

Advancing the Effective Use of Technology in Higher Education

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In 1989 the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) located in Boulder, Colorado, founded the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET) as a resource for the 15 western states. At the first annual meeting, delegates from outside the WICHE states petitioned to join. The original membership agreed. By 2004, WCET had over 250 members representing 43 states and seven countries. WCET had become an international, member-driven service agency.

WCET's initial mission was to assist the western states and their higher education institutions integrate telecommunications technology into their academic services. Early projects included brokering electronic degree and certificate programs between states, and sorting out the western states' regulatory policies to make inter-state distance learning programs more reasonable to operate. The first degree program WCET brokered was the University of Arizona's Master's in Library Science. It had students in states where there were no graduate library programs. Students had video and telephone links with the Arizona faculty, and were required to spend a few weeks on the campus in the summer. The US Department of Commerce assisted in funding the brokering program that was run by Russell Poulin. By 1995, in addition to library science, WCET had brokered six degree and certificate programs in the areas of health, information technology, environmental engineering, and space studies.

In the early 1990s WCET worked to make the state regulatory structure easier to navigate for colleges and universities that were willing to offer distance learning outside their own states. In the process, WCET staff discovered the dominant role that regional accrediting played in state regulations. We began working with the regional accreditors, and the Principles of Good Practice that most of the states adopted were also used by the accrediting community to assess distance learning programs.

Emphasis on Good Practice led WCET to a strong focus on students and the services and information they need to have to be successful. With the help of funding from the US Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE), WCET's Barbra Krauth surveyed colleges and universities to find good examples of online services. This resulted in a Web tour of the different approaches institutions had for serving distance learning students. Taking this further, Patricia Shea managed a project funded by the US Department of Education's Learning Anytime, Anyplace Program (LAAP) to assist different types of institutions as they completely re-worked their services to students to take full advantage of the Web. Teams from a research university, a community college, and a private university worked together and on their own campuses with consultants through the transformation process. Regular Webcasts were offered to the higher education community which focused on specific services, and the advances and issues that were emerging for each. The models that the WCET team put together are currently being used to help universities, colleges, and statewide systems improve their Web-based services to students.

After working with the regulatory side of quality in distance learning, WCET staff realized that students also needed to be better informed as they chose a distance learning provider. WCET produced a Consumer's Guide for potential distance learning students that was distributed through state higher education executive offices; however, not many students contacted those offices when they were seeking a provider. WCET staff decided to work with a commercial publisher, Prentice-Hall, to get information directly to the consumers. The first edition of the Distance Learner's Guide was published in 1999. Sales were sufficient to have Prentice-Hall request an updated version for a second edition released in

2005. The book was produced by having experts from the WCET membership write the various chapters and using a central editor. The second edition helps a learner assess his or her readiness for distance learning, know the questions to ask of a potential provider, and figure out his or her equipment needs, and it offers a lot of information useful for the successful distance learner.

In 1996, the Western Governors Association (WGA) wanted to explore the use of technology for higher education in the 18 states represented by the member governors. WGA staff turned to WCET for assistance. The lead governors were Mike Leavitt from Utah and Roy Romer from Colorado. They wanted to create a new type of learning opportunity for people in the western states that would focus on state workforce needs, grant certifications based on outcomes, and use new technologies. Governors Leavitt and Romer worked with WCET staff, WGA staff, and staff from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) to create the Western Governors University (WGU). By 1999 WGU had its own staff and was on the road to becoming a degree-granting, independent institution.

During the formation of WGU, the regional accrediting associations began working more closely together. They formed the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC) to address common issues. One issue C-RAC took on was the creation of common principles upon which they could base their standards for distance learning programs. C-RAC turned to WCET to work with them to create those principles. Based on the earlier set of principles developed for the states, WCET staff revised and updated the Principles of Good Practice for C-RAC. WCET staff also worked with the staffs of the regional accrediting associations to interpret the principles. By 2001 the commissions of all the regional accrediting associations had adopted the same set of principles.

During its first decade, WCET evolved into a real service organization, taking on projects no single institution or even a single state could tackle on its own. WCET members identified issues, and WCET staff created projects for funding. One of these was the Technology Costing Methodology (TCM) that was funded by FIPSE and the Andrew Mellon Foundation. WCET partnered again with NCHEMS, whose president, Dennis Jones, designed the framework for

the costing model. TCM was tested in dozens of settings and modified accordingly. The value of TCM is for planners. It created a consistent set of metrics that can be applied across departments within an institution, or across institutions in a state to allow the real costs of a particular academic model to be known. The TCM framework, case studies, and interactive tabulator are all online for anyone to use without any charges. An online “how to use TCM” course was also produced.

As the century turned, WCET began developing more resources for its members and the higher education community. With funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, WCET staff began work with Bruce Landon (the creator of Landon-line housed at Douglas College in British Columbia) in the development of EduTools, which has become a worldwide resource (www.edutools.info). EduTools is a decision site on the Web with independent information and reviews of course management software products, student support services, and institutional policy issues. The tools on the site let people compare the products on a common set of features and step the user through a rational decision process. By 2004, the site had been translated into several languages and was linked by sites all over the world.

Another part of WCET’s expanding list of services was direct assistance to campuses and state higher education systems on a wide variety of topics relating to the integration of technology into academic activities both on and off campus. WCET staff and members worked on technology planning projects, auditing Web-based student support services, professionally developing campus leaders, developing new e-learning programs, evaluating programs and projects, as well as educating state and federal legislators. WCET staff also assisted with the academic management of the eArmy University. In addition, the staff mentored a new organization—The North American Council for Online Learning (www.NACOL.org)—developed to assist virtual high schools with research and policy information. It was financially supported by the William and Melinda Gates and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundations.

In 2002 WCET staff took a leadership role in the international movement for Open Educational Resources. Staff worked with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to introduce universities around the world

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