Online University Gets Powered by Cisco WebEx

Executive Summary

University of Fredericton

- **Industry:** Education
- **Location:** Headquartered in Fredericton, NB
- **Employees**: 32 (faculty and adjunct faculty)
- Number of online students: 702

CHALLENGE

- Improve overall user experience for students, for both lectures and group meetings
- Simplify desktop screen sharing and real-time collaboration features
- Help enable busy executive-level MBA students to record lectures

SOLUTION

- Cisco WebEx Training Center for live and interactive university courses
- Cisco WebEx Meeting Center for student collaboration on group projects
- Cisco WebEx Support Center for simplified back-end IT management

RESULTS

- Virtual breakout sessions allow students to collaborate in real-time during classes
- Executive-level MBA students get valuable exposure to WebEx platform
- High-quality, interactive video lectures accompanied by full-motion PowerPoint presentations

University of Fredericton becomes first online university in Canada to offer real-time collaboration using Cisco WebEx.

CHALLENGE

Traditional universities often do not give online courses as much prominence as in-class learning. But when a university is completely online, the user interface, including what students see when they watch a lecture, ask a question, or conduct a presentation, is critically important.

The University of Fredericton, an accredited online university offering graduate degrees to business and government professionals, has realized the user experience means everything. This goes beyond user friendly courseware and extends to the ability for students to collaborate with each other, as well as the accessibility of professors and teaching instructors.

For years, the New Brunswick-based school had been working with e-learning software that did an adequate job at "pushing out information" to students, says Peter Mersereau, Operations Manager at the university. In order to continue offering innovative online learning options and to set itself apart from other online universities, the school decided to look for a more dynamic e-learning platform.

A key part of the platform that the university sought was software that could give teachers and students the ability to collaborate from anywhere in the world.

With the university striving to offer world-class executive MBA programs, many of the school's students tend to be working executives from Fortune 500 companies. The ability for the school's e-learning platform to offer highly collaborative, web conferencing features to its executive-level students was absolutely crucial. The school also wanted to help ensure that those features worked just as well on a variety of mobile platforms and devices.

In the end, the university decided on a collaboration suite to give students the ability to record lectures, hold online meetings, and share their desktops with one another.

SOLUTION

With its decision to implement Cisco WebEx™, the university became the first in Canada to exclusively use the technology to deliver course content and lectures. As part of the Cisco WebEx platform, the university is using WebEx Training Center, WebEx Meeting Center, and WebEx Support Center.

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> – **Peter Mersereau**
> Operations Manager
> University of Fredericton

With the Training Center platform, University of Fredericton professors can deliver live and highly interactive online classes. Features include document sharing, high-definition video playback, full -motion PowerPoint presentations, whiteboards, and virtual breakout sessions.

"Interaction with students is important in a live classroom setting and greatly enhances the learning experience," says Mersereau. "Professors and instructors are now able to make their presentations more detailed and media-rich, resulting in truly dynamic visual sessions that really capture the students' attention and make them more enthusiastic to learn."

Training Center also allows the university to record lectures and make them available for download online.

"This has proven to be a key asset for us and a huge benefit to students," Mersereau says. "Even if they miss a class there's no fear of falling behind, because they can simply download and watch at their convenience. We have several students working remotely or travelling on business, so we realize not everyone can view lectures 'live' and this is a great way of accommodating them. In addition, if students want to review a class in more detail, they also have the option of going back and re-watching the session."

For the professors giving the lectures, an "attention indicator" can give them insight into whether or not students have their WebEx pages open and active, he says.

After students leave the virtual classroom, they can utilize the WebEx Meeting Center and the Cisco Collaboration Cloud to work on projects or presentations together. The platform offers high-definition videoconferencing, desktop sharing, real-time document annotation, and white boarding. These "out-of-the-classroom" meetings can be scheduled anytime and from a wide variety of supported smartphone and tablet devices.

Rounding out the collaboration suite is WebEx Support Center, which can be used whenever a student or faculty member runs into a technical issue.

"This was a benefit we weren't anticipating when we made the switch to WebEx," Mersereau says. "Whenever a user has an issue, we can remotely see what's going on with their computer or software."

This functionality allows university technical services to run instant and personalized support sessions, allowing them to collect the relevant information to troubleshoot problems quickly.

RESULTS

Out of all the feedback that the university received from its students following the move to Cisco WebEx, the students were most appreciative of the ability to easily connect and collaborate with professors and fellow students.

"It's very rare to find classes presented live to students at a typical online university," Mersereau says. "With Training Center, the live classroom is just the beginning of the collaborative learning experience."

After office hours, professors hold WebEx Training Center sessions to discuss lecture topics or upcoming projects in more detail. These sessions, which are typically scheduled on weekday evenings to accommodate busy executive-level students, allow for a more personalized learning environment.

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> University of Fredericton

The same flexibility has also been extended to students wanting to connect with each other on group assignments. Students can get together, virtually and on their own time, through Meeting Center.

"We see this all the time," Mersereau says. "Three or four students get together in WebEx and work on a project. Sometimes they'll prepare for a group project in Meeting Center for an hour and then head into their live Training Center class to present it."

The fact that document files, videos, and photos can be shared so easily in the tool helps ensure that students never have to leave WebEx to collaborate and complete their work together. And features such as in-meeting polls and questionnaires give both students and professors instant feedback on presentations and classroom sentiment.

The tool has been so effective at allowing students to quickly get together and collaborate that university staff are using the Meeting Center tool for internal meetings as well, Mersereau says. This application includes meetings with global business partners, he added.

"Most courseware software offers similar functionality, but WebEx just does things better," Mersereau says. "Cisco has helped us position the University of Fredericton as Canada's most innovative online university."

With the rise of social networking and the Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) trend, the next generation of workers is changing business communications and the future of work. Employees increasingly expect flexibility to work where they want and on any device they want.

The University of Fredericton sees WebEx as a tool that its students will increasingly be exposed to in their professional lives, as the trend toward telecommuting and work-life blending continues.

NEXT STEPS

The University of Fredericton has been using WebEx for almost one year and is now looking to expand its use of Cisco products to launch social programs in the student community.

The school is currently exploring the use of enterprise collaboration platform Cisco WebEx Social™ to create an online Occupational Health and Safety community where faculty, students, and other professionals can share, write, and post content pertinent to the industry. Mersereau says this community would just be a start, as the school is looking to get professors and instructors involved in building student communities covering their specific fields.

A greater use of video is also expected in the future, he said, with the school planning to use Cisco WebEx Event Center to broadcast future events. For example, the university sponsors a triathlon club and could broadcast events or Q&A sessions with its top triathletes.

"Cisco technology is used throughout the business world, so we're looking to incorporate as much of it as we can in the coming years," says Mersereau.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information on Cisco WebEx, visit http://www.webex.com/.

To learn more about the University of Fredericton, visit http://www.ufred.ca/.

PRODUCT INFO

- Cisco WebEx
- Cisco WebEx Training Center
- Cisco WebEx Meeting Center
- Cisco WebEx Support Center
- Cisco WebEx Social