Virtual School Classification

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**Introduction**

This paper discusses classification of virtual schools. Terminology and models in academic literature are discussed. The student populations virtual schools accommodate are explored. Finally, the student author provides a justification for perferring one model over others found in the literature.

**Virtual Schools Terminology and Models**

There are different ways to categorize virtual schools. K-12 online learner refers to the practice of online learning for elementary and secondary students (Waters, Barbour, & Menchaca, 2014). Supplemental, online programs are generally defined as virtual schools (Waters, et al., 2014). Finally, cyberschool describes a publicly funded, full-time school (Waters, et al., 2014).

Virtual schools are generally online distance education programs available to K-12 students (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Barbour, et al. (2009) quotes Clark who categorizes virtual schools as government agencies at various levels as well as private and for-profit schools. Watson as quoted in Barbour, et al. (2009) categorizes virtual schools as supplemental programs, district cyber schools, and cyber charters are connected with commercial curriculum providers.

Stalker and Horn (2012) suggest a blended model that encompasses brick and mortar institutions as well as online learning. These two categories contribute to four blended models: the rotation, flex, self-blend, and enriched virtual models (Stalker and Horn, 2012). The rotation model rotates between learning modalities, where one of the learning modalities consists of online learning for a given course or subject (Stalker and Horn, 2012). Content delivered primarily via the Internet comprises the flex model (Stalker and Horn, 2012). In the self-blend model students supplement learning via online course(s) (Stalker and Horn, 2012). Students divide time between attending a brick-and-mortar campus and learning online in the enriched-virtual model (Stalker and Horn, 2012).

Matthew Wicks and Associates (2010) describe characteristics of virtual schools across ten dimensions. “These various dimensions represent hundreds of thousands of potential online program configurations although in practice there is a much smaller number of likely configurations” (Matthew Wicks and Associates, 2010, p. 11). The most significant dimensions are comprehensiveness, reach, delivery, and type of instruction (Matthew Wicks and Associates, 2010). Comprehensiveness characteristics include supplemental courses or full-time schools (Matthew Wicks and Associates, 2010). Reach refers to the area that the virtual schools cover from individual districts to global (Matthew Wicks and Associates, 2010). Delivery encompasses synchronous and asynchronous (Matthew Wicks and Associates, 2010). Type of instruction range from fully face-to-face to blended to fully online (Matthew Wicks and Associates, 2010).

**Virtual School Student Populations**

Virtual school classification can extend to student populations. Virtual schools provide an option for students wishing to accelerate academic progress (Watson, Gemin, Vashaw, & Pape, 2015). Students wishing to prepare for advanced placement exams or even pursue accelerated options for college can find accommodation at virtual schools (Watson, et al., 2015).

Students facing challenges can benefit from virtual schools (Watson, et al., 2015). Students who are in prison, are pregnant, or have dropped out can continue school virtually (Watson, et al., 2015). Credit recovery programs are provided virtually (Watson, et al., 2015). A virtual school “provides new possibilities for personalizing and accommodating learning environments for students with disabilities” (iNACOL, 2015, p. 5).

Finally, virtual schools accommodate students who do not desire to or cannot attend traditional schools. Athletes, homebound students, those in the arts can still attend school virtually (Watson, et al., 2015). Online supplemental materials can enhance the curriculum of home school students (Watson, et al., 2015).

**Author’s Recommendation for Categorization**

The student author favors the classification system that Matthew Wicks and Associates (2010) described. The Clark and Watson classification systems require a prior understanding of the author’s definitions (Barbour, et al., 2009). Both systems only provide a handful of terms to describe virtual schools (Barbour, et al., 2009). The categorization that Matthew Wicks and Associates (2010) discuss allows for hundreds of thousands of descriptions of virtual schools. This ensures the accuracy and completeness of the categorization (Matthew Wicks and Associates, 2010). In addition, the general terms used for each categorization are easily understood. Speciality student populations can further define virtual school classification.

**Conclusion**

This paper discussed the categorization of virtual schools. The Clark and Watson (Barbour, et al., 2009) models were rejected in favor of the Matthew Wicks and Associates schema. The student author felt this model allows for greater accuracy in describing virtual schools as well as allowing for ease of understanding. Virtual schools help diverse student populations to succeed: those wishing to accelerate academic progress, those facing challenges that could hamper scholastic success, and those students who do not desire to or cannot attend traditional schools.

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