

# Digital at the Core

by Mirta M. Martin

This fall, business students at Virginia State University needed nothing more than a computer, an e-book reader, or a mobile phone to gain access to the courses in our core curriculum—and all the required textbooks. That’s because we’ve created an online portal through which the content for nine of our integrated core courses can be digitally delivered, and where the textbooks are available for free download. The digital delivery is part of a complete curriculum overhaul that we launched this year to make sure our program is integrated, rigorous, sustainable, and as technologically sophisticated as the business world our students will enter.

I became dean of the business school in August 2009 and quickly realized that the program needed to be rebuilt from scratch. We also needed a branding strategy to set our school of business apart. I challenged the faculty to revolutionize the curriculum and asked members of the business community what skills and abilities they wanted to see in our graduates before hiring them. A year later, in August 2010, we have started our “revolution of excellence” and launched the integrated digital program.

Virginia State University is using electronic course delivery to save money, save the environment, improve student retention, and prepare business graduates for the complex working world.



# VSU has many students who can't afford to buy a textbook outright, and the high cost of textbooks affects our retention rate.

We believe our new curriculum will provide four benefits to our students. It will foster a better understanding of organizational interdependency between divisions; it will cut down on costs; it will reduce waste; and it will give our students the technological skills they'll need to navigate the real-world digital landscape.

## Electronic Texts

The defining characteristic of the new curriculum is its digital delivery. As one of America's historically black colleges and universities (HBCU), Virginia State has many students who can't afford to buy a textbook outright. They might borrow it, check it out of the library, or try to get by in a course merely by listening to class lectures. When these methods are insufficient, they withdraw or fail, so the high cost of textbooks affects our retention rate.

We reasoned that, if we can provide textbooks digitally for free, students can have access to all the reading material in a class and maintain that access for their entire undergraduate careers. If, during freshman year, they purchase a three-inch thick textbook that explains forecasting models, will they keep that heavy book for the next three years? Probably not. But when they have to write business plans in their senior year capstone course, they need to refer back to that book. With our digital model, students will be able to download and store all of their core textbook content on their hard drives, and it will always be available to them.

Digitally delivered textbooks also have other benefits. They can include just-in-time case studies, which means their information will not be quickly outdated, as is often the case

with traditional textbooks. For instance, Enron provides a wonderful case study about ethics in the workplace, but the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is a more urgent and timely case to consider. When we bring current news stories into the classroom, students realize that they're not just learning theories, they're studying contemporary life.

In addition, because the books are delivered electronically, the material becomes more accessible. Faculty can create links directly to content that targets specific assignments. Students can download that material in PDF format and then access it on their computers, Kindles, iPads, and smartphones.

Finally, digital textbooks are environmentally friendly. We're teaching sustainability and corporate social responsibility in the undergraduate program. What better way to model these ideas than by showing students a way to conserve natural resources?

Obviously, if a school is delivering a digital program, students must have computers. There are computer labs throughout the university that all students can use, but next year we will require incoming students to bring their own laptops. We can justify the expense of a laptop—which might cost less than \$1,000—because we will be saving each student several thousand dollars in book fees over the course of the program. We will also work with our bookstore to develop a plan that makes these computers available and affordable to our students.

## Partners and Portals

To deliver our digital curriculum, we've partnered with two companies. The first is Flat World Knowledge, which publishes free and open textbooks for higher education. Textbooks were vetted by our faculty on a case-by-case basis before we decided which ones should be adopted, then Flat World created a portal that allows our students to read the textbooks online.

Our second partner is GoingOn.com, which has developed an online learning environment where faculty can incorporate social learning pedagogies. Students can use the site to communicate with others in their teams and cohorts, and they can develop networks around classes and outside interests. A student might download a book from Flat World and post something about it online, and everyone else in the group will be able to share their different perspectives.



We hope this platform not only will enable student-generated content, but also will foster a sense of community in the business school. Like other social media, it will allow faculty and students to create profiles about themselves, and this will give them a better sense of who is in their classes, their clubs, and the school of business as a whole.

Because we are just launching our digital portal, we can't yet deliver our entire program electronically. However, we've created a core curriculum that includes nine courses that span from the introductory freshman class to the senior year capstone course. Over the next three years, our goal is to reach 100 percent delivery of textbooks for 30 courses—the 17 in the core, as well as courses specific to certain majors.

But our digital education plans don't stop with electronic delivery. For instance, our revamped curriculum includes a business communications course, where students learn how to sell themselves to potential employers. We will create a digital recording of students in practice interviews at the beginning of the class, before they've learned how to present themselves, and again at the end of the class, when they've mastered communication skills. These interviews become part of their ePortfolios, electronic records of their four years at Virginia State University. Students will be able to reference these recordings to benchmark their progress.

In addition to the videos, the ePortfolios will include letters of recommendation and copies of papers and projects that have been graded and corrected. As part of the digital initiative, papers will be submitted digitally and feedback will be offered the same way. Some instructors may opt to deliver their comments in an audio file so that students will be able to hear their tone of voice and better gauge the nature of the critique.

By accessing all this material, potential employers will be able to see a graduate as a three-dimensional individual. Not only will they know what's on a student's résumé, they'll also be familiar with that student's mannerisms, thought processes, and analytical progress over four years.

### Challenges and Requirements

While we're very excited about our digitally delivered curriculum, other schools that want to try something similar should be aware of the challenges. First, for schools with



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our budget, it's an expensive endeavor. We're looking at investing \$250,000 in infrastructure, delivery, and maintenance costs. We expect to recoup that investment, but it's a significant outlay at the outset.


Second, it must be a rigorous program even if it's delivered digitally. Putting the textbooks of our core courses online was only one part of our curriculum redesign. We also developed an integrated, team-taught core curriculum with the goal of breaking down disciplinary silos. In addition, we partnered with local business sponsors and mentors who are providing students with real-world experiences, as well as real-

world business problems to solve. These changes were just as crucial as committing to digital delivery.

Third, the program won't succeed without the support of key members of the administration. If they're lukewarm, the dean will have too many battles to fight. I've had the full buy-in of our administrators, because they see the future and want to move our students in that direction.

Finally, it requires a supportive faculty, starting with a faculty champion. At VSU, our leader has been Andrew Feldstein, an assistant professor of marketing. He culled through potential vendors and helped articulate the digital curriculum to other faculty. Our department chairs immediately embraced the vision, and then the rest of the faculty did as well. Today, I see MIS professors talking to accounting professors who are talking to marketing or management professors as they discuss how to integrate the curriculum and engage our students. If deans don't have that interest from and interaction among faculty, they're sunk.

At Virginia State University, we have had the perfect combination of factors—an incredibly supportive administration, an enthusiastic faculty, a persuasive champion, and a revamped curriculum we could all believe in.

It has been a massive undertaking to make such dramatic changes in a year's time. The joke has been that I'm wearing the wheels off my roller skates. But the effort has been worth it, because our students are poised to graduate with the 21st-century skills they need to be successful throughout their careers. 

Mirta M. Martin is dean and professor of management at the Reginald F. Lewis School of Business at Virginia State University in Petersburg.