

Columbia College
Virtual Office Professional Certificate of Achievement
Program Justification

Criteria A: Appropriateness to Mission

1. Statement of Program Goals and Objectives

The goal of the Columbia College Virtual Office Professional program is to prepare students to become entrepreneurs and/or independent contractors to provide professional, administrative, creative, and technical assistance to clients in a virtual environment using advanced communication technologies. Preparation includes topics related to creating a virtual office such as time management, customizing the workplace, evaluating software and hardware, and communicating effectively and efficiently with and through technology. This is a new Columbia College certificate program. The goal is to add an AS degree and possibly a transfer degree. The momentum for college-level virtual assistant training is building across the U.S., Canada, and internationally. With the rise in popularity to become a successful virtual assistant, colleges are recognizing the unique value of adding this type of training to their curriculum.

In order to grow and develop the Virtual Office Professional program, there needs to be more options for students, including but not limited to this Certificate of Achievement. The Virtual Office Professional program encourages students to coordinate classes in the entrepreneur and business disciplines to aid them in being successful virtual assistant business owners. The certificate will prepare students to research the market, assess skills, and identify a niche in order to open and operate their own businesses.

Program Student Learning Outcomes:

After completion of this program, students will be able to:

- Analyze skills and interests necessary to define a niche as a virtual office assistant.
- Demonstrate time management and organizational skills.
- Demonstrate the ability to communicate effectively through multiple methods of communication including oral, written, and electronic.
- Demonstrate application of business ethics.
- Demonstrate knowledge of strategies to create a client base.
- Demonstrate knowledge necessary to create a workable office space.
- Demonstrate the ability to prepare a marketing plan.
- Identify resources necessary to set up a business.
- Operate as an entrepreneurial virtual office assistant.

2. Catalog Description

The Virtual Assistant Professional Program prepares students as entrepreneurs or independent contractors who will be able to provide professional, administrative, creative, and technical assistance to clients in a virtual office environment using advanced communication technologies. The courses assist the student in developing skills which will work in virtual environments, and identify

the student's niche in the industry. Preparation includes topics related to creating a virtual office such as time management, customizing the workplace, evaluating software and hardware, and communicating effectively and efficiently with and through technology.

3. Program Requirements

The certificate program requires 18 units for completion; all are required units.

BUSAD 41	Small Business Management	3 units
OFTEC 168	Creating and Managing a Virtual Office	3 units
OFTEC 120	Computer Keyboarding III	3 units
OFTEC 130	Business English	3 units
OFTEC 131	Office Procedures and Technology	3 units
OFTEC 132	Business Communications	3 units

TOTAL 18 units

4. Background and Rationale

This new program is fully aligned with the Columbia College Mission Statement and the Educational Master Plan.

Columbia College Mission Statement

Columbia College is a dynamic institution of learners and creative thinkers dedicated to high standards of student success. We prepare students to be fully engaged in an evolving world by offering comprehensive and high quality programs and services. Columbia College is committed to a culture of improvement through measuring student learning across the institution. We strive for excellence, foster a spirit of professionalism and celebrate diversity.

The program's development is based on the mission to *prepare students to be fully engaged in an evolving world*, especially since the Virtual Office Professional program has evolved due to recent advancements in technology. Furthermore, per the mission, the program is *comprehensive, high quality, and fosters a spirit of professionalism*.

Columbia College Educational Master Plan

As stated in the Educational Master Plan (EMP), approved by the YCCD Board of Trustees on May 14, 2008:

A [Office Technology] program revision planned and developed by faculty, will be implemented when a fulltime faculty person in Office Technology is hired. The plan calls for major revision in the program and the inclusion of virtual office curriculum.

Shortly after the approval of the EMP, a full-time faculty was hired and she has been working to develop this comprehensive and industry-relevant program offered through the Office Technology Department.

Additionally, as stated in the EMP, *Columbia College's Office Technology curriculum provides instruction in the tools of modern technology and also teaches the basics of office procedures*—fully supporting the need to provide a program combining both the tools of modern technology and office procedures.

Supporting Rationale

The increased use of the web, professional office technology hardware, and software technologies has allowed individuals to work outside their corporate/business office and/or to become self-employed entrepreneurs. The Virtual Office Professional program has become a legitimate part of the modern higher education system of the United States, but this is a fairly new phenomenon. In 2007, there were more than 25 million small to midsized businesses. Many of the businesses failed because of the high cost of overhead. With the booming virtual industry, a partnership is created between the small business owner and the virtual assistant (VA). The business owner pays for the services which are time-consuming and usually easily accomplished by a VA professional, and pays only for time on task, thus saving the cost of overhead and personnel.

For any entrepreneur, solopreneur, busy manager or company owner, there are multiple benefits in partnering with a virtual office assistant. The work environment is constantly changing, making it necessary to know and learn new “tools”, applications, and software. This makes it difficult for anyone to keep pace with technology. Therefore the benefit becomes clearer--virtual assistants are constantly learning and training on the latest applications and software so that they can offer their client the best and most profitable tools.

The Benefits of a Virtual Office Professional Program

The rationale can also be justified through the summary of benefits of virtual office assistants in the workplace:

- Working with a VA saves money and gains creative time.
- Hiring a VA eliminates the necessity of providing an office, computer, telephone, software, and business supplies.
- Less overhead costs with no need for employee benefits such as vacations, retirement, tax withholding, and/or sick leave.
- Fewer hiring complications, including recruiting, advertising, severance. VA's usually enter into a contract with their client based on mutual agreement.
- The VA takes responsibility for all of the time-consuming activities which prevent the business owner from expanding the business.
- The VA becomes an advisor and a source for suggestions which helps increase the client's business.

In today's economy, when new and prospective students return to school to update training, they face a shrinking employment market. Although administrative professional growth has remained steady, many positions for administrative assistants (and related job titles) are only available in large metropolitan areas. With the high cost of commuting, many students cannot afford to travel to where jobs are abundant, nor can they afford to relocate to a more expensive area. A virtual office assistant is an independent entrepreneur who creates her/his own job opportunities by networking either on a face-to-face basis or through a virtual association, such as International Virtual Assistant's Association (IVAA). These entrepreneurs don't need college degrees. Some VA's have been so successful that they are franchising their businesses. For example, *Cybertary* began as a solo business in Sacramento and now has offices in other states.

The Columbia College Virtual Office Professional program teaches students how to set up and organize a business and presents networking opportunities with other successful businesses. Thus,

the program increases students' chances of getting a startup business off the ground. In addition, it increases students' career aspirations, provides autonomy over their careers, and often leads to an interest in obtaining further education and leadership skills.

Criteria B: Need

5. Enrollment and Completer Projections

The anticipated enrollment for this program is 20 - 24 students each year with an anticipated completion rate of 60-75%.

6. Place of Program in a Curriculum/Similar Programs

The Virtual Office Professional program will be offered through the Career Technical Education Division. It will augment existing options in the Office Technology, Business, Computer Science, and Entrepreneurship programs. No existing entries need to be removed or modified to reflect program adjustments associated with this new option. The program prepares students to work in a wide variety of businesses, similar to an administrative office. The Virtual Office Professional program expands the scope of these three programs to include the principles of starting a small virtual office assistant business. The goals and objectives of this option and the job categories for program completers remain similar to those of the existing programs.

The Virtual Office Professional program will keep the program student current with changing job requirements and applications within the virtual assistant industry. This will expand the options that students have in Office Technology so that they can be prepared to own and operate their own business, or work as a virtual assistant for another entrepreneur.

7. Similar Programs at Other Colleges in Service Area

Columbia College is a small, rural campus in a community which is geographically widely distributed. The nearest college with a similar program is Merced College which is approximately 55 miles from Sonora; all other programs are at least 100 miles from Sonora.

The following is a summary of the only similar program in the same service area as Columbia College:
Merced College, Virtual Office Skills Attainment

Per the Merced College catalog, this program is not a certificate or degree. It is a 9 unit skills attainment with the following three courses: Virtual Office (3 units), Social Influence Media (3 units), and Introduction to Desktop Publishing (3 units). The Columbia College Virtual Office Professional program is an 18-unit, comprehensive Certificate of Achievement.

The Columbia College faculty has been in direct conversation with the faculty at Merced College who oversee their program. Since the Columbia College program is rural and remote, not easily accessible to other locations, we do not identify Merced College as a competing or conflicting program—both colleges reach out to separate target markets considering the geographical locations.

In addition, the programs offer vastly different courses. For more information about the Merced College courses in virtual office, visit http://www.mccd.edu/academics/resources/catalog_archive/2011-2012/mc_catalog_11-12_a.pdf.

This certificate is not applicable to transfer requirements for this application—it is a non-transfer award.

8. Labor Market Information & Analysis

According to the California Community College Centers of Excellence, occupations relating to administrative assistants, event planners, and web designer occupations are expected to grow by nearly 6% (1,402) over five years, all of which are careers that can be staffed by a Virtual Assistant (Sept 2011). While it's difficult to determine how many of these will enter the field as a virtual assistant, it is reasonable to estimate that with an approximate annual 280 possible occupations in this field, that Columbia College will provide a Projected Net Annual Labor Demand of 5% or 14.

The virtual industry was the subject of the March 2011 newsletter, *Keying In*, published by the National Business Education Association (Volume 21, Number 4):

The Market. *If Amazon is any indication—searching on “virtual assistant” nets more than 100 results—interest in this career is hot. Titles like The Two-Second Commute, The Common-Sense Virtual Assistant, and VA Secrets Revealed! Encourage “wage slave” employees to seek their fortune in sweats, not suits, working from the comfort of their own home.*

Interestingly, the Department of Labor (DOL) Occupational Outlook Handbook (2009) does not yet have a separate classification for “virtual assistant” (virtual receptionist and virtual assistant are housed under “Receptionists and Information Clerks” and “Secretaries and Administrative Assistants”, respectively). However, the DOL does acknowledge that the office of the future will be mobile, and that job-opportunities will be best “for applicants with extensive knowledge of computer software applications, with experience as a secretary or administrative assistant, or with advanced communication and computer skills.” (DOL, 2009a,b).

Virtual offices are experiencing growth even in a recessionary economy, both locally, and internationally. As businesses look to trim expenses, virtual office services help reduce overhead while keeping professionalism high. For example, by paying for space and communication infrastructure on an as-needed basis, businesses can keep office expenses to a minimum. With the portability of today's workplace, the notion of paying for space fulltime becomes anachronistic. Traditional receptionists can be replaced with remote receptionist services at a fraction of the traditional cost. Some virtual office companies or telephone answering companies offer a franchise system, providing entrepreneurs the opportunity to enter the marketplace for a fraction of the usual setup costs and with the added bonus of leads being fed to them.

In an article entitled “Five Trends Shaping the Future of Work”, Bob Nelson, president of Nelson Motivation Inc. (www.nelson-motivation.com) notes that, “Some 42 percent of all organizations

currently provide some type of flex time or option for telecommuting, job sharing or alternate work schedules . . . Work is increasingly becoming a state of mind more than a place to be.”

The Fall 2011 issue of the *Western News Exchange* from the Western Business Education Association listed internet services, data processing and other information services as one of the fastest-growing industries for 2012:

The Internet’s proliferation will continue into the next decade and our reliance on it will increase. Not only has the number of computers increased, but so has the number that are connected wirelessly. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, output by the Internet service industry is to grow 10.3% annually, the highest among all industries. Job growth is expected to reach 46.2%.

9. Employer Survey

The program development of the Virtual Office Professional Certificate of Achievement was discussed with employers of the Columbia College Business Administration Advisory at the April 2011 meeting. The Advisory was given data that supported the trend towards small businesses and entrepreneurship for virtual assistants. The Advisory supported the development of this new program.

However, it is important to note that an employer survey is not relevant because of the contractual relationship between two equal partners. The Virtual Office Professional is not an employee but rather an independent contractor who works with small businesses to fulfill administrative needs which might not constitute a position for a full-time employee. The VA, therefore, might have several regular clients plus an occasional client whose goal is for a task-specific assistant.

In lieu of a survey, the regional economic information provided by the Centers of Excellence above is the evidence of the development of this program.

10. Explanation of Employer Relationship

The Virtual Assistant is not employed. The relationship is based upon the need by the client for assistance. The VA bills for time on task or establishes a contractual relationship with the client to perform specific duties (see discussion above). This section is not applicable to this program application.

11. List of Members of Advisory Committee

The following is a complete list of Advisory Committee members of the new Virtual Office Professional program. It is important to note that the majority of employers listed are representative of the industry/employer groups that would hire, on a contractual basis, students who complete the Columbia College Virtual Office Professional program.

Name	Company	Specialty
Kelly Poelkner	Another 8 Hours, Inc. 106 E. 4th Street, Ste. A O'Fallon, IL 62269	VA, author, speaker, coach
Diana Ennen	Virtual Word Publishing 1660 Cathedral Drive Margate, FL 33063	Publicity, Book Marketing, Author, Speaker, Trainer
Jeannine Clontz	Clontz Business Services, LLC 117 Ron-de-ie-Drive Arnold, MO 63010-4146	Business Coaching, training, teaching
Nina Feldman	Nina Feldman Connections 6407 Irwin Court Oakland, CA 94609	Office & computer professionals network (placement services)
M. Colleen Wietmarschen	Clerical Plus 9093 Arrowhead Court Cincinnati, Ohio 45231	Transcription – medical, legal; editing, focus groups, seminars, social networking,
Randy Barton	Columbia College Business and Economics Department Sonora, CA	Curriculum Committee Chairperson
Jill Olson	The Job Connection Sonora, CA	Job Training and Placement

12. Recommendations of Advisory Committee

The Advisory Committee for this program fully supports, without reservation, the Virtual Office Professional program.

The consensus of the Advisory team recommends the following:

- The VA participate in an internship or be provided with a mentor.
- The VA have basic office technology courses such as Administrative Office Procedures.
- The VA be an expert in word processing skills.
- The VA possess the appropriate technology skills
- The VA have excellent communication and English skills
- The VA have previous office experience and possess the maturity and motivation to be self-employed.

Some team members encourage that VA's become certified, but certification varies with the individual or organization offering it. Most members of the Advisory Team belong to the International Virtual Assistant's Association (IVAA). IVAA has recently added a College Committee. This committee is concerned about consistency in VA certification.

Criteria C: Curriculum Standards

13. Display of Proposed Sequence

The course sequence below is suggested, not mandatory. The prerequisites and/or courses recommended for success are noted below each course. The certificate can be completed in one-year or less.

Fall Semester 1

OFTEC 168	Creating and Managing a Virtual Office <i>Recommended for Success: OFTEC 120, CMPSC 4, CMPSC 10</i>	3 units
OFTEC 120	Computer Keyboarding III <i>Recommended for Success: OFTEC 110</i>	3 units
OFTEC 130	Business English	3 units

Spring Semester 1

BUSAD 41	Small Business Management	3 units
OFTEC 131	Office Procedures and Technology <i>Prerequisite: OFTEC 125 with a grade of C or better, or P</i>	3 units
OFTEC 132	Business Communication <i>Prerequisite: OFTEC 130 or ENGL 650, with a grade of C or better, or P</i>	3 units

14. Transfer Documentation

The Virtual Office Professional Certificate of Achievement program is not intended for transfer.

Criteria D: Adequate Resources

15. Library and/or Learning Resources Plan

Resources are adequate for the proposed Certificate. For the purposes of this program, the library will only need to provide students internet access for individual projects or independent research projects. Instructors will meet with the librarian annually to discuss library learning resources to determine if additional resources are needed.

16. Facilities and Equipment Plan

Facilities and equipment are adequate for proposed Certificate. The courses for the Virtual Office Professional program take place in one of the existing computer labs and lecture classrooms.

17. Financial Support Plan

All courses are existing and financially supported. No additional costs will be needed to support the program or instructional equipment/supplies.

18. Faculty Qualifications and Availability

Current qualified faculty will teach the required courses. Faculty qualifications are based on state requirements and instructors must pass standard screening through the District's Human Resources Department. The Virtual Office Certificate program will be coordinated by a tenured faculty with 20 years experience with administrative office assistant programs.

Criteria E: Compliance**19. Based on model curriculum**

N/A

20. Licensing or Accreditation Standards

N/A

21. Student Selection and Fees

The Virtual Office Professional Certificate program is an open enrollment program with no student selection requirements.