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*The challenge of a metropolitan university to offer innovative higher educational programs in limited space is being facilitated by creative distance learning. The Executive Program leading to a Master of Science in Health Administration at Virginia Commonwealth University is an example of such a program that is changing from a first generation bulletin board conferencing system to a "client-server" based program on the World Wide Web accessed through the Internet.*

# **Health Care Executive Education: *A Program Note***

## **Customized Executive Education**

The health care industry is undergoing a period of rapid change. Different types of managerial knowledge and skills will be required for health care delivery systems to respond effectively to environmental pressures than have been needed in the past. Navigating strategic directions, attracting competent staff, building teamwork, improving productivity, managing resources, and offering services to meet the needs of patients will continue to be necessary components in order to maintain the mission of health care organizations to provide care and to survive and thrive.

Health care organizations are searching for academic partners who can customize an executive program in order to promote advanced learning and also to add value to the productivity of their work force. Interviews with leaders of integrated health care delivery systems indicate that the most notable competencies for future health care executives include: (1) understanding alternative forms of care management and technologies, (2) ability to guide and manage organizational change in turbulent environments, (3) ability to benchmark and continually assess organizational performance, (4) interest in developing and navigating competitive advantages, and (5) effective utilization of financial, clinical, marketing, and community health network information. Future executives are leaders who have mastered the skills of making timely and critical decisions, and also are willing to manage organizations facing ambiguity

or uncertainty in the changing environment.

Only a handful of accredited graduate health administration programs are prepared enough to respond to the educational needs of the health care industry. Exemplary programs have to possess unique abilities to offer effective adult education, use cutting-edge computer technology for distance learning, and have a dedicated and cooperative full-time faculty who understand corporate culture and competitiveness in the health care marketplace. The following describes a successful executive program offered by a metropolitan university in the United States.

The Executive Program offered by the Department of Health Administration at Virginia Commonwealth University, Medical College of Virginia (MCV) campus is a decentralized program that provides a Masters of Science in Health Administration degree. It is particularly suited for those with a minimum of five years of progressive managerial or clinical experience including:

- Clinicians who are interested in making a career change from clinical practice to management.
- Staff and technical specialists presently employed in the healthcare field who want to assume general management positions.
- Executive-level health care managers who want to prepare for further career advancement with a graduate degree in health administration.
- Mid-level managers who require advanced training to assume executive-level management positions and those who need additional skills and knowledge to fulfill new requirements and expectations in their present position.

### **Program Description**

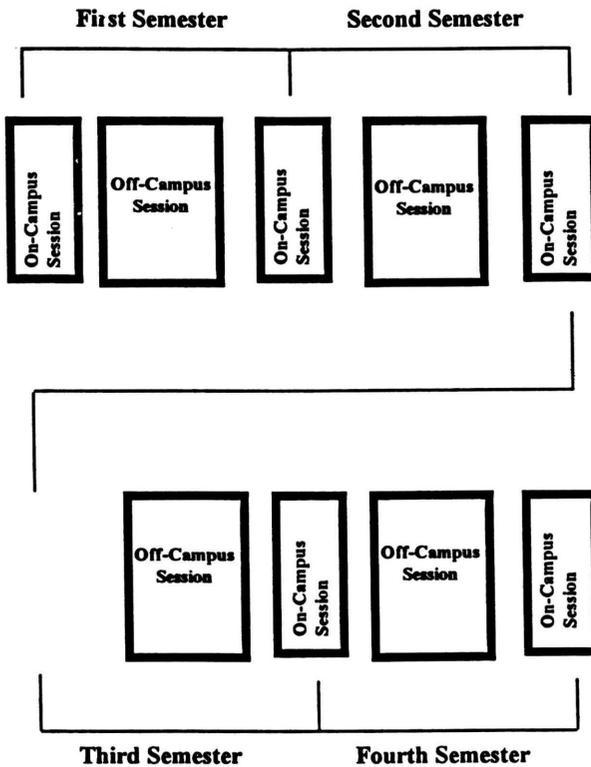
MCV's Executive Program is a full-time program designed to allow the full-time professional to maintain his or her work and pursue a degree. It offers courses in health care organization behavior, organization and management theory, managerial accounting and finance, health economics, management and operations analysis, health care marketing, quantitative decision support systems, managerial epidemiology, health and business law, strategic management, managed care, alternative health care financing and delivery systems, leadership, and the management of professionals. Upon formal acceptance to the program, three prerequisites are offered as independent-study modules: microeconomics, accounting, and statistics. The prerequisites are completed prior to beginning the first courses.

The program consists of a forty-three hour curriculum taken over twenty-four months in four six-month semesters. The students, referred to as associates, begin and end each semester on the MCV campus in six to thirteen day sessions for a total of only five such on-campus sessions over the two year duration of the program. During these sessions, the associates meet eight hours each day. Associates attend lectures, participate in seminars, and use the department's lab, computer facilities,

and the university library. They are given detailed outlines of lectures, complete handout sets, and learning/study guides for materials covered. Free time, while on campus, is reserved for study, group project work, relaxation, and planned social activities.

The other five and a half months of each semester are spent off-campus (see Figure 1) where the associates devote a minimum of twenty hours per week to Executive Program study. This process is facilitated by conferencing via personal computers and the Internet, computer-aided instruction, programmed interaction, videotaped lecture presentations, and independent study modules.

Figure 1



The associates work at their own pace, and can access the system at any time, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The education is provided by many media:

*Computer conferencing by means of our "Execunet system."* This system can be accessed from any personal computer equipped with a modem. Initially developed for a stand-alone bulletin board system, as of July 1995 the system will allow participants to access our client server through an online provider with Internet access or gateways to the World Wide Web. Other similar online services providing healthcare information are being developed. Access to the Executive Program is

reached through the VCU/MCV home page. Each of the courses provided in the semester has space with a newsgroup on the system that is used for completing and submitting assignments, asking and responding to questions regarding the material covered, and participating in discussions of course material with other associates.

The major and most important use of the Execunet system is holding electronic seminars for each course. Faculty, like the associates, can access the system from wherever they can connect their computer: office, home, or anywhere they may be travelling and doing research. This also allows participation of guest faculty and distinguished practitioners, since they do not have to be physically present in Richmond, Virginia. Execunet is also used for class meetings and faculty advising. There is even a "meeting room" for faculty and associate interaction and a board for job announcements.

*Computer-aided instruction.* This is accomplished with interactive software that allows individual lessons or entire courses to be offered on diskettes or CD-ROM. Associates proceed through a series of instructional modules using text and graphics, problem sets, and quizzes. This allows the program to be self-paced and provides the associate with periodic performance feedback. The software packages are accompanied by reading materials and necessary study guides.

*Programmed instruction.* This is a series of very structured printed lessons and problem sets. Spreadsheets, datasets, and slide presentations are easily accessed through interactive software. The associate must complete a given level of proficiency before moving to the next lesson. Periodic problem sets and cases provide the learner with the opportunity for feedback regarding achieved proficiency.

*Videorecorded lecture presentations.* These provide the associate with the opportunity to "attend" a lecture as many times as needed during off-campus sessions. The lectures are then discussed in an electronic seminar via Execunet. This method allows each student's questions and comments to be recognized by the instructor. It is a luxury not found in the traditional classroom environment. Future planned improvements for the program include the incorporation of video presentations on CD-ROM.

The Executive program has many advantages over other educational opportunities. The major advantage is the flexibility of time management. The on-campus sessions are intensive and off-campus communications can be done at any time twenty-four hours a day during assigned seminar weeks. The program also provides for an intensive writing experience. This experience is facilitated by the use of the computer, in lieu of verbal communication, for the presentation of carefully written arguments, questions, and comments on the course material. Within the program there is also a unique seminar exchange. Associates are able to read and respond to the comments of other students. Furthermore, there is always direct faculty response to any and all questions of the associate.

The Executive Program has no specific course prerequisites for application. Applicants must have a baccalaureate degree, adequate grade point average (GPA) and five or more years of progressively responsible managerial or clinical experience. Also, the submission of GRE or GMAT scores is required; however, standardized tests can be waived upon request for those who have earned other graduate or doctoral degrees.

### Lessons Learned

The computer-conferencing application to distance learning is not faultless. The success in program development and implementation is contingent upon three P's: (1) professional quality and technical support; (2) provision of resources; and (3) pricing. Each of them is constrained by different problems.

The executive program relies on the expertise of the faculty who can deliver high quality professional instruction via the computer-conferencing network. Without a strong and dedicated faculty the program will never be developed. Very often, faculty members who are not sufficiently computer literate will slow down the development because they are not sufficiently flexible, versatile, or willing to adapt to changes in the technological arena.

The university needs to allocate adequate resources in support of innovative program development. The start-up cost is relatively high. It includes new faculty lines, technical support staff, training of the faculty, and advertising/marketing. The regular teaching faculty needs to be augmented by preceptors or practitioners involved in the educational process. The short-term payoff from the investment in distance learning is not very good. Thus it is very difficult to convince administrators to fund creative programming.

Pricing is a critical issue. A new degree requires different resources that are usually not provided by the university. Thus the add-on fee or surcharge to each associate's tuition is needed to pay for the program support. On the average, the fee is about 30 percent higher than the regular tuition. For out of the state associates, the travel cost for on-campus sessions should be added. Ideally, corporate support can be generated so that each associate can be sponsored by a corporation.

In sum, a successful program in distance learning is dependent on the quality of instructional faculty and staff. The cost (\$30,000-40,000) of computer equipment and software is the least concern of a computer-based distance learning program.

### *Suggested Reading*

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