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14:1 Interview with Tim Stroud, President and CEO of the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL)

Editorial

Online education in K-12 schools is a relatively new, but rapidly growing, educational phenomenon that provides students in the elementary, middle, and secondary grades with computer-mediated educational programming. The extent of anticipated growth is reflected in the Education Commission of the States' projection that more than one in five K-12 students will be receiving a substantial portion of their instruction online by 2005 (Hassel and Terrell, 2004; <http://www.connectionsacademy.com/virtualreport.asp>).

Online education in the K-12 arena is increasing in scope and importance in a number of areas including **curriculum enhancement** for classroom instruction, **curriculum extension** through the addition of complete online courses, **complete curriculum delivery** through virtual or cyber charter schools, and **teacher professional development**. Advocates of this form of educational delivery promise a number of benefits including convenience, flexibility an enhanced and expanded curriculum, and the potential to personalize instruction.

To the extent that these benefits can be realized, online K-12 education offers an attractive and important educational enhancement of or alternative to traditional classroom instruction. However, institutionalization of any educational innovation within the overall national education system should be preceded by close study and evaluation of that phenomenon. A relatively new non-profit organization, the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL), has recently been formed to guide and support this process. In this issue of DEOSNEWS, NACOL president Tim Stroud discusses the goals and achievements of NACOL to date. Mr. Stroud was interviewed by Dr. Melody Thompson, Director of the American Center for the Study of Distance Education.

Interview with Tim Stroud, President and CEO of the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL)

Melody Thompson: The North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL) is a relatively new organization. What need was it developed to meet?

Tim Stroud: In October 2000, a national virtual high school symposium, “Building and Growing Your Online School,” was organized by CiTE, a division of eCollege. eCollege is a commercial provider of course management systems for the K-12 and higher education market. The idea for the conference grew out of repeated requests for information received by the existing virtual schools, particularly in Kentucky and Florida. Those states were the first to organize at the state-level, so they were strong models for other states. More than 200 attendees participated. Feedback throughout the meeting was very positive, with comments that it was a much needed “first meeting of its kind.” It was in the feedback session at that meeting that someone first suggested the need for a national organization for virtual high schools.

Also in October 2000, the National School Board Association’s (NSBA) “Teaching and Learning Conference” gathered a group of virtual high school leaders and led an informal discussion about the needs of K-12 virtual schools. There was a similar sense of need for more interaction and communication among the virtual schools. Out of that meeting a listserv was developed, but there has been no further organization under the auspices of the NSBA.

In response to the initial request for a national association, efforts were made to locate a potential ‘home’ for a virtual high school association within an existing organization. Organizations that were contacted included the National School Boards Association, the National Education Association, the SchoolTone Alliance, and representatives from the former Web-Based Education Commission (David Byer, former executive director and

Irene Spero, former public affairs director). The Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET) was also approached, but it was determined that K-12 falls outside their mission and scope. In each case, there was expressed support for the creation of a national association designed to work with virtual high schools, but no indication that a current organization was willing to expand its own mission and role to serve this new audience. These national education leaders were similarly unaware of any other existing education-related organization that would be interested in developing a virtual K-12 organization.

MT: How has NACOL developed to meet this need?

TS: For more than two years, leaders of virtual K-12 programs discussed their need to organize, share knowledge, and associate as a group. They did this through conferences and gatherings that were developed in response to the high level of individual inquiries to individual schools and programs.

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation sponsored two meetings to discuss the needs of the schools and the states involved with virtual school programs. The first meeting was held October 15, 2001 in conjunction with the CiTE Virtual High School Symposium in Chicago. Following this meeting, a series of conference calls took place to determine an issues agenda and to plan the next meeting.

The second meeting, a Virtual High School Summer Institute (<http://oasas2.ucsc.edu/vhsconf>), was held August 15-17, 2002 in Santa Cruz, CA. Additionally, there were several conference calls with interested parties to determine next steps and to identify the agenda for the Summer Institute.

The Virtual High School Summer Institute, hosted by the University of California College Preparatory Initiative (UCCP) and WCET, was attended by more than 50 virtual high school leaders from across the United States: from Hawaii and Alaska to New Jersey and Connecticut. An open dialogue and spirited sharing of knowledge on multiple levels

took place over three days. Out of this meeting, the group generated a preliminary vision and formed a planning committee.

MT: Tell me a little about yourself. What is your background? By what route did you end up as President/CEO of NACOL?

TS: My education and professional experience combined to prepare me for my responsibilities in this role. In particular, my experiences as a teacher, a legislative assistant, and a technology public policy coordinator for the American Federation of Teachers have provided a background that allows me not only to understand the needs and perspectives of the various public education stakeholders, but also to influence and negotiate change at both the institutional and public policy levels.

MT: What do you see as the most important developments in online learning at the K-12 level over the last few years?

TS: I see six key developments in the field:

1. Learning Management Systems that allow school districts to widely disseminate online learning courseware to students
2. Increased awareness that the use of technology to deliver content and offer direct instruction to students is an effective means for educating
3. The digitizing of traditional content with the added components of streaming video and virtual classroom spaces
4. The outreach that has taken place to allow more students, of diverse backgrounds, to participate in online learning courses and activities
5. Increased competition in the commercial marketplace that has led to the development of higher quality course content
6. Preliminary research that supports the efficacy of online learning

MT: What are the biggest challenges facing K-12 online teaching and learning?

TS: I see the following as major challenges:

1. Funding at the federal, state, and district levels to allow all students to experience the innovative uses of technology for online learning
2. Educating district, state, and national policy makers about the realities of online learning, thus dispelling the myth that all students involved in online learning are sitting behind a computer learning in a one dimensional environment
3. Helping policy makers to craft legislation that will make online learning a part of state and district education programs
4. Conducting and disseminating in-depth research that supports the use of online learning as a valid pedagogical approach
5. Educating teachers—beginning with pre-service programs—as to the pedagogy and methodology surrounding online teaching and learning

MT: There are a lot of organizations now that are attempting to support or promote online learning. What differentiates NACOL from these other organizations? Specifically, what does NACOL offer to its members and the field generally?

TS: NACOL is the only non-profit organization specifically designed to meet the needs of teachers, administrators and policy makers involved in online learning. Although there are other organizations that support the use of technology in the K-12 education community, NACOL provides the professional development (through regional and national symposiums and “webinars”) that addresses the specific needs of teachers working (or interested in working) in the online environment. Similarly, NACOL is leading the charge in cutting edge research, working with experienced academics and practitioners to establish the efficacy of online learning in the K-12 environment.

Finally, NACOL is the only non-profit organization that specifically acts as an agent of change to promote and expand online opportunities for students. Through our education efforts in the United States Congress, U.S. Department of Education, and with individual

state legislatures, more public and private entities than ever before are considering policy changes in order to allow using online learning to be a viable educational tool.

MT: I understand that NACOL wants to partner closely with higher education professionals and institutions. What types of collaborations would you like to see?

TS: Specifically, NACOL believes that all interested parties (individuals, institutions, non-profit associations, and corporate entities) have a place at the table when it comes to discovering what works and how to promote excellent education. In fact, in our work to date we have tried to ensure that the voices of all four constituencies are involved in the decision-making process. For higher education the most important role is in conducting the research—based upon the massive head start that higher education institutions have in this area—and helping to bridge the professional development gaps that new and existing teaching populations must overcome.

NACOL is currently partnering with researchers from the University of North Florida, University of South Florida, and the University of Minnesota to establish the effectiveness of online learning opportunities as compared to bricks-and-mortar environments. Similarly, NACOL has teamed up with Johns Hopkins University (JHU) to offer a regional professional development symposium for K-12 teachers and administrators so that participants have the advantage of learning best practices that arise from years of solid research conducted by JHU faculty in the use of technology and the principles of professional development.

MT: What major initiatives is NACOL currently undertaking and/or planning to undertake?

TS: Recently NACOL established the Online Learning Clearinghouse intended to be the most comprehensive source of information related to online learning in the United States. The first component of the Clearinghouse is an independently produced, comprehensive

database of online learning programs (by city and state) in the United States. Underway are several additions to the Clearinghouse including:

- A database of state laws that govern online learning
- A database of Canadian online learning programs
- A database Mexico's online learning programs
- Expansions of the current database to include courses and grade levels for online learning programs

Other long-term strategic objectives include:

- Efforts to establish standards for online learning courses
- Efforts to expand the professional development opportunities—both in person and via virtual classroom experiences—for teachers, administrators and education policy makers
- A State-of-the-State report on online learning for each of the United States
- Promotion of cross-border research exchanges between the United States, Canada, and Mexico
- White papers and publications that address specific content and pedagogical issues directly related to online learning
- A comprehensive blueprint that will help district and state policy makers more easily understand the investment and practical needs that must be met in order to establish quality online learning programs

MT: How can DEOSNEWS readers keep in touch with NACOL and stay informed about its future programs and activities?

TS: The easiest way is to become a member! NACOL offers a special annual membership for institutions of higher education and their faculty. Once the institution establishes membership ten members of the faculty will have access to the benefits of membership. Each member of NACOL receives a highly informative quarterly

newsletter, access to daily information about the happenings in the world of online learning through the NACOL Forums (<http://www.nacol.org/forums>), and significant discounts to all conferences and events sponsored by NACOL. Additionally, NACOL has made a commitment to look first to our member institutions when seeking partners to develop innovative research projects that will help carry out the organization's ever-changing strategic objectives. Information about NACOL in general and about joining is available at <http://www.nacol.org/>.

MT: Thank you, Tim, and good luck in building on the potential that is already quite evident in NACOL.