**TOOL SUMMARY**
This tool was created by the VIN for community college deans and key staff who will implement the virtual incubator on a day-to-day basis. Because delivering services face-to-face in brick-and-mortar facilities is more commonly discussed, this tool aims to familiarize colleges with ideas to consider when creating a virtual incubator and community of practice.

**THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN VIRTUAL AND DISTANCE LEARNING**
Virtual learning involves the ready-access of information or services and involves individuals connecting at their leisure despite obstacles like geographic distance (highly rural communities) or incompatible schedules (midnight courses). In addition to overcoming challenges like these, which are often seen as “negatives,” virtual learning offers up a myriad of new “positives” to the learner, teacher and community. For example:

- New discussion threads can be built out by more people in less time
- Subject-matter experts can share content directly with those seeking information
- A new kind of “community of practice” can emerge for the college, the community at large and the entrepreneurs who would seek to build an idea into a business

While “virtual” has a broader definition in community colleges as it relates to entrepreneurial education and training, the term “distance” is frequently interwoven into these discussions. However, distance learning is not always equivalent with the kind of opportunities the VIN wishes to convey related to virtual incubation.

- **Distance learning and accessing of a service** involves some method of interaction among students, teachers, classes and groups, or among entrepreneurs, incubator advisors and other companies, which takes place outside of a physical space they may occupy together. Person-to-person, person-to-group and/or information exchanges can take place via any medium, including snail mail (correspondence courses), telephone, videotapes, email, text, online group discussions or periodic movement across distances, such as driving between college and business.

- **Virtual learning and accessing of a service almost always involves using a “virtual” space or environment that has been established for a particular purpose.** The purpose may be a school/college course (increasingly typical and usually established by the teacher/professor) or a regularly occurring and often routine discussion among a group, such as an organization or committee meeting, social interaction, or information exchange and networking among people with similar interests or concerns. For example, “Backpack” is a virtual space that enables a group to communicate simultaneously via emails to the site for comment or posting information. The group may also communicate via conference calls and blast emails with attachments and links to websites, but Backpack enables this communication and information exchange without the need to synchronize schedules for a call or to maintain an email list for the group.
RATIONALE FOR USING A VIRTUAL SPACE ENVIRONMENT

The two most common purposes for establishing a virtual space environment are:

- To provide a full spectrum of information for anyone with access. Depending on the sophistication of the technology platform, information may include pdf and other types of files; links to relevant websites, video, streaming video of a “live” presentation—a lecture, panel discussion, panel with audience Q&A, or series of conference sessions; or live one-on-one or group discussions via video/audio link from any location and time zone.

- To exchange information among a community. Because a space can be “monitored” by a person designated or agreed on by a group, a virtual environment enables larger numbers of individuals to access information, advice, assistance and networking opportunities without being face-to-face with anyone or requiring the individual attention of one person.

A virtual incubator could offer access to all of the materials that anyone offers and recommends, access to other entrepreneurs and incubators, remote one-on-one interaction with an expert, and even depending on sophistication of technology—access to a business or social occasion where most of the participants are in one place.

A virtual learning/service environment enables colleges to:

- Save time
- Provide access to a standard vehicle for collecting information that meets quality control requirements
- Facilitate the integration of distance and campus-based learning or of learning across different organizations and businesses
- Increase the accessibility of information and resources
- Promote interaction among business owners, academicians and experts
- Develop learning communities

COMMUNITY COLLEGE VIRTUAL INCUBATION SERVICES

- **Virtual Office**: Provides clients with web phone, web fax, web conference and web apps that resemble MS Office products as well as, calendar, contacts, notes and private instant messaging. Clients receive business class web mail @bcc.edu.net. With an online reservation system, clients also are able to reserve audio conferencing and videoconference bridging services.

- **Email**: Provides a mail application designed to keep things simple and efficient, enabling clients to seamlessly switch between multiple accounts, quickly respond to customers using auto-reply and enhance their professional image using custom email signatures.

- **Contacts**: Stores all of the clients’ contact information and allows them to keep in touch using one-click web phone and web fax. Saves clients time by allowing their contacts to update their own information.
• **Web Phone**: Makes/receives free phone calls directly from the clients’ account. All of the client users receive a dedicated number and may instantly direct-dial other users in their account.

• **Private IM**: Enables clients to chat with colleagues in just seconds with a private and secure instant messaging service optimized for one-on-one and group discussions.

• **Web Conferencing**: Provides audiocasting, live chat, file sharing, desktop sharing and video display for clients to conduct and manage powerful web presentations.

• **Web Fax**: Allows clients to send individual and broadcast faxes—including text, websites and multimedia files—directly from their computers.

• **Audio Conferencing**: Provides secure administrative and guest PIN numbers for conducting and managing private audio conferences 24/7.

• **Video Conference Bridge**: Connects IP/ISDN or multi-point videoconference calls by reservation to ensure perfect connectivity.

• **Cloud Drive**: Stores all client documents safely and securely on robust servers where they may access all of their data remotely from anywhere.

**EXAMPLES OF VIRTUAL INCUBATORS AND TECHNOLOGY USAGE COMMUNITY COLLEGE INCUBATORS**

These case studies illustrate a range of ways community colleges use technology to build and enhance their virtual incubators. Some are old, new, high-tech and low-tech. These examples offer models for working with off-campus entrepreneurs without losing an interactive feel or requiring very expensive, high-tech equipment.

• **Indian River State College’s Innovation Incubator (I2)** is deliberately unlike a traditional incubator whereby businesses lease office space. The I2 is an affiliate incubator, meaning businesses and entrepreneurs (especially start-ups and home-based businesses), through a paid membership, are able to use the services and facilities provided by the affiliate incubator, including mentoring and business consulting. However, the members do not house their business at the incubator site. The affiliate incubator model has a media-scape room with cutting-edge technology that allows online, two-way, global collaboration among businesses, partners and educational institutions; a business center, strategic planning rooms, conference room and large auditorium equipped with the Echo 360 network device to facilitate taping of meetings, conferences and seminars; and offices equipped with computers that offer professional space where a business owner can work without being cramped at the kitchen table or in the spare bedroom. An affiliate incubator promotes collaboration while also offering an affordable place to work, learn and connect live or virtually with other businesses, partners, educational institutions and mentors.

• **The North Iowa Area Community College John Pappajohn Entrepreneurial Center** can use multiple technology platforms to provide service in the area, depending upon the entrepreneur’s needs and capabilities, including videoconferencing, webinars, email and social media. The technical assistance provider needs to be mindful of how entrepreneurs want to receive information and how they best process that information. Using multimedia (video and audio) technology with a big interactive element has proven to be the next best alternative to the intimacy of face-to-face communication. MyEntre.Net
is an entrepreneurship support system built around the premise that lifelong engagement between small business owners and providers of critical resources, capital and technical assistance will result in enhanced business start-up and expansion in Iowa. The concept, developed at the University of Northern Iowa, centers on an evolving set of technology-driven resources and delivery methods that are tested and shared with Iowa service providers at low or no cost.

- **Southeast Community College** wants its virtual incubator clients to feel as if they are part of the on-site incubation; they are treated the same as on-site clients with just a few adjustments. The college makes a concerted effort to maintain contact with them, generally by email and telephone but also via text and Skype. If they are located close enough to the college, a meeting at the local coffee house is often sufficient, but the college’s business coaches will also travel to the client’s place of business.

- **Long Beach City College** hosts the Los Angeles Regional SBDC Network and the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses program, using technology to either deliver services more efficiently or provide training and access to technology to help entrepreneurs more effectively plan and operate their businesses. For example, to counter the traffic congestion in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area, clients have the option of using technology such as GoToMeeting or Skype to meet with their business advisors. Of course, email and telephone are always options as well, depending on the preferences of the clients. The college also uses online programs available for business planning, analysis and projections. For example, SageWorks/ProfitCents assist subscribers with industry benchmarking on financials and operational analysis related to financial forecast and projections, and offers specialized databases for foreign market research for clients conducting business internationally.