

Legal Services Training Consortium  
of New England

Status Update

Distance-Learning Institute  
July 2003

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## 1) Introduction

We are delighted to present this initial summary of our work to date on the Distance Learning Institute. We have accomplished a great deal since we began working on this project in December 2002. Specifically, we have: 1) deepened our understanding of the range of technologies and approaches encompassed by the term “distance learning”; 2) researched, evaluated and piloted a number of distance-learning tools; 3) selected a curriculum platform; 4) convened a national advisory committee to help guide our work; 5) begun the process of converting an initial course, Basic Lawyering Skills Training, to a distance learning format; 6) tested the use of specific distance learning tools within our current in-person training events, and; 7) developed a new Consortium website [www.legalaiduniversity.org](http://www.legalaiduniversity.org) - which will house our in-person curriculum as well as provide resources to support our distance learning activities.

We are now moving into the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the project which will include more focused attention on course development leading up to a formal pilot in which we will evaluate the curriculum design and associated technologies by offering segments of the course to a small group of legal aid advocates. This report provides an overview of the Distance Learning Institute’s purpose and goals, reviews our accomplishments to-date and outlines next steps.

### ***a. Background & Description of Need***

The Distance Learning Institute is a collaborative project of the Legal Services Training Consortium of New England and Legal Services Law Line of Vermont, and is funded by a national Technology Initiative Grant (TIG) from the Legal Services Corporation. Through the Distance Learning Institute, we will be able to provide legal aid programs and staff nationally with ready access to high-quality training and professional development resources specifically geared to the legal aid community.

Although training is a critically important component of a successful legal aid delivery, there is currently no national infrastructure and minimal state or regional structures to support the professional development needs of legal aid staff. Since the loss of the LSC-funded regional training centers in late 1995, training and professional development opportunities for legal aid staff have been extremely limited, and in many areas of the country, non-existent. Because development and sponsorship of such legal services specific programs is so labor and time-intensive, as well as expensive to produce and attend, too few programs have been able to dedicate resources to this important function.

As a result, new staff are too often not adequately introduced to the unique purpose and mission of legal aid practice. Left to their own devices, staff must learn and refine basic skills without support. This vacuum creates a sense of isolation that stifles growth and development, ultimately leading to high turn-over among new and more experienced staff. The result is lower quality service and less successful outcomes for legal services clients.

Even where legal services-oriented training programs exist it is difficult to make these programs available to everyone who needs them. Many staff are not able to participate in training events for a number of reasons: they cannot afford to take time away from their work when a particular training program is scheduled; the programs are not available when they need them; training budgets are limited; site and trainer resources are limited. Consequently, the immediate need for training and professional development for those individuals continues to go unmet.

### ***b. Distance Learning Institute Purpose & Goals***

Through the Distance Learning Institute, we now have access to a combination of distance-learning tools -- including web technology, email, video conferencing, asynchronous and synchronous group e-meetings -- through which we will make our training resources available to legal aid programs nationally. And with the help of our partner, Practising Law Institute (PLI), a nationally recognized expert in the delivery of continuing legal education, we will be able to produce lecture materials and other resources via CD ROM and streaming video for use in our on-line courses. Using these technologies, we will be able to bring exciting new training curricula, based upon the curricula already developed and tested by the Training Consortium, to offices, programs and individuals who have not had these opportunities available to them before.

## **2) Work to date**

### ***a. Understanding Distance Learning:***

Distance learning can be defined in many ways and a critical first step was to define and understand what was important in the Consortium's distance learning environment. In addition to the need to disperse and present information, we also wanted to continue to create a sense of community with the individuals and organizations who participate in our training programs. To do this, we decided on an approach that is often called "blended learning." Blended learning takes the best of distance learning -- the ability to participate in training when and where it is convenient for the learner, the ability to update training materials from a central point and the ability to include geographically dispersed experts in lectures and discussions - while incorporating techniques, including some in-person sessions, that allow participants to build a sense of community. In addition to online lectures, reference materials, discussions and assignments, the Consortium's courses will also include live chat, phone discussions, in-person meetings when appropriate and other techniques to build upon one of the most distinguishing aspects of our programs, that is, the sense of community and commitment that comes from learning with other legal aid staff.

In developing our initial work plan for the Distance Learning Institute, we needed to first define how distance learning would work in relation to the Consortium's needs. It is important to understand the similarities and differences between distance-learning and face-to-face learning, the challenges one faces when developing and delivering distance-learning content and what distance-learning factors are most critical to the organization.

The distance-learning format we are developing has many similarities to face-to-face instruction. Both are facilitated by an instructor with prepared content. Both provide opportunities for independent learning and group activity. Both offer chances for self-checks and instructor reviewed assignments and both can progress in a linear fashion, providing one lesson or content area after the previous one has been completed.

There are, of course, differences between distance-learning and face-to-face instruction that have been important for us to understand and keep in mind to ensure that instructional, interactive and learning quality are not compromised in a distance-learning environment. Three of the key differences between the two include:

- A distance-learning environment requires a high level of self-motivation on the part of the learner. The instructor does not see the learner at a pre-designated class time and the learner may be completing individual or group assignments without repeatedly logging into the online forum. This means that the instructor is not always aware of the amount (or lack) of participation from each learner.
- Unlike participants in a face-to-face course, participants in a distance-learning environment may be geographically dispersed. It may be difficult or impossible for them to meet face-to-face to complete group activities, conduct research or participate in study or review groups.
- Distance-learning requires the participants to have access to appropriate technology (including a PC, internet connection, printer and, in some cases, specific software in order to participate effectively.

Our research and discussions about distance-learning led us to develop a list of criteria for the Consortium's Distance-learning Institute which, in turn, structured our search for a distance-learning tool.

### ***b. Key Criteria for Evaluating Distance Learning Platforms***

Once we better understood how distance-learning could be used to deliver the Consortium's content, we developed a "desired features" list that included functionality for the courses, as well as requirements for whatever application platforms we finally selected. These included the following:

*i) Functionality* - the distance-learning system needs to include the following functions as part of the course delivery:

- Chat feature
- Lecture material - a place to post course content, lectures, etc.
- Threaded discussion areas - both for the larger group and also subdividable for smaller groups within a section.

- Ability to handle delivery of graphics and video and/or provide the ability to link to a CD or other media with these components.
- Links to other resources such as other websites, bookstore, etc.
- Sections where breakout groups can work together, possibly a whiteboard and a place where they can share documents, information, ideas, etc.
- Multiple occurrences of the same course with different "classes" or groups of students. This could be classified as an administrative function as well. Since we may have different "classes" or groups of people taking the same course at the same time, we need to be able to have a single course run for multiple classes or groups of people.
- Interactive activities with associated feedback - students may need to answer multiple-choice questions, type in answers to a short answer question, perform drag and drop or matching activities, etc.
- Course map

*ii) Administration* - The distance learning system must include the following features that make it easy for the learners and allow facilitators and administrators to easily maintain, update and track.

- Focus on ease of use.
- Intuitive - there should be little or no formal training required to use the system.
- No programming/html required to post announcements or location specific information. The trainers should have the ability to post information specific to their location or class.
- Reporting and tracking - trainers need to be able to pull reports that show participation, assignments completed/due, etc.

*iii) User Experience:*

- Ability to work with different technologies, software versions, hardware, etc.
- Intuitive/clearly defined sections and menus. Easy to navigate.
- No programming/html required. Users should be able to create their materials in an application in which they are comfortable and then cut and paste or export to the training tool.

*iv) Course Development:*

- Training should be provided or available on how to build a course.
- Flexibility to turn on and off features by section or lesson. We may not use all features all the time and we want lessons to reflect actual contents/features.
- Ability to import content from other applications. If a content expert submits materials in Word, we want to be able to easily put that content in the course.
- Custom look and feel that can vary slightly from course to course.
- Ability to see course from users perspective during course development.
- Excellent technical and user manuals/materials available.
- Customer support available.

### c. Platform Review

We then looked at a range of application platforms that could deliver against our criteria and provide our learners, trainers and administrators with an easy-to-use, powerful tool at a reasonable cost. Platforms are basically broken down into three categories; we reviewed a number of application platforms in each of these categories, considering the pros and cons of each.

- a. **Open source Tools** (Generally developed by an individual, thinktank or academic institution and made available over the internet at no cost. Examples include Manhattan and ATutor)
  - Pro's
    - Available at no cost.
    - Highly flexible
    - Can integrate best of multiple tools into custom solution
  - Con's
    - Often require additional programming and modifications to get full functionality or benefits of flexibility required by individual or organization. Programmers and developers not easy to find.
    - Require organization to host or find hosting for tool, content, participant records, etc.
    - Generally little or no training or customer service provided.
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- b. **Web-based Classroom Tools** – (Fully functional, tested and supported tools developed by software companies and sold through licensing or purchase agreements to users. Examples include Blackboard and Ecollege)
  - Pro's
    - Fully functional, ready-to-use tools available immediately.
    - Require very little programming skills for developers.
    - Offer customer support and training.
    - Incorporate many features and functionality
    - “Tried and true” solutions used by many academic and non-academic organizations.
  - Con's
    - Can be expensive.
    - Limited to features, functionality and organization of specific tool.
    - May require programming skills to go beyond what is already built into system.
    - Some tools are new – concerns over whether vendor will continue to operate long-term.

- c. **Development Tools** (Programming or development tools used by developers and programmers to create a variety of applications, including online classrooms. Examples include Director and Authorware.)
- Pro's
    - Provide fully customizable and very flexible solution.
    - Developed specifically for distance-learning applications.
    - Relatively easy to find programmers and developers on freelance basis.
    - Used in many academic and non-academic organizations.
    - Customer support and training available.
  - Con's
    - Not ready-to-use solution.
    - Can become costly quickly.
    - Must purchase tool up-front and then stay current with updates.
    - Customer support and training available, but often for additional cost.
    - As tools become outdated, it can be difficult to update and maintain course.
    - Each course requires programming.

After reviewing the range of available tools, we selected several tools to explore in more depth examining each of their features, functionality and price structure. We also reviewed a number of existing distance learning courses to learn more about how other organizations have structured their learning activities. Finally, we developed and evaluated pilot units for BLST on two platforms – Ecollege.net and Blackboard.com.

#### **d. Tool Selection**

After an extensive definition phase, followed by a platform review, we selected Blackboard as the tool for the Consortium's Distance-learning Institute. Blackboard is one of the most popular and widely used web-based classroom tools and offers affordable access through our membership in the Connecticut Consortium on Distance Learning.<sup>1</sup> Blackboard provides the features and functionality that are important to the Distance Learning Institute including online content, group activities, assignment collection, media integration, participant tracking options and more. Also, once we revise and complete the course content and instructional design, Blackboard will allow us to get our courses up and running relatively quickly.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.ctdlc.org/About/mission.html> to learn more about the Distance Learning Consortium of Ct.

### 3) Current Work

Now that we have selected our curriculum platform, we are now focusing more intently on getting our curriculum ready for posting on the platform and developing strategies for including short and long-term evaluation processes into our work. Specifically, we are:

- Converting selected sessions from our **Basic Lawyering Skills and Case Planning** trainings from in-person to distance-learning formats. In most instances, this involves the creation of new content and activities to support the conversion since all existing materials are not appropriate for a distance-learning format.
- Beginning development of a video, “**Voices of Legal Aid**”, which will provide an inspirational introduction to the BLST training. While thinking about how to turn a live lecture into something that could be delivered electronically we concluded that this could be delivered with a 20-30 minute video that combines stories of new lawyers, clients, and experienced lawyers in a way that shows why people come to legal aid, what legal aid means to clients, and how a legal aid career fulfills and rewards advocates. This will all be done through the words of people being interviewed; the interviewer would not be shown. The interviews will be edited together, cutting back and forth among people to create a narrative that moves from hopes and expectations to accomplishments to reflections on the value of legal aid as a career.
- **Scripting demos** for sessions on client interviewing and counseling to be filmed at the PLI studio in late August.
- Developing our own **website** – [www.legalaiduniversity.org](http://www.legalaiduniversity.org) -- which will include all of our curriculum and as well as easier-to-use formats for downloading training designs and materials. The site will also provide a link to our Blackboard courses once they are operational. The site will continue to be linked to and searchable through the NLADA site.
- Developing strategies for building **short and long-term evaluation** processes into our work. At a minimum, we will develop an on-line evaluation form which will assess participants’ initial reactions to the course and will ask questions related to course content, facilitator availability and assistance, software and navigation, training goals and objectives and overall impressions of the distance learning environment. We will also develop follow-up questionnaires to be sent to participants three to six months after they complete the course. This questionnaire will ask questions to determine how and if participants are using the knowledge and skills covered in the course.

We have also established an advisory committee who will help steer the course development and implementation. The advisory committee will play a key role in the following activities:

- Review of course content, structure and activities.
- Recommendations for additional courses and/or course content.
- Providing feedback on course as presented in Blackboard.
- Organizing and evaluating results of a pilot.
- Marketing the course/institute.
- Providing materials for the courses – case studies, small group activities, etc.
- Other activities to be determined through follow-up calls to each member.

#### **4) Lessons Learned**

Over the last many months, we have learned a great deal about distance learning and how we can most effectively use distance learning tools to provide training and professional development resources to legal aid programs and staff. Some key lessons include:

1. Course materials will need to be refined, revised and, in some cases, redesigned, for use in a distance-learning environment.
2. A sense of community can be built through distance learning, but it requires additional work since it does not come as naturally as it would in a face-to-face environment.
3. No single tool is ideal – the selected tool, to some degree, dictates the structure and organization of the course.
4. Each step takes longer than originally anticipated.

#### **5) Summary**

We have come a long way since starting the Consortium's Distance-Learning Institute. Our accomplishments to-date are many and include a review of course content, review and selection of a tool, development of a working pilot that we can continue to refine and perfect, the establishment of an advisory committee that will play a key role in our continued success and the development of a clear picture of what the distance-learning institute will look like, who it will serve and how it will be developed.

There is still much to do, but we are off to a great start and our research has provided a strong background from which to develop our Distance Learning Institute.

For more information on the **Distance Learning Institute**, contact Ellen Hemley, Director, Legal Services Training Consortium ([ehemley@mlri.org](mailto:ehemley@mlri.org)), Tom Garrett, Executive Director, Legal Services Law Line of Vt. ([tgarrett@lawlinevt.org](mailto:tgarrett@lawlinevt.org)) or Hugh Calkins, Director of Research & Development, Pinetree Legal Aid ([hcalkins@ptla.org](mailto:hcalkins@ptla.org))

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