



First Steps in Designing a Corporate University: Issues & Options

by Gloria A. Regalbuto, PhD

Because I've had the unusual luck to have designed and implemented several corporate universities for a variety of companies, I've managed to acquire a great deal of practical information about their structures, processes, and pitfalls. I've had many calls from individuals and corporations who believe they want one—often because their competitors have one—and don't know where to begin.

Starting a corporate university requires a great deal of patience, persistence, and organizational know-how. It has taken me an average of two and a half to three years to get one running and able to sustain itself. There are many issues to consider, but the very first and most important one is to define what your management means when they say they want one.

What's a Corporate University?

For those of us who've been in the field of performance technology more than ten years, the current level of interest in corporate universities is nothing short of miraculous. However, it's the type of concept that causes us to be both ecstatic and paranoid. Maybe I'm alone in this, but I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop

and for all those corporate academic walls to come tumbling down the next time the stock market dips below 6,000.

Much of my concern stems from the belief that most corporate universities are not designed to improve performance, but to deliver curriculum. Most are modeled after four-year colleges instead of best-in-class corporate performance-improvement systems. Having struggled for years to convince executive management teams that we're about more than "training and education" and having fought for a place at the "we're-all-focused-on-the-bottom-line" table, I'd hate to find ourselves pushed away because we'd fallen for an ivy-covered vision.

The term "ivy-covered" reminds me of Frank Lloyd Wright, who said something like: it's better to be an architect than a physician because a doctor's mistakes require them to bury the dead where an architect's errors can be concealed by the judicious placement of ivy. It makes me wonder what's behind the ivy.

Clearly, the establishment of curriculum and the delivery of classroom training are not enough. It's my belief that, to be worthy

of the investment and trust of a corporation, a university must be a process by which all individuals participating in an organization's systems are involved in continuous learning for the purpose of performance improvement.

This approach purposely incorporates the management of intellectual capital along the entire value-chain and process flow of an organization, that is, suppliers/vendors, employees, clients, and the community. A university founded on this assumption broadly includes the improvement of individuals, teams, and organizational performance.

How Do You Ensure that Your Corporate University Is Focused on Human Performance Improvement?

I make the assertion that a corporate university must produce results that add value to its organization in order to achieve sustainable success. Any training function created in a "we-haven't-had-anything-for-years-so-anything-looks-great-to-us" vacuum is bound to be successful—for a while.

So what must a university do to ensure its ability to add value? There are several "critical success factors:"

1. A university must have a clear mandate and support from all levels of management. To accomplish this management must understand training's close linkage with bottom-line strategy.
2. The university's mission, vision, goals, and processes must be clearly linked to the organization's business objectives. This is the single most critical factor in building a university that is sustainable.
3. It must be closely partnered with line management to ensure that skills can be transferred to the workplace.
4. It must take responsibility for analyzing the organizational systems that impact performance (i.e., removes barriers to performance).
5. A corporate university should also take responsibility for the management of intellectual capital, whether it is stored on paper, computer, or human systems. This doesn't mean that it should usurp the responsibilities of existing organizational functions (i.e., information systems), but that it is ready to partner with other functions to ensure that intellectual capital is well managed.
6. It should target the organization's entire customer supply chain. This includes key customers, product suppliers, and the community that supplies employees. While most universities focus initially on their internal systems, they should work toward adding value to upstream and downstream systems because these inevitably impact the organization's performance.

7. A university must be considered to be a process, not a place.
8. It should also continuously explore new ways of learning and provide a venue for innovation and change so that the organization is ensured of the most effective and efficient means of managing its human capital.

How Do You Establish a Corporate University's Mission?

A corporate university is a supplier of products and services to a corporation. It is an internal consulting service and should be thought of as a business unto itself. Getting the mission right is critical because it must be aligned with the mission of the organization it serves. In short, you must ask "What does the corporation expect the university to be able to do for it?"

Two major factors are involved in determining the university's mission:

- The corporation's human resource development philosophy, and
- The types of products and services the university is expected to provide.

There are many possible products and services a corporate university can provide. Figure 1 can be used to determine the types of products and services needed based on the corporation's human resource development philosophy.

How Do You Create a Business Plan?

As I said earlier, a university should be thought of as a business. As with any new business, you should construct a comprehensive business plan. Consider including the following information:

- The mission, vision, and strategy.
- A description of your target market(s), that is, who is your customer and what do they expect and need?
- A description of planned products & services based on your evaluation of customer expectations and needs.
- An organizational design that meets the needs of your customers most effectively.
- A workflow process that focuses on creating maximum value for the customer with the minimum number of steps.
- A staffing plan based on necessary functions, expected volume of work, and effective customer access.
- Specific and rank-ordered business objectives laid out in a year-by-year, progressive timeframe.
- Budgets & financial plans.

If you want to...	Then your University should...	And/or...
Instill specific cultural values in all employees (e.g., excellence in customer service & quality, or valuing diversity)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have centralized/standardized design capacity • integrate values with accountability, reward, & recognition systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • embed those values in all training activities and interventions • provide orientation training for all employees
Create alignment with corporate mission, vision, & strategic plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have a direct link to strategic planning activities & business plans • allocate training resources based on strategic goals • incorporate measurement and evaluation systems to mark progress toward plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set priorities for design & development resource allocations based on strategy (as with Capital Asset budgets) • Integrate measurement & evaluation systems with accountability, reward, & recognition systems
Improve workplace performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide performance consulting service • design performance management systems • design performance interventions • establish needs forecasting & assessment systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assign performance consultants to lines of business • train managers in performance analysis techniques
Support organizational development & change efforts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensure management's involvement in leading & reinforcing change efforts • be used as a standard communication channel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide change-management training • establish change-champion or change-agentry network
Support continuous quality improvement systems & processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide training & education for entire supply chain • provide process quality analysis facilitation & training • integrate university with quality team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide instruction on quality processes & systems • incorporate quality objectives into performance management systems
Use education & training as a tool to recruit & retain quality employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide career development training in addition to current job skills • provide tuition reimbursement • support professional development to reduce obsolescence in the marketplace • provide programs that will help bond employees to the corporation (e.g., family-based or work-family training) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide self-enrichment programs • provide training for employee's families (e.g., retirement planning, work-family issues) • provide for career counseling & analysis • establish career-path planning systems • maintain employee skills inventories • train managers to coach in career development • establish formal or informal mentoring programs • consider accreditation & licensure issues
Use education & training as a critical manpower planning tool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • integrate with corporate succession plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • train managers in succession planning • training managers to evaluate based on standardized core competencies
Improve workforce quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set skill- & competency-based job descriptions & standards • provide job-related training • provide recruiting standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work with local communities to build labor-force quality • work with schools to influence curriculum • assist with pre-employment testing designs • consider pre-employment training investments
Enhance customer relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide customer seminars • generate revenue through client training • provide training for community service • include community issues in business strategy & planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • linkages with schools & community colleges for exchange of services • provide curriculum advisory support for public education institutions • consider employee sabbaticals for community service

Figure 1. Products and Services.

Some of these elements are more difficult to design than others. Some require that you integrate with existing systems more carefully.

How Will the University Integrate with Existing Functions?

A corporate university is a service function within an organization. Its role must be both integrated with and differentiated from the roles of other, similar functions. The role definitions listed below, stated in very simplistic terms, may help to clarify those relationships.

- **Human Resource Functions:** Manage the acquisition and retention of those associates whose performance is needed.

- **Information Technology Functions:** Manage the provision of information needed for job performance.
- **Employee Communication Functions:** Disseminate information needed for job performance.
- **Corporate Universities:** Ensure the capacity for worthy, on-the-job performance.
- **Individual Managers:** Ensure on-the-job-performance.

What Will the University Do?

Every function within an organization has a system of processes that must be performed to achieve its mission and goals. Figure 2 lists the functions and processes that must be incorporated into every corporate university.

PROCESS	FUNCTION	DELIVERABLES	METHODS	STAFF NEEDED
NEEDS ANALYSIS	Continuous auditing & anticipation of skill-development and information-acquisition needs of employees across functions and geographic distributions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizationwide skill needs assessment • Early warning system for skill needs changes • Continuous monitoring of client needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University director is part of management team • Advisory board provides strategic links • Need surveys • Focus groups • Corporate training plans • Internal consulting to functions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals with holistic view of organization • Professional in organizational development, or performance consulting
PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS	Process for determining causes of performance issues & whether or not the issues are related to skills & knowledge of the workforce or to other organizational conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Description of causes of performance problems • Identification of performance barriers • Identification of most effective & cost-beneficial intervention • Cumulation of cost/benefit data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews • Surveys • Focus groups • Performance analysis • Performance observation • Curriculum design methods • Monitor key indicators • Statistical process control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideally — Line managers conduct their own performance analysis • Performance consultants to managers
COST/BENEFIT ANALYSIS	Process for determining probable return-on-investment (ROI) or return-on-mission (ROM) for performance interventions and deciding whether or not to proceed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost-effective interventions • Cost comparisons of alternate intervention methods • Savings base established for ROI or ROM calculations • Data to establish priorities between and among various projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine targeted performance • Set savings base for longitudinal evaluation of organizational impact • Compare benefit of change to cost of status quo • Compare costs of one delivery method to another • Compare costs of one kind of intervention over another • Evaluate long-term value of ROM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training evaluation skills • Costing skills
JOB & TASK ANALYSIS	Process for describing the duties and tasks of specific occupations to derive skill-needs by job title	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skill inventories • Uniform skill taxonomy, which can be used for recruitment, appraisal, and compensation evaluation • Identification of skill links between job titles and across functions for career-path planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DACUM Process • Job observation • Individual interview • Focus groups • Steps include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Determine job duties — Compare with job family — Determine job-task requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructional systems designers • Curriculum designers • Incumbent subject matter experts (Exemplary Workers)

Figure 2. Functions and Processes.

PROCESS	FUNCTION	DELIVERABLES	METHODS	STAFF NEEDED
JOB & TASK ANALYSIS CONTINUED		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to build modular (more targeted) curricula job descriptions for integration with other HR functions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Derive skill, knowledge, & competency needs Write learning & performance objectives 	
INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEMS DESIGN (ISD)	Systemized process for the development of performance interventions, including, but not limited to, classroom-based interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-paced, programmed learning interventions Job aids Classroom training Computer-based training Inter/Intranets Distance education Multimedia Electronic performance Support systems Facilitated "work-outs" Job redesign Organizational development Process analysis 	Primary steps in ISD method: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess relevant characteristics of performers Analyze characteristics of work setting Clarify and detail learning & performance objectives Establish performance measures Sequence objectives Specify instructional strategies Design materials Evaluate design 	ISDs (Master's degree or equivalent experience) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multimedia producers Video/Audio producers CBT CDi, CD Rom programmers
ADMINISTRATION	Scheduling, recordkeeping, & reporting functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Registration & scheduling Recordkeeping & reporting Notifications, prework & followup Duplication & distribution of materials Materials production Accounting & budget maintenance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Options include: Call-director, or call-center registration & servicing HRIS system maintenance Outsourcing management Computer-driven registration Hand registration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administrative & clerical Excellent customer service Data-entry & Database management skills Duplication services Desktop publishing
MEETING & FACILITIES PLANNING	Identification of meeting resources (hotel, meeting space, transportation, AV-media, etc.); contract negotiation & meeting space planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cost-effective use of existing facilities Ability to negotiate competitive contracts for travel, per diem, facilities, & equipment Standards control Best-practice database Event-planning 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional meeting planner Site managers for existing facilities
DELIVERY	Distribution of training materials & interventions, especially stand-up training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stand-up training Facilitation Coaching Local distribution of self-paced or other-than-classroom interventions Train-the-trainer certification Distance learning 	Depends on intervention medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trainer Educator Manager of trainers Instructors, leased trainers Subject matter experts (SMEs)
PROGRAM EVALUATION	Evaluation of life cycle and/or organizational impact of interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formative evaluation (evaluation of design in process) Summative Evaluation (evaluation and postdesign testing) Type I: Customer Satisfaction; Changed Attitude Type II: Increased Knowledge Type III: Skill Acquisition Type IV: Organizational Impact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survey Observation Focus groups Pilot programs Longitudinal performance studies Statistical analysis Cost-benefit analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instructional systems designer Psychometric designers Professional training evaluator

Figure 2. Functions and Processes, continued.

Who Needs to Be on Staff?

Depending on the size of the audience served and the size of the staff needed, staff roles can be broadly based or narrowly niched. The most common job family for HRD includes:

- performance consultants
- instructional systems designers
- multimedia design & production specialists
- meeting planners
- stand-up trainers (delivery)
- general office manager
- administrative specialists (registrars; call-center staff; materials, production, & distribution)
- career advisors/career-path planners
- librarian
- AV systems manager

Figure 3 provides an idea of the kinds of duties and tasks performed by each function. The roles and functions listed in Figure 2 can be clustered differently with one person performing combined roles. The way that the labor is divided will depend on the volume of work experienced.

ROLES	FUNCTIONS
PERFORMANCE CONSULTANTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal Consulting • Performance Management Coaching • Needs Analysis • Performance Analysis • Cost/Benefit Analysis • Process Facilitation • Resource Identification & Referral • Vendor Relationship Management
INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEMS DESIGNERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audience Analysis (T-POP) • Job & Task Analysis • Curriculum Design • Instructional Systems Design • Evaluation Design • ROI Calculation
MULTIMEDIA DESIGN & PRODUCTION SPECIALISTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multimedia Design, including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – computer-based training – electronic performance support tool design – CDi or CD-ROM design & production – video design & production management – distance education process design
MEETING PLANNERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting & Event Planning • Logistics Planning • Contract Negotiation • Vendor Relationship Management • Meeting Space Planning & Allocation
STAND-UP TRAINERS (DELIVERY)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain Subject-Matter Expertise • Course Preparation • Course Management (Updating & Revision) • Stand-up Delivery • Course Evaluation • Student Evaluation • Course Data-Gathering

Figure 3. Duties and Tasks of Each Function.

ROLES	FUNCTIONS
GENERAL OFFICE MANAGER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program Scheduling • Work Distribution & Scheduling • Recordkeeping & Report Production • Contract Negotiation • Financial Management & Budgeting • Work Process Management • Customer Service & Counseling • Registration Process Management • Catalog/Calendar Production • Materials Production & Distribution Management
ADMINISTRATIVE SPECIALISTS (REGISTRARS; CALL-CENTER STAFF; MATERIALS, PRODUCTION, & DISTRIBUTION)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Registration & Scheduling • Data Entry • Notifications, Pre-work & Follow-up • Duplication • Materials Production • Customer Service & Information Dissemination • Office Supply Inventory Control • Tuition Reimbursement Administration
CAREER ADVISORS/ CAREER-PATH PLANNERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual Values & Skills Analysis • Job Matching • Job Description Files Maintenance • Job-Family Data Maintenance • Career Fair Planning • Career Advising & Counseling • Resume Preparation Counseling • Interviewing Counseling • Job Search Techniques Counseling
LIBRARIAN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning Resource Cataloging • Acquisition of Self-paced Learning Materials • Materials Lending & Inventory Control • Resource Information Provision • Customer Service • Individual Self-paced Training Recordkeeping
AV SYSTEMS MANAGER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inventory Control • AV Maintenance • Location Control & Delivery

Figure 3. Duties and Tasks of Each Function, continued.

What Information Systems Will the University Need?

Many data systems are required to run a university. A corporate university is, after all, tasked with the responsibility of managing intellectual capital. This requires a database. Several types of databases may be needed for a corporate university, including:

- registration & scheduling systems
- individual training records (part of HRIS)
- inventory control systems
- course & learning resource cataloging systems
- budget & accounting system
- project management systems
- course/intervention design systems
- distance education systems (e.g., intranet)
- LAN administration
- library control system

What Kind of Resource Allocation System Will Be Needed?

Training needs are very difficult to anticipate and in many cases training resources are used up on a “first-come-first-served” basis. To maintain alignment with the corporation’s strategic plans, a system must be in place for setting priorities for the allocation of human resource development funds. There are several ways of accomplishing this task:

- Establishment of a “human capital asset request” plan tied to yearly budgeting and profit planning processes;
- Establishment of a permanent university advisory board, which sets priorities for course development and expenditures;
- Establishment of a chain of command for training priority decisionmaking;
- Establishment of authority within the university structure to establish project priorities; and
- Establishment of curriculum committees by job-family and allowing the setting of group budgets & priorities.

What Kind of Equipment Capital Is Needed?

In addition to setting priorities for development costs, a university also has continuous maintenance costs related to staffing, facilities, equipment, and other expenses required to continue the delivery of existing programs. Some choices can be made about methods of delivery, which greatly affect capital resource investments. Some of these delivery methods require the following:

- Design facilities
- Production facilities
- Multimedia computer stations
- Design and production software
- Remote learning stations
- Learning software and materials
- Intranet access
- Uplink and downlink facilities
- Training rooms & meeting facilities
- Training room-based AV equipment (e.g., overhead projectors, slide projectors, computer displays, television sets, video players & recorders, flipcharts, and CDi players).

What Kind of Infrastructure Is Needed?

Any corporate function requires a support structure to keep it running smoothly. As you design your university, you should consider incorporating the structures and processes shown in Figure 4.

If You’ve Carefully Considered These Issues & Options...

You’re more than ready to get your university off the ground. However, accept the fact that you probably won’t

STRUCTURE/ PROCESS	DESCRIPTION
PLANNING	The method by which design and delivery schedules are established
REGISTRATION	The method by which students are identified and recorded as attendees for particular courses or intervention delivery
SCHEDULING	The establishment of a master schedule of events, their locations, and other necessary logistics
CONTRACTING	The establishment of a standard methodology for negotiating and contracting with vendors. The maintenance of performance standards by those vendors and the monitoring of their performance against standards
FINANCE	The establishment of methods for billing, accounting, and budgeting for training and development resources. This may include tracking corporatwide expenditures for human resource development, whether or not those expenses are incurred by the university or by other departments
RECORD KEEPING	The maintenance of corporate, business, unit, and individual development records
MANAGEMENT REPORTING	The production of information to assist corporate and business unit managers in decisionmaking and regulatory reporting
CLIENT COMMUNICATION	The establishment of a system for continuous availability of development opportunity information to users. This includes the establishment of call centers, catalogs, seminar announcements, calendars, marketing materials, or other communication vehicles
QUALITY CONTROL	The development of and adherence to product, process, and customer-service quality standards

Figure 4. Structures and Processes.

have the luxury of making all these decisions and planning all these systems up front. It just takes too long. By the time a corporation decides to act on its need for a university, it has a pent-up need that is at least three years old. Patience in the system will be minimal.

The point is to make sure that you consider all of these issues at some point in time. The longer you wait, the harder they are to implement. On the other hand, it’s often good to build up a history so you’ve got a better sense of your client’s needs and the volume of work you’re going to have to take on.

The key to success at this point is to keep yourself and your staff from getting discouraged. Remind them that a university is not a “thing,” but an evolving process.

What defines your mastery?

I suspect my "mastery" falls in the area of designing and managing training functions (or corporate universities). For me, mastery of any discipline requires four critical elements: 1) Knowledge, 2) Experience, 3) Examination, and 4) Communication.

In any field, you've got to start with a base of knowledge—a set of assumptions about how things work—which you may acquire through reading or from a teacher or mentor. In my case a statistical quality control consultant introduced the ideas which formed the basis of my first "corporate university" workflow. My education as a social scientist also provided me with a set of methodologies about human behavior in general.

But, knowledge of its own isn't much good unless its applied in a very wide variety of circumstances. Only then can you tell which of your assumptions hold true consistently, which should be modified on a case-by-case basis, and which should be pitched entirely as bogus. I've been lucky enough to be in the field for 18 years and to work in just about every standard industrial code.

None of that experience is worth much without examination: What worked? What didn't? Why didn't it? What can I learn from this for later application? The norms, the "rules," the patterns of behavior only become visible when you look back closely at what you've done. I've done this quite consciously and documented my experiences in presentations and articles throughout my career.

Finally, I don't think you acquire "mastery" without talking about what you've done. Usually, the communication is done for the purpose of sharing with others in your discipline. Often, you try to save a protégé steps and provide them with more upfront knowledge than you had to start. In this way, a discipline grows and evolves.

However, the cynical side in me also says that you're only a master if other people say you are. A true master is constantly looking for the next truth, the next skill, and isn't focused on attaining some predetermined point of excellence; so, they'll never be able to see themselves as "masters."

Don't Forget to Celebrate!

The initiation of a corporate university is an event that requires widespread recognition. Not only is it the result of significant effort, but a university is a process that requires the participation of all the associates in the corporation. Unless its start-up is broadcast widely, participation and access will be limited.

The opening of the university should be a gala event that is visibly attended by all levels of management to show their support of its processes and activities. Those who have dedicated effort to planning and initiating the university should be thanked and recognized for their efforts. (This means you and your staff!!)

Most of all, the launch of a university must be fun and inviting. It should be clear to everyone that the university belongs to all staff members and that they all play a role in—and benefit from—the continuous learning of the organization.

I've often had to console my staff members and myself over the arduousness of the task of starting a university. It can be frustrating and continuously feel as though you're taking as many steps backward as forward. Think of it as a dance, and you'll be all right. What better way have you got to spend your time? It's worthy work. What more can you ask for? 🌟



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poration, and as Senior Management Development Advisor for the Columbus, Ohio headquarters of Battelle Memorial Institute. Specializing in start-up training functions, Gloria has initiated departments in eight organizations. She has been active in the profession since 1973 and has published or presented articles on many training related topics. She is an active member of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD). She received the prestigious Gordon Bliss Memorial Award in 1996, served as National President in 1991 on the National Board of Governors, and the Board of Directors from 1987 to 1991. She was a member of ASTD's National Planning Committee (Chair in 1988) and the Planning Committee for the first National Technical

Skills Conference. Dr. Regalbuto is also an active member of the International Society for Performance Improvement and has served on their National Research Committee and was the founding President of the Heartland Chapter in Columbus, Ohio.

She has received two ISPI National Achievement Awards. Gloria is an actively publishing poet with many publications in literary magazines, several awards in competitions, and a book, *No Winter but this Cold Rain* (Bottom Dog Press). She received Ohio Arts Council Individual Artist Fellowships for poetry in 1987 and 1992. Gloria can be reached at gregalbuto@bbw.com.