

Building a System to Deliver Programs at a Distance

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Learners in the 21st century are increasingly using online delivery methods to achieve their academic goals. Through online learning, students are provided access to quality programs and services delivered with convenience and flexibility. Although technology tools are used in some measure in many courses provided by the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, the courses, programs, and services specifically designated as “online” are those delivered predominately over the Internet and are the focus of Minnesota Online.

The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System recognizes that the integration of technology into teaching is essential to our ability to continue to serve our students and to provide the citizens of Minnesota with the flexible, state-of-the-art higher education they have come to expect. It is critical for the system, its leadership, and faculty to best leverage their collective resources to facilitate the effective and efficient use of the technology in a manner that responds to student need and that provides quality learning.

Unfortunately, financial support for higher education has flattened precisely at this time of required investment for the future. The Minnesota State College and Universities System response is to use existing resources wisely toward the development of a targeted approach to e-learning that leverages resources, encourages partnerships and collaboration, and builds upon the unique strengths of our various institutions.

During the past decade, quality assurance indicators have become major issues internationally for higher education. Managers of higher education systems and institutions today are concerned about

quality, and with how to make certain that quality assurance systems and mechanisms are appropriately implemented in their institutions. In comparison with the business sector, only a relatively small number of role models of best practices exist in education. Tang (1998) suggests: “It is recognized that benchmarking is not simply a tool to use for dealing with crises and urgent priorities, but an overall drive for gaining superiority in the marketplace” (p. 407). Minnesota Online acknowledges the importance of sharing best practices that recognize a sense of community and encourage success that fully develop and utilize people’s talents.

It is the vision of Minnesota Online that the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities will be a trusted provider of choice for high-quality online learning opportunities that expand access for a community of lifelong learners within Minnesota and beyond.

The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System is a network of two- and four-year public higher education institutions, including 32 state universities, community colleges, technical colleges, and combined community and technical colleges. The system serves approximately 240,000 students annually in credit-based courses and another 130,000 in non-credit courses. It has approximately 16,500 faculty and other employees, plus approximately 21,000 student workers. The system is responsive to the needs of business, collaborating with employers to provide affordable, customized training and education programs.

In addition to the students served by the system’s 53 campuses around the state, the “Minnesota Online” site at <http://www.minnesotaonline.mnscu.edu> is a gateway to its distance education offerings. According to Minnesota Online:

The number of students enrolled in the United States in post-secondary distance education courses increased six-fold from 1994 to 2002, and is expected to continue to grow at an even quicker pace. By the fall semester of 2003, Minnesota State Colleges and Universities offered approximately 70 programs and 900 courses online, serving 5.5% of the total system student headcount, about 10,000 students.

This article describes the approach that Minnesota State Colleges and Universities is taking to build Minnesota Online, a statewide system that delivers higher education courses and programs online.

PURPOSE STATEMENT FOR MINNESOTA ONLINE

Minnesota Online is composed of Minnesota State Colleges and Universities institutions to advance and facilitate the delivery of online products and services for its member institutions. Minnesota Online was established to be an internal “innovative enterprise” within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities’ system for the development and operation of e-learning. With the need to operate efficiently, effectively, and with due diligence as an “innovative enterprise” for the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities’ system, Minnesota Online operates under the following drivers:

- To meet market demand
- To meet stakeholder expectations
- To promote access
- To respond to increased competition

EXPECTED OUTCOMES OF MINNESOTA ONLINE

The success of Minnesota Online is to provide a collaborative framework for serving the online learners of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities and is being driven by stakeholder expectations. To serve these learners, the responsibilities of Minnesota Online shall be to:

- Provide support services or assist member institutions in supporting online courses and programs.
- Enhance academic, technical, and student services for online learners.
- Provide access for learners for all available online courses and programs.
- Assure seamless financial aid for eligible students enrolled through Minnesota Online.
- Secure affiliation status from the Higher Learning Commission for online program approval, and facilitate campuses in achieving accreditation of online programs.

CENTRALIZED SERVICES

Minnesota Online serves as a vehicle for collaborative pooling and sharing arrangements among the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities by joining together through a statewide network to offer distance learning programs. Examples of such services are highlighted on the E-Resources Web site at: <http://www.eresources.mnscu.edu>.

- **E-Communities:** Provide e-community services to students using the electronic portfolio as the core element. The pilot occupation in the area is a nursing career pathway.
- **E-Portfolio:** An electronic portfolio tool for Minnesota students, workers, educators, and citizens in the 21st century. Developed by the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities in alliance with Avenet LLC, and partially funded by a Congressional Award. The e-portfolio is an online version of résumés, experiences, goals, and more. This platform is designed to be as easy to use as possible, with a similarity to “word processing” rather than to HTML and Web publishing.
- **E-Services:** Web-enabled services offered to students to support e-learning needs through the development of several initiatives such as the e-mentoring model, including services of tutoring, online assessments, study skills, orientation, and instructional support.

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