

## Creating a Smith College Virtual Learning Commons

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Supporting student needs in their development of capacities inherent in and essential to a liberal arts education, and developing a culture of research, inquiry, and discovery broadly conceived, requires that the College provide students and teachers with both physical and virtual spaces which facilitate collaboration, interaction, and learning. We propose the creation of a *Virtual Learning Commons (VLC)* to provide teachers and learners with a digital environment that facilitates the creation, the management, the discovery, and the sharing of the many modes of digital content that can be used for teaching, for learning, and for research.

The goals of the *VLC* are to:

- Develop an infrastructure of connectivity and access that will expand support for teaching and learning while integrating many initiatives already existing on campus.
- Encourage cross-disciplinary teaching and research opportunities using digital media.
- Facilitate the use of digital resources at Smith, whether created locally or externally.
- Provide an environment for the seamless access and integrated management, preservation, and planning for the support of new curricular initiatives and pedagogy.<sup>1</sup>

### Current Environment

Smith has made significant investments in various enterprise systems for access, management, storage, and curriculum support across the institution. These systems include:

- **Aleph**, the powerful new Five College integrated library system
- **Moodle**, the Smith course management system which manages curriculum content
- **Insight**, the image database used for research, study, and classroom presentations across campus. Includes some faculty personal collections
- **E-Portfolios**, a pilot project for student generated content
- **Multi-MIMSY**, the collaborative system used by the Five Colleges and area museums
- **GIS systems** used in the sciences and other areas
- **SnapDragon**, an image collection management system
- **Archivist's Toolkit** being developed by Smith, Five Colleges, and several major research universities
- **Archives and Special Collections** digitized collections, image management databases, and finding aids database
- The **Five College fiber optic network** that provides high-speed connectivity

As robust as these systems are, there remains a large opportunity, as well as a challenge, to provide interconnectivity between systems, to allow cross platform search and discovery and to deploy campus-wide protocols to maximize and make more effective use of our investments. Moreover individual faculty, academic departments, student organizations and other departments on campus have collections of materials that serve their research and teaching, that relate to internships and study abroad and that support the co-curriculum. These largely stand in isolation, however. Coordinated management and improved access to these resources would be enhanced through development of a Smith Virtual Learning Commons.

Models for virtual learning commons can be found across the spectrum of higher education. Colleges and universities often work in partnership with consortia, museums, libraries, and research organizations. For example, Amherst College is adopting a suite of strategies and tools to meet pressing needs for access and storage of digital materials. Their membership in the consortial **Liberal Arts Scholarly Repository: Digital Commons** contributes to pooled research output from eight colleges. Highly successful and comprehensive digital initiatives can be found at most major research institutions. Harvard has its Library Digital Initiative,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the proposed initiative in "Global Visual Culture" put forth by the Museum and Art Department, will require a robust and accessible repository for digital publications, born-digital art, and research media. In addition, the VLC could enhance and support collaborative research projects among members of a given class (first-year, junior year), at the seminar level, and with a possible capstone experience within each student's major. It might also provide the environment for student portfolios.

Cornell University its Open Access Repository and the University of Michigan has its innovative *BlueStream* online environment. *BlueStream* features integrated tools for using digital video, audio, images, and documents in higher education. This initiative is transforming scholarship as researchers bridge the divide between "digital natives" (most students) and "digital immigrants" who may be less familiar with the environment but have much to record and share. Smith can re-imagine these models and lead the way for other liberal arts colleges through building the *VLC*.

### **The *VLC* Initiative**

The Virtual Learning Commons would provide:

- **robust search and access tools** that cross administrative boundaries and allow students and faculty to discover related materials
- **sharing/communication tools** to enable new and dynamic modes of intellectual discourse and promote user engagement with content, e.g., using the likes of social computing tools such as tagging, wikis and recommenders
- **community management tools** for faculty, students, and staff to collect, annotate, disseminate, and store research output in diverse formats
- **intellectual property safeguards** that ensure broad access while protecting the institution, faculty, and students
- **adoption of national and international standards** to ensure long-term sustainability of digital resources

### **Resources**

In order to realize the *VLC* the college needs to establish a collaborative organizational and technological infrastructure for *VLC* management and sustainability. We need to develop a clear locus for planning, management and assessment. A startup investment for digital repository software, hardware, and developing staff expertise is needed. Programming for interoperability is likely to be needed initially and perhaps on a long term basis.

Smith will re-imagine existing virtual learning environments and provide leadership to other liberal arts colleges through building the *VLC*. The *VLC* will provide a digital environment for faculty and students to find, collect, create, manage, and share content for teaching and learning. The *VLC* will promote and facilitate the use of primary resources for research and pedagogy by providing seamless access and integrated management, preservation, and planning for digital resource development. Teaching and learning would both be enhanced by providing a virtual learning environment that facilitates exploration and innovation.

### **Leadership and Partners**

The *VLC* would be a collaborative effort of Educational Technology Services, the Imaging Center, and the Libraries. Other academic support centers, e.g., the Science Center, the Museum, the Botanic Gardens, would be partners.

### ***VLC* Initiative Sponsors/Authors**

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