

Georgia Virtual Technical Connection

Distance Education for Georgia's Technical Colleges

Theresa West

INTRODUCTION

According to the Technical College System of Georgia (2017), an estimated 42% of the adult population has some level of college education in Georgia. For that reason, the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) provides a unified system of technical education, adult education, and customized business and industry training through programs that use the best available technology and

offer easy access to lifelong education and training for all adult Georgians and corporate citizens. In fact, it oversees the state's technical colleges, adult literacy programs, and a host of economic and workforce development programs. As of today, the TCSG consists of 22 technical colleges with one university system technical division and 85 satellite campuses.

Particularly, the system provides a broad range of career opportunities through a variety of certificate, diploma, and associate degree programs; continuing education programs; and economic development programs. More importantly, all TCSG colleges are accredited through a process overseen by a national or regional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. For instance, the Council on Occupational Education is a national accreditation body recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, while the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools is a regional accrediting body recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.

According to Online Colleges, a website that provides information about top online colleges and degree programs in Georgia, several technical colleges in the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) system were recognized for their excellence and achievement in higher education.



Theresa West,
Business Technology IFCC
Southern Region Chairperson,
Technical College System of Georgia,
P. O. Box 72271 Albany, GA 31708.
Telephone: (229) 430-3583.
E-mail: twest@albanytech.edu

As a leading resource for campus and online learning, Online Colleges released its annual ranking for 2017 and honored TCSG colleges for their excellence in online learning such as Georgia Piedmont Technical College, Central Georgia Technical College, Albany Technical College, and Ogeechee Technical College (onlinecolleges.com).

GEORGIA VIRTUAL TECHNICAL CONNECTION

According to Koon (2013), Georgia Virtual Technical Connection (GVTC) is a portal for online instruction in the TCSG. In fact, GVTC serves as the TCSG conduit for distance education and technology-enhanced education. Additionally, GVTC strives to ensure that the instructor and/or course developer workforce of the TCSG is afforded a vast array of tools, training, and support, assisting them in the development and delivery of the highest quality online content possible. In the same manner, Georgia Virtual Tech offers online courses that do not require on-campus class time and hybrid courses that are split between traditional face-to-face and online course time.

GVTC MISSION STATEMENT

According to GVTC (2011), its mission is to provide support, guidance, and assistance to the state's technical colleges in the design, development, and delivery of distance education and technology-based learning initiatives, manage the state level online student application portal, and serve as a conduit for distance and technology enhanced education (GVTC, 2011).

GVTC HISTORY

In the beginning, the Georgia Virtual Technical Institute consisted of 132 students and 17 online courses (Koon, 2013). Instructors within the TCSG system suggested the idea of teaching over the Inter-

net to their presidents, who then approached the commissioner about online learning. Afterwards, the commissioner supported the presidents and instructors in their efforts by appointing an executive director of the Department of Technical and Adult Education Online Learning Initiative and a board of presidents to oversee this initiative (Koon, 2013). After its inception, the name changed to Georgia Virtual Technical College in 2000. Later, the name changed to Georgia Virtual Technical Connection in 2010 because it was established as a unit of the Technical College System of Georgia, not a college (A. Berger, personal communication, April 26, 2017).

Today, GVTC has nine staff members. According to Berger (Personal communication, April 26, 2017), the number of online faculty is between 4,000 to 5,000 instructors, and the number of online students is between 100,000 to 130,000 students. Indeed, each technical college in the TCSG provides rigorous and engaging online learning as well as hands-on learning. For this reason, GVTC's goal is to ensure best practices for learners in the distance education environment as well as provide technical assistance to technical colleges in the TCSG (see Appendix A).

COMPLETE COLLEGE GEORGIA INITIATIVE

In order to build a 21st century higher education system, there is a need to provide students with the necessary tools to increase successful completion rates in the distance education environment. According to the Complete Georgia College initiative (2016), it aims to meet projected workforce needs by increasing the percentage of its population with some level of college completion from a current 42% to 60%. In fact, the Complete College Georgia initiative focuses on designing and building an accessible, responsive, and accountable higher education system while

fostering a national sense of urgency for action to achieve Goal 2025 (Complete College Georgia, 2016). For that reason, the goal of the TCSG and University System of Georgia (USG) is to add 250,000 postsecondary graduates to Georgia's workforce by 2020 (Complete College Georgia, 2016).

According to Morris (2012), the Complete College Georgia initiative is supported by the governor and led by the University System of Georgia in partnership with the TCSG. In other words, the shared responsibility for improving postsecondary completion rates among the TCSG and USG has led to collaborative agreements, as both systems move to implement high-impact strategies on their campuses. In fact, both the USG and the TCSG work cooperatively on organizing, planning, and implementing efforts that improves student success and increase graduation placement rates from institutions of higher education. For example, these two systems have articulation agreements in which the goal is to provide associate of applied science graduates of select programs with an opportunity to earn a bachelor of applied science degree from one of the universities in the USG. The articulation agreement between the USG and the TCSG will ensure that students' technical/occupational credits will be accepted as transfer credits by the university.

ACHIEVE THE DREAM INITIATIVE

To meet the Complete College Georgia initiative, the Achieve the Dream initiative focuses on closing achievement gaps and accelerating success among diverse student populations, particularly low-income students. Through this initiative, there is a need to identify areas where achievement gaps threaten the success of the college's student population. For that reason, the TCSG has collaborated with the Achieve the Dream organization since 2012. TCSG has made great strides in strategically addressing various projects designed to

close the gaps and accelerate success among diverse student populations, particularly low-income students and students of diverse ethnicity, which aligns with the Achieving the Dream National Reform Network's mission (Achieve the Dream National Reform Network, 2017).

According to the Achieve the Dream National Reform Network (2017), there are three priorities. The first priority strives to improve the enrollment services process through an initiative entitled "Getting It Right from the Start." Through efforts associated with this initiative, the TCSG has successfully eliminated some of the wait time experienced by the students during peak registration. In fact, the number of complaints received from students has declined, while the number of enrollees has increased. The second priority works to improve the success rate of students in the college's gateway courses. Strategies for this initiative include the continuation of blended/provisionally admitted classes, implementation of College Success course, and the effective delivery services in the Academic Achievement Center. To monitor this initiative's impact, each individual technical college collects data and analyzes students' performance in blended and general education courses.

The third priority entails the monitoring and tracking of the college's online learning activities along with the newly established Academic Advising Center. For instance, integrating a checklist such as a Learning Outcome Assessment tool will not only identify but also outline online student's expected learning outcome. On the other hand, the Advising Center will enable colleges to assist students as they navigate through their academic programs. The mission of the Advising Center is to provide a supportive atmosphere that promotes the educational development of students in which it serves to prepare them to be workforce ready. In view of that, the desired results of the Achieve the Dream initiative and the TCSG's three pri-

orities include growing enrollment for our geographic and demographic groups, increasing graduation and placement rates, and achieving results and desired outcomes for students, local employers and local communities (Achieve the Dream National Reform Network, 2017).

PERFORMANCE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

To adhere to the Achieve the Dream initiative, the TCSG developed the Performance Accountability System to promote quality and excellence in technical education and training. For instance, the Performance Accountability System contains four modules: program assessment, community needs assessment, planning, and budgeting. The program assessment module is based on the assessment of the effectiveness of the college's programs that culminate in a technical certificate of credit, a diploma, or an associate degree (Technical College System of Georgia, 2017). The community needs assessment module assists each college in determining its future needs for program improvement, modification, phase-out, expansion, or startup. The planning module is the key to improving quality, customer satisfaction, and high performance. Finally, the budgeting module addresses the needs identified through the internal analysis and improvement planning process. In other words, each technical college receives state funding annually for continuation of current programs, services, and administration. One of the ways that the technical colleges receive state funding is through the Perkins IV Act. The Perkins IV Act provides federal support to career/technical education programs by allotting 85% to academics, 10% to state leadership activities, and 5% to state administration activities. As a result, each year the legislature may allocate state funds for distribution the following year based on the enrollment. For that reason, each technical college in the TCSG system

receives funding based on the enrollment and graduation placement (Technical College System of Georgia, 2017).

INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY

Technology has proven to be an integral part of everything we do in society, including how we teach and learn. In fact, innovative uses of technology engage students in the traditional face-to-face environment as well as contribute to student success in the distance education environment. According to Smaldino, Lowther, Russell, and Mims (2015), "instructional technology does not replace the teacher, but rather technology and media can help one become a creative manager of the learning experience instead of a mere dispenser of information" (p. 10). For that reason, video podcasts can be used for creating lectures or having students view lectures from other content experts. In view of that, GVTC manages the systemwide learning management system (LMS) that is utilized by all the state's technical colleges. In other words, GVTC oversees several additional applications that enable, enhance, and support distance and blended education such as:

- Blackboard Collaborate—offers synchronous learning via a webinar type environment;
- SmarterMeasure—online evaluation tool designed to assist students in determining their readiness for distance education;
- Respondus—used to create assessments, exams, and question banks all of which can be delivered via the LMS or used in a face-to-face environment through printed versions;
- Smarthinking—online tutoring service available to students taking fully online courses—select colleges only;
- Softchalk—allows the design of web-based learning content that can be used as a standalone resource or imported into the existing LMS platform;

- Studymate—allows the creation of Flash-based activities and games that can be incorporated into the virtual classroom or serve as stand-alone resources; and
- TurnItIn—allows instructors to verify originality of written papers, as well as providing a tool for feedback (Georgia Virtual Technical Connection, 2011).

According to the GVTC (2011), Blackboard Learn is the LMS that TCSG utilizes. Blackboard Learn supports the delivery of online content by providing students and instructors a secure login environment into their virtual classroom. Instructors and/or course developers design, develop, and deliver course content and materials in and through the LMS. Students interact with the content, the instructor, and other students while attending their virtual course. Similarly, Blackboard Collaborate is a tool within Blackboard Learn that allows students to do online presentations. For instance, using Blackboard Collaborate will allow students to virtually present their presentations and allow instructors a faster way to grade and provide timely feedback to the student.

Next, SmarterMeasure Learning Readiness Indicator (formerly Readiness for Education at a Distance Indicator Assessment) is a web-based tool to assess students' likelihood for succeeding in an online learning environment. Students use the SmarterMeasure Assessment because it serves as a device to depict strengths and weaknesses of required computer skills. Since TCSG's target population is diverse, it is advantageous to analyze and administer a pretest of specific learning groups to determine the required computer skill level. For that reason, learner characteristics are assessed as learner-related characteristics because they are centered on the learners' demographic characteristics, chronological age, physiological characteristics, educational background, and cultural background.

ADMISSIONS REQUIREMENTS

According to the GVTC (2011), students may sign up for online courses at a "home" institution or any other college in the TCSG. To enroll, applicants must be at least 16 years of age. To be admitted through the GVTC to one of the 22 technical colleges within the TCSG, students must:

- complete and submit the online application form with a nonrefundable application fee; and
- submit high school, technical school, and/or college transcript.

Home school students' acceptance requirements in lieu of a high school diploma or transcript require the following:

- letter from superintendent's office showing that the parents conformed to the requirements of the Georgia Department of Education;
- final or exit exam scores from an accredited state and/or national testing program; and
- annual progress reports for the equivalent of the home schooler's senior years.

Students with diplomas from secondary schools located outside the United States may have their transcripts evaluated for equivalency by an approved outside evaluation organization or attain a General Education Development High School Equivalency Diploma. They must:

- submit assessment test scores within the last 5 years. These may include ASSET, SAT, ACT, COMPASS or Accuplacer; and
- be 16 years of age or older (Georgia Virtual Technical Connection, 2011).

LIBRARY RESOURCES

It is widely recognized that information literacy skills play an important role in academic achievement and lifelong learning.

Even though faculty have the responsibility of designing curricula and assignments that promotes information literacy, librarians have the responsibility to identify core ideals within its own domain to extend learning for students and work collaboratively with teachers. According to Calhoun (Personal communication, April 25, 2017), information literacy principles support instruction and provide measurable evidence that the faculty is utilizing the library support services. In relation to academic achievement, some of the factors influencing the quality of student coursework include:

- Ability to retrieve relevant information: Students' ability to retrieve information is hampered by their inability to identify concepts, read citations, use controlled vocabulary, use library catalogs.
- Inefficient use of time: Students experiment using different search strategies without success. This "trial and error" approach is time-consuming.
- Risk of plagiarism due to a lack of knowledge of the principles of the ethical use of information and particularly the use of citations. A significant number of students have limited or no knowledge of the basic information research process.

In view of that, students enrolled in distance education courses via GVTC have access to the Georgia Library Learning Online (GALILEO) system. GALILEO is an initiative of the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia that provides access to multiple information resources including secured access to licensed products (GALILEO, 2014). In fact, GALILEO is the doorway to a wealth of information such as encyclopedias, business directories, e-books, and government publications. Through GALILEO, students can access over 300 databases indexing thousands of periodicals and scholarly journals from their mobile devices anytime and anywhere (GALILEO, 2014).

Equally important, Interlibrary Loan is an agreement among participating libraries to make certain materials, books, dissertations, journal articles, et cetera, available to member libraries upon request. In other words, this agreement for "resource sharing" gives students access to far more materials than any one library can hold. Each individual technical college searches its own collection first and then searches the Online Computer Library Center database to locate and borrow materials owned by other American, Canadian and European libraries. In addition to the Online Computer Library Center, students may also search the WorldCat database to locate books, and Gold (Georgia Online Libraries) to locate journal articles. Since there is no charge for the Interlibrary Loan requests, these databases are available through GALILEO (2014). For that reason, each individual technical college provides statistics on the number of searches in which a usage summary is available in the GALILEO database.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF GVTC

One of the advantages of GVTC is that it has everything in one location such as a list of programs and courses for each technical college. Next, it provides student orientation, live chat, computer needs, online readiness assessment, and technology requirements. More importantly, students are able to access online resources for their specific program from their specific institution anytime and anywhere. Finally, each technical college has autonomy and flexibility which gives them complete control of their online development and online instruction.

Despite the advantages, there are limitations with GVTC. For instance, even though there are audio and videos for Blackboard Learn platform, the integration of audio and video podcasts of student orientation in one centralized location within the GVTC website would enable TCSG to

maintain a global competitive edge among other community colleges and universities. Next, incorporating assistive technologies such as text-to-speech software to meet the needs of students with disabilities. More importantly, GVTC website needs to be more engaging by incorporating a GVTC tour as well as student testimonials in one centralized location for online students to access anytime and anywhere.

SUMMARY

Georgia Virtual Technical Connection serves as the Technical College System of Georgia conduit for distance and technology enhanced education. In other words, GVTC is a unit within the technical education arm of the TCSG. Mainly, GVTC supports and manages the application used for distance education environment. For instance, GVTC manages Blackboard Learn, which is the systemwide learning management system. Even though GVTC serves as a back-end support only, it would be advantageous for GVTC to incorporate audio/video online experiences to promote

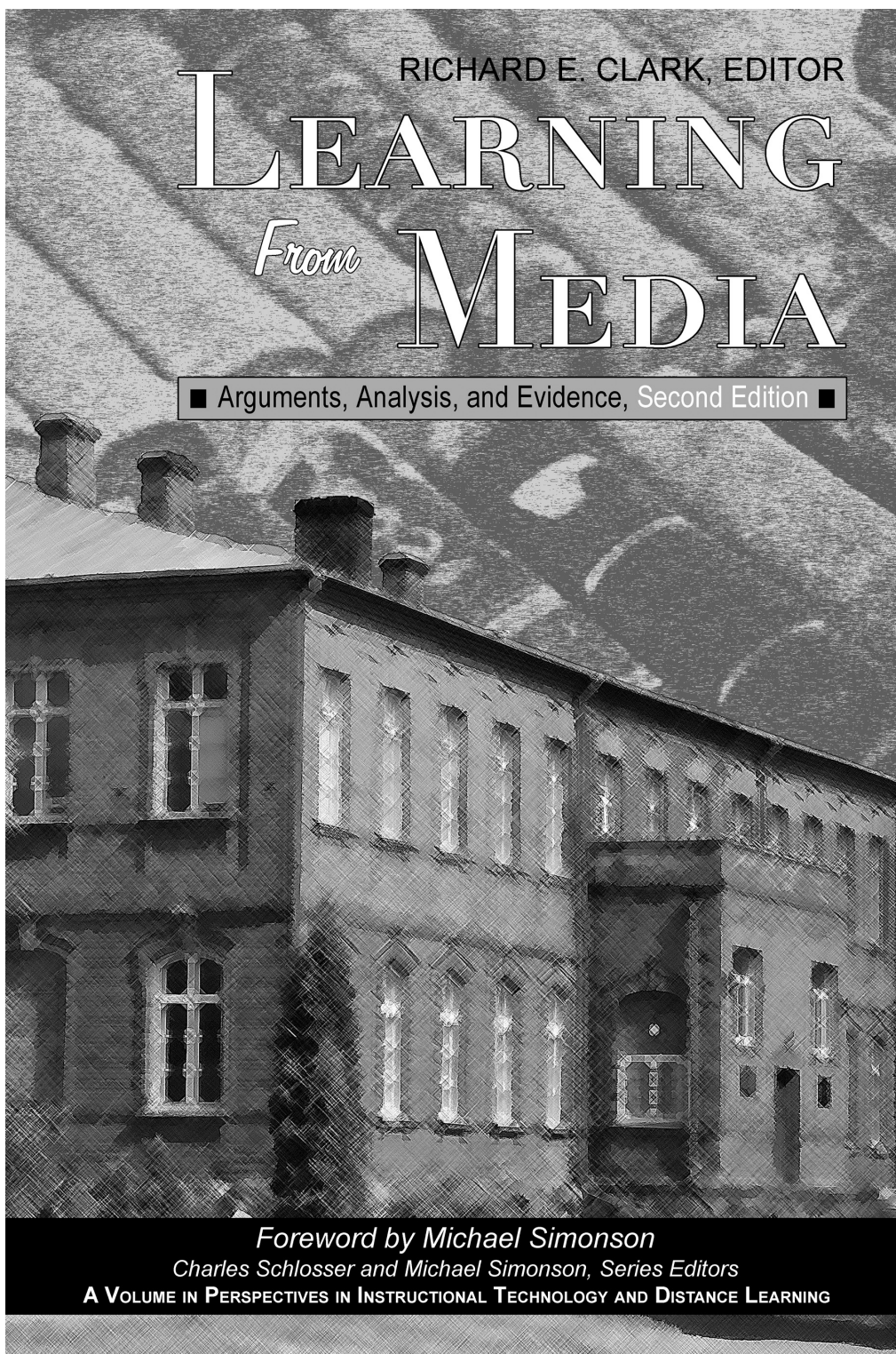
distance education for each technical college within the TCSG.

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APPENDIX

The screenshot shows the gvtc.org website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links: Home, Apply Now, Deadline Calendars, Programs, Courses, Student Affairs, Resources, and Student Orientation. The date 'Tuesday, April 25, 2017' is displayed on the right. The main content area has a heading 'Thank you for your interest in online learning.' Below this, there are three main sections: 'Blackboard Login' on the left, 'Online Application requests for:' in the center, and 'Faculty Resources' on the right. The 'Blackboard Login' section includes a Blackboard logo and a dropdown menu to choose a college from the list: Albany Technical College, Georgia State College of Art and Design, Georgia State College of Business, Georgia State College of Science and Mathematics, Georgia State College of Technology, Georgia State College of Visual Arts and Design, Georgia State College of Health Sciences, Georgia State College of Nursing, Georgia State College of Public Health, Georgia State College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Georgia State College of Veterinary Medicine, Georgia State College of Health Sciences, Georgia State College of Nursing, Georgia State College of Public Health, Georgia State College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Georgia State College of Veterinary Medicine. The 'Online Application requests for:' section has a heading '(click one button below to proceed)' and four radio button options: 'Beginning Student' (A student who has never attended college before), 'Transient Student' (A student who pursues a course at another college due to a schedule conflict or the desired course is not offered at his/her home college. To attend a college as a transient student, you must receive permission from your home college.), 'Transfer Student' (A student who has attended college before but wishes to transfer to another college to pursue a program of study.), and 'Special Admit Student' (A student who desires to take courses only. He/she does not desire to pursue a program of study. Special Admit students are not eligible for financial aid.). Below these options, it says 'For application assistance - contact Burnette Cockfield, GVTC Student Affairs Coordinator - 1-877-532-GVTC (4882)'. The 'Faculty Resources' sidebar includes a link to 'Bb Learn Resources and Training POC Resource Page' and a graphic for 'Online Learning Anywhere Anytime' with the 'KNIER' logo. At the bottom, there's a footer with the mission statement of the Georgia Virtual Technical Connection.



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