in turn places an increased burden on students who need to acclimate to entirely different approaches.

We recommend the development of a standardized faculty training program for those engaged in teaching online courses. The program must be comprehensive, engaging, and aligned to the strategic mission for online education in order to equip faculty with the skills needed to succeed in online instruction. The program should start with the existing VCU ALT Lab courses as the skeleton, with time and resources provided to enhance the offerings and increase the methods of delivery (ex.

Developing synchronous and asynchronous versions). This program should be co-taught by instructional/technical designers and instructional faculty (see faculty online champions below) to ensure efficacy and applicability to the instructional experience. Participation in this training should be valued as an expectation and must occur prior to or simultaneously with teaching in an online environment.

Given the additional expectations, faculty participation must be incentivized either through monetary compensation or other means of recognition (e.g., tied to tenure and promotion and/or annual performance review process) for their time and efforts engaging in the development program. Further, consideration should be given to the development of recognition/incentives for faculty demonstrating a continued commitment to developing their skills in online instruction. For example, continuing to attend new training sessions, implementing innovative pedagogy, and/or developing scholarship around online teaching practices should be factored into decisions to distribute additional incentives.

While the goal is to ensure that all courses are taught by faculty equipped with sufficient skills and practices for online instruction, the initial recruitment of faculty for this proposed onboarding and training should start with VCU champions. At the onset of VCU's online growth initiative, we recommend beginning with faculty most interested in and engaged with online education rather than requiring those not interested to become online instructors. Our current online champions are likely to exhibit an enthusiasm towards online teaching, a willingness to learn and innovate, and will be best prepared to provide students with an exemplary course experience. These faculty will also serve to grow and promote new online initiatives with others within the University. This organic growth will limit pushback, while also providing examples of what online courses should look like at VCU.

Recommendation 3. *Develop an intentional, comprehensive, and ongoing process to collect and evaluate student and faculty experience data to ensure a Culture of Care*

Engaging in a concerted, university-wide effort to expand existing and develop new online programs requires an agile mindset and the willingness to alter the course as new information becomes available. Regardless of the thoroughness of the planning process, we must expect and embrace the opportunities to adjust in order to maintain focus on our goals for growth in the online education market. To achieve this level of agility, it is essential that VCU remain

abreast of feedback from all stakeholders, with specific focus on students and faculty, through the development of a robust data collection and analysis process. Suggested actions that support a data-valued culture include:

1. The administration of a cadence of consistent survey questions to students and instructors engaged in online courses. The data collected will be used to supplement the qualitative experience data with quantitative comparisons of student outcome measures.
2. Support the development and distribution of a customized course evaluation that is appreciative of the differences in instructor and student experiences and needs within online learning environments. VCU can begin with the [course evaluation developed by VCU Online](#), then consider how this can be structured to best collect valid data from each stakeholder group. This evaluation should include questions that directly relate to the online learning experience and the strategic mission for online education. An adopted online course student evaluation will be uniformly utilized in all online courses and feedback will be incorporated into future course planning and faculty development.
3. Establish focus groups, both across and concentrated within programs, to collect qualitative and experiential data on the teaching and learning experiences of those engaged in online courses and programs at VCU.
4. Support a team dedicated to the evaluation of the data collected from these and other sources. Based on their analysis and feedback, program leadership should use the insights gained from the information gathered to evaluate and assess trends in experience and student outcome measures.
5. Program leaders should operate with a willingness to make data-informed changes in a swift and agile manner that both prioritizes a need for consistency among faculty and staff and demonstrates the courage to adapt and grow.

Recommendation 4. *One Stop Student Success Center*

To ensure a seamless onboarding/transition experience for online students, it is critical to have a centralized One Stop Student Success Center that houses centrally trained personnel who transition the student from prospective candidate all the way through to graduation. We propose a 3 tiered team of professionals:

- **Prospective Student Specialist** - this tier serves as the first point of contact for incoming inquiries about online programs. The staff would be trained to find the best fit program for the prospective student based on their needs and learning goals. They will serve as the conduit to either an enrollment coach within the One Stop shop, or refer the student to Admissions to apply for a face-to-face program. This tier would be knowledgeable about transfer articulation as well as all majors and degree programs offered at VCU.
- **Enrollment Coach** - this tier would receive a case referral from the Prospective Student Specialist, and would be a trained professional on admissions, transfer success/coaching. They are not academic advisors, but they are trained by

University Advising to accurately enroll students in their first semester of classes.

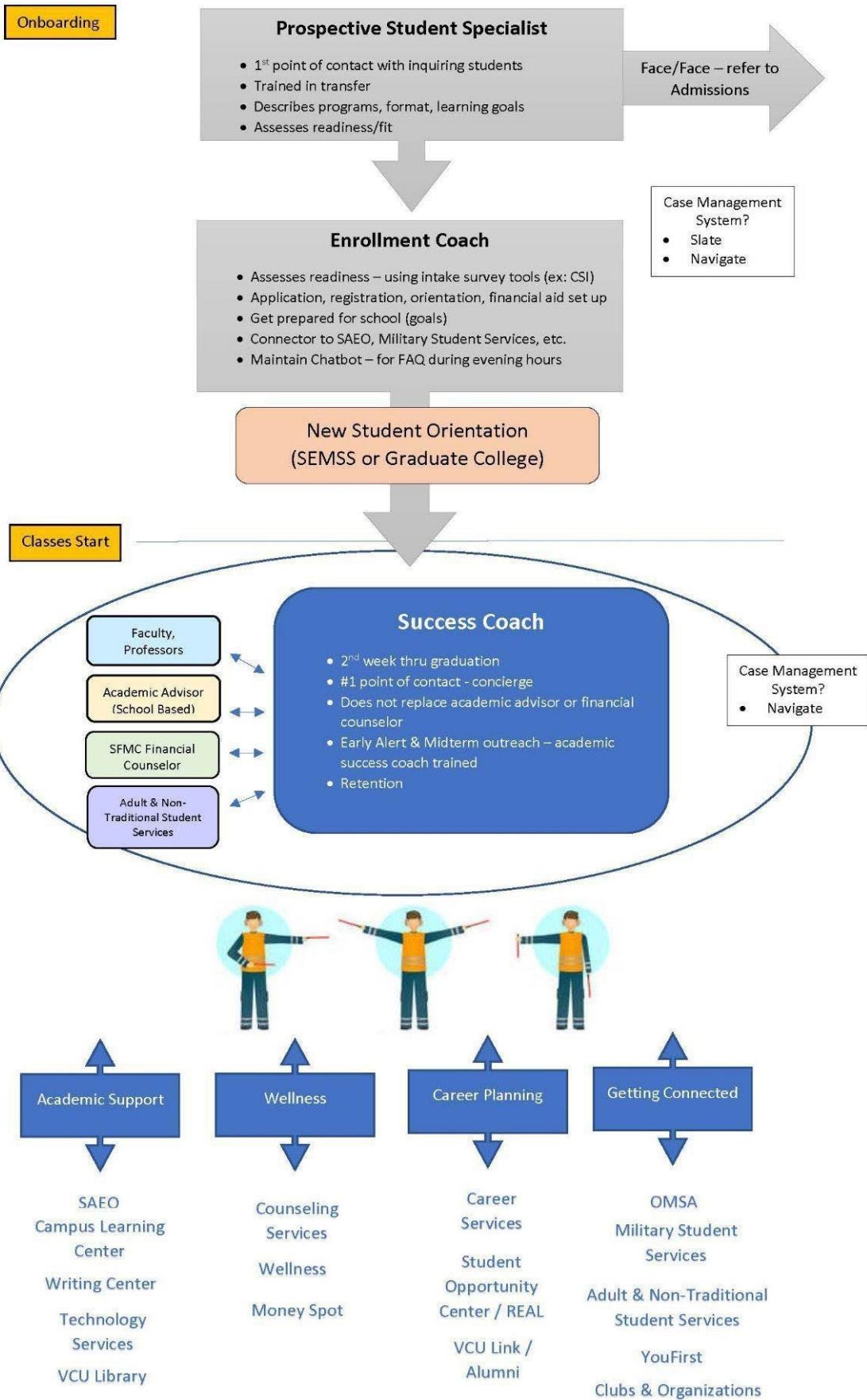
The Enrollment Coach will also be the connector to other VCU SEMSS/DSA offices that might need to be engaged with the student for initial onboarding (ie: Military Student Services, SAEO, Division for Academic Success). Case management would be handled through Navigate. The enrollment coach would be the student's point of contact until the 2nd week of classes (through drop/add). During onboarding of students, Enrollment Coaches are encouraged to utilize "online readiness" assessment results. (See recommendation 8) (examples include <https://www.tamus.edu/catie/online-readiness-tools-and-research/> and https://pennstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_7QCNUPsyH9f012B)

- **Success Coach** - the success coach will then serve as the "conciierge" to their assigned student starting the 2nd week of classes through graduation. The success coach does not replace the academic advisor or their financial aid counselor, but they can help make appointments for each of these care team members. The Success Coach will engage in goal setting using major maps (undergraduates) as their foundation. The success coach will be trained in academic coaching to support the student throughout the early notification and midterm windows and will be the recipient of all alerts submitted by faculty via Navigate. The Success Coach will be available to embed themselves into course meetings at the request of the instructor (or student) and help the student navigate technology platforms required by professors in their courses. The Success Coach will be responsible for student retention and progression initiatives for their assigned caseload (which is different from on-campus students, where academic advisors are responsible for outreach).

This center would be charged with ensuring equitable experiences for online students, and would work across VCU to deliver online new student orientation (either through SEMSS Orientation or the Graduate College), first and second year experiences, and student engagement opportunities throughout the student lifecycle.

Training and on-going professional development for this team is critical and One Stop shop staff should be members of university wide committees or staff meetings in centralized areas like Admissions, Financial Aid/Student Financial Management, University Advising, and Academic Coaching.

VCU Online Success Center



Recommendation 5. Create a “Culture of Care” (Student Experience)

A “Culture of Care” will be demonstrated at the course level, engagement in student life and career development, and through student support services.

At the course level, instructors will provide a clearly communicated program of instruction (syllabus), leverage early notification reports to monitor and support students as needed, and have early and regular feedback to students. We strongly recommend that the following components are required (mandatory) of all faculty teaching online courses:

- All online courses must have a documented quality review either by VCU Online / ALT Lab or an external review. Courses that do not have a documented review must undergo revisions in order to satisfy quality rubric requirements. VCU Online / ALT Lab instructional designers will partner with course instructors to complete course revisions. A course also should have a quality review cycle determined by current best practices and existing university level assessment/program review cycles.
- Mandatory use of Canvas as the Learning Management System (LMS)¹
- A syllabus provided at least 2 weeks prior to the start of classes
- Inclusive teaching practices that promote proactive and actionable feedback using formative assessment as well as summative assessments - to ensure guideposts of reflection back to the learner prior to the end of the 4th week.
- 100% engagement/submission of [early notification programs](#) (weeks 2-4 for progress reports and weeks 6-10 for midterm grades)
- Course student ratios must be carefully considered and monitored. Research suggests that an instructor's ability to attend to their students and appropriately engage the class is largely dependent on the number of students in the course. The ideal student-to-instructor ratio is between 20:1 and 25:1. Several factors including course type, level, design, and instructor experience suggest an increased or decreased ratio.
 - For more detailed considerations on factors that should be considered when determining course size, consult the following report by St. Louis University (https://www.slu.edu/provost/distance_education/faculty_info_distance_ed/student_inst_ructor_ratio.pdf).

¹ In addition to supporting the faculty and student experience, a single LMS will also facilitate compliance with federal requirements related to distance education (e.g. ensuring that students who register for a course are the same as those who complete the assignments and earn the grade for the course, as well as documenting compliance with recently introduced requirements related to regular and substantive feedback by instructors)

At the student life and career development level, the VCU community must develop online opportunities for engagement, socialization, and access to social and professional networking. An annual audit should be conducted by the new One Stop Student Success Center leadership to ensure virtual opportunities are available across the student services spectrum and with alumni engagement. Examples include:

- opportunities for online communities of learners to have a voice as an entity in student government
- fully online student organizations
- join Honor Societies
- engage in work-study and undergraduate research opportunities (REAL)
- attend Career Fairs,
- engage in wellness and community building resources and activities

We also recommend creating a robust online information resource library, to support online students 24/7, when staff are not available. This resource library would provide videos on common FAQs/processes that impact/support student success. Examples would include:

- study skills
- time management
- how to register for classes
- how to see and understand your student bill
- how to upload a resume on Handshake
- how to use the Student Opportunity Center (SOC)
- how to write a personal statement, etc.

Recommendation 6. *Dedicated Infrastructure & Resources*

Building upon VCU's existing central services for online education, investments in personnel and dedicated facilities will need to align with the scale of programs and quality goals.

- **Human Capital Investment**

To create a virtual resource library, various VCU offices will need “buyout” or temporary “backfill” personnel to create bandwidth for staff to create innovative, highly engaging resources (videos, PDFs, other mediums). Just like faculty, it is critical to provide dedicated time for the development of quality online resources, without jeopardizing the staff member’s performance in their day/day job.

- **Dedicated Marketing, Multimedia & Communications Resources**

Marketing, multimedia, and communications experts must be made available, at no expense, to units being asked to develop resources for the online resource library.

- **Dedicated IT team**

This team develops enhanced eServices/Dashboards/“Next Steps” platforms so that SEMSS units can build tools that provide enhanced capabilities for tracking and motivating student engagement. Ideally, a team of IT experts (webpage developers,

SQL/Database programmers, etc.) would be made available to SEMSS units to develop highly engaging, logical/sequenced, and planning focused dashboards, webpages, etc. for delivering their services/messages/"to-do" lists, etc. Failure to provide said IT support limits access, creativity, efficiencies, and uniformity in our service delivery. We need a culture of "we can do that" versus "we have the vanilla version and this is the best that it can do".

- **Personnel expansion remains proportionate to student expansion.**

In order to provide a quality, student centered experience, personnel need to be added to support units in proportion to the expansion of online students to maintain "smart" ratios as determined by each unit (Advising ratios, financial counselor ratios, peer mentor ratios, SAEO access specialist ratios, mental health counselor caseloads, etc.). This group recommends that guidelines for acceptable faculty-student ratios in alignment with their disciplines be established prior to implementing any online programs along with a commitment to timely staffing hires so that staffing happens concurrently with growth rather than lagging behind. An example of a guideline for faculty-student ratios developed by St. Louis University is [provided here](#). A starting point for establishing faculty/student ratios for online courses should consider SCHEV base adequacy faculty-student ratios established by discipline area ([see p. 7 of document here](#), additional guidance can be found in SCHEV program files held in academic affairs within the office of the provost).

Recommendation 7. *Consistent University Policies and Guidelines*

To ensure consistent and equitable student and faculty experiences across VCU's online learning environments, university administration must create and ensure the application of policies and procedures which empower units that make up the university's online support systems and structure. VCU Online, while potentially an operational silo, must engage and be accountable to cross-functional frameworks and metrics utilized across the university for student and faculty success. Core metrics outlined in Quest 2028, particularly for student success (retention/graduation goals) must have equal accountability for meeting these metrics.

Examine the current Student Code of Conduct and other VCU policies to adapt to online conduct so as to ensure a professional and ethical experience for online students.

Recommendation 8. *Establish a skills assessment option that accepted students can opt into as a way to determine their readiness for online learning program.*

Many students with the intellectual capacity to succeed in a course struggle or fail because of a lack of certain technical proficiencies or an understanding of the nuances involved with online learning that they could not foresee being an issue. This is particularly the case with returning and adult learners who have not been in school in some time for whom online

learning is a novel and new experience. In addition to the standard rigors and expectations, there is the added component of navigating a Learning Management System, engaging in digital spaces, technical requirements related to downloading and uploading content, etc.

To provide students the opportunity to determine their readiness for online learning and connect identified areas of difficulty with training opportunities, we propose the creation of a skills assessment. These skills assessments would provide students an opportunity to "learn what they do not know" and proactively identify opportunities to fill skill gaps prior to or concurrently with their online learning experience. We recommend the following parameters:

- The Online Learning Skills Assessment will be an optional though encouraged opportunity for students enrolling in an online course or program to assess their readiness in a low-stakes environment.
- We will need to establish a set of core competencies for online learning and base the Skills Assessment on exploring the practical application of these skills.
- Potentially borrow identified measures from this article on the [Online Readiness Assessment](#).
- The Skills Assessment should take place in or make use of Canvas, in order to make it as practically applicable as possible, given that this is the standard LMS for VCU.
- We must link feedback from students' performance directly to resource guides and campus personnel who can help students fill skill gaps.
- Communicate to students that it is not a test and the key goal of the Readiness Assessment tool is to provide awareness and a space