

Tarrant County College Engages Students with a Mobile Web App

Soon after our web team launched a new website in 2009, Tarrant County College students and administrators began asking, "Why isn't the site mobile-friendly?"



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We weren't surprised to hear it. Visits to our website from mobile devices shot up a whopping 16 percent in the eight-month period between August 2012 and March 2013. We'd gone from approximately one in 10 visitors accessing our site on a smartphone or tablet to an astonishing one in four.

We also knew we weren't the only college in this situation. "The 2013 E-Expectations Report found that 68 percent of college-bound students said they have viewed college websites on a mobile device," said Lance Merker, president of OmniUpdate. "Not only is mobile use growing, but a full 43 percent of surveyed students use their mobile devices for all their Web browsing."

As the sixth largest educational institution in Texas — a state known for big things — we knew we needed to change our approach to support our site visitors.

Unfortunately, our web content management system (CMS) at the time could not easily provide a mobile-friendly site; much less make changes on the fly. We looked at lots of options, and then chose to make the switch to OmniUpdate's CMS, OU Campus™. Using OU Campus meant we could build our mobile site first and implement our main site in the CMS later — when we were ready and resources were available.

We considered three approaches to a mobile-

friendly site. First, we looked at creating native apps — custom downloadable apps like those found in the iTunes Store or Android Marketplace. It would require building specific source code and updating it each and every time for each and every marketplace out there. That would mean a lot of upkeep and support, overwhelming our small web department. So that option was out.

Second, we looked at responsive design, but ran into similar problems. Responsive design uses a "mobile first" approach where users can view a site on any device and the content is automatically formatted to the device's width. Though it was a practical solution, our team didn't have the time or resources to redesign our entire site using responsive design.

Lastly, we looked at a mobile web app — a website designed for mobile devices. Building a mobile web app would bring in a lot of responsive design features, in addition to being adaptive and work on any mobile device. It would provide easy access among students and devices. Plus, this option was strongly supported by our chancellor. We decided a mobile web app was the way to go.

Once we decided that the purpose of our mobile-friendly web app would be to provide information to students, our web team began to research what students needed most.

The staff supplied us with information on what other colleges and universities generally focus on for a well-designed mobile presence, as well as best practices. With more than 700 college and university websites managed using OmniUpdate; we knew they were a trusted resource. We also looked at Google Analytics data. We focused on TCC students' mobile behavior by filtering out parts of the site that were clearly being used by administration. This narrowed the field down to seven major areas that had the most student traffic: myTCC (our student portal), calendar, maps, library, courses and programs, student services and career coach.

But were students not using the whole site because it wasn't mobile-friendly or because they only needed those major areas on the go? We asked students directly, in the one place we knew our mobile visitors most certainly spent their time: Facebook.

Our web team posted the status, "If TCC had a mobile app for current students, what's the one thing you hope it would have?" Fifty-nine "Likes" and 106 comments later, we had confirmation that the seven major areas identified would work nicely for our web app. At the same time, we knew that any additional areas requested by students could be incorporated easily at a later time using OU Campus.

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Touch Control Systems

Empower Faculty to Teach with Technology

Intuitive – that’s the word Joe Mancini, executive director of technical services at Montgomery County Community College (MCCC), Pennsylvania, uses to describe the Information Technology (IT) department’s approach to designing smart classrooms and meeting spaces on its campuses.

Recent full-scale renovations to two major buildings at the college’s Central Campus in Blue Bell, coupled with the expansion of its West Campus in Pottstown and construction of a brand new Culinary Arts Institute in Lansdale, have enabled Mancini and his team to re-think how they implement and support technology in the classroom and beyond.

A key component to their new design is the installation of Extron touch control systems, which feature touch panel graphics that can provide faculty with step by step instructions on using smart classrooms or video conference rooms, should they need it. As a result, instructors are able to get the most out of their classroom technology.

“The value of this technology is that it empowers users to take ownership,” explains Mancini, who has been with the college for 21 years. “It also permits consistency so faculty can seamlessly move between rooms and even campuses without learning different technology.”

The touch control systems consolidate the need for multiple remotes into one panel from which instructors can control all smart room technology. This includes a projector/smart board, laptop, VCR and DVD players, computer, sound and, for some, videoconferencing.

“We simplified the use of technology in the classrooms. We labeled the controls and eliminated remotes. If you can use a smart phone, you can use this technology,” Mancini says.

Implementing controls that make technology more accessible for the end user also reduces the number of calls to the college’s help desk for technical assistance. And, when there is a problem, help desk technicians are now able to remotely access the controls to resolve most issues.

“Previously, if an instructor called the help desk, they would have to wait 10 minutes for a technician to physically come to their classroom – some-



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times for something as simple as turning on a projector or replacing remote batteries. Now, since the system sits on the network, we can assist instructors remotely, minimizing the disruption of student learning,” Mancini explains.

Multimedia Specialist Frank Lieb also notes that the system significantly reduces the need for training, which is especially beneficial to adjunct instructors who may only be on campus for one class per week or who may be hired immediately prior to the start of a semester.

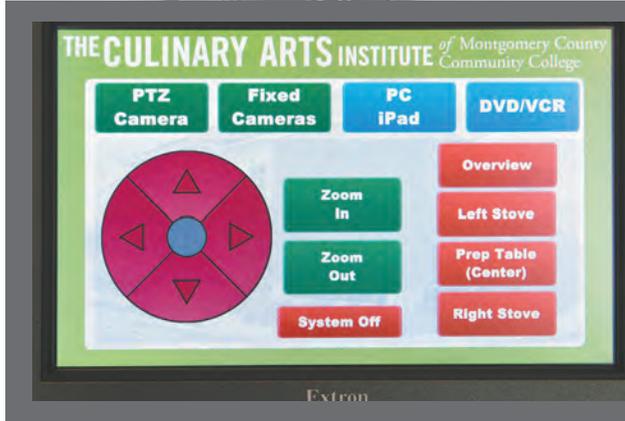
It is not only faculty that benefits from the touch control systems. IT has incorporated the technology into 15 of its video conference-enabled meeting rooms, allowing administrators and staff to facilitate meetings between the college’s campuses or other locations without the assistance of a technician.

“Someone from IT used to be on hand to set up every single video conference call. This was fine when there were only six rooms, but now there are 35, and it’s not sustainable for a technician to be running around campus between meetings,” Mancini explains.

The system also enables IT to be



TOP: Culinary Arts students watch instruction on one of several monitors positioned around the teaching kitchen. Instructors are able to control the camera and displays via touch control system.



LEFT: A close-up shot of a panel that controls the touch control system in MCCC’s Culinary Arts Institute.

proactive in terms of maintenance issues. For example, IT technicians are notified when a projector lamp is about to burn out. In addition, all technology is programmed to turn off automatically at 11 p.m., supporting MCCC’s Sustainability Initiative.

Currently, MCCC has deployed the new system in 115 classrooms and 15 video conference enabled meeting rooms. According to Mancini, the goal is to update an additional 10-15 rooms each fiscal year going forward until 100 percent are outfitted with the now-standard technology. IT has also implemented touch control systems for two large video walls at its Central Campus in Blue Bell. The controls feature with icons that allow users to easily switch between live television feeds and student-produced content.

Of note, Mancini and his team designs and builds most the college’s technology in house – which saves money and provides valuable learning experiences for employees and students.

“Historically, our IT department is very self-sufficient. We do our own integration so we can better support the [technology] products down the road,” says Mancini. “Doing this also enables us to partner with the college’s computer science students for things like programming, providing them with a valuable hands-on work experience.”

Mancini adds that one benefit of working with Extron on the touch control systems project is that the company allows users, once trained, to program the equipment themselves. This knowledge deepens IT technicians’ understanding of the overall system and enables them to develop new and creative ways to design and implement classroom technology.

For example, the college’s IT staff got creative in designing the technology for the kitchens and classrooms in its brand new Culinary Arts Institute (CAI). Using the touch control system, culinary instructors are able to control overhead cameras to display content on several large monitors

positioned throughout the teaching and demo kitchens. Using the same controls, they bring up PowerPoint presentations or even search the Internet.

“The technology enables us to bring the lecture into the kitchen, and to switch seamlessly between a variety of teaching tools,” explains Chef Francine Marz, director of MCCC’s CAI. “We can easily show a variety of content that relates to a given lesson. For example, if we’re making Indian cuisine, we can show video that relates to Indian culture so our students can better understand the area from which a particular style of cooking originates. We can even play cultural music while we work,” she continues.

And, according to Lieb, that’s not all IT has in store for the CAI.

“The next step is to configure the system so that instructors can control everything with an iPad,” he shares. “The touch screen panels have an iPad app that enables everything to be controlled wirelessly.” ▲

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The entire process to build and implement our mobile web app took about three months. OmniUpdate developed and delivered the mobile templates in two weeks, and then it was up to us to gather and edit con-

tent, then get approval from administrators.

Working with OmniUpdate gave us a solution to go live quickly, keep up with the increase in mobile traffic, and create a more efficient way to manage our content.

Our team is now looking forward to moving the entire TCC site into OU

Campus. Since we’re comfortable with the new CMS, we’ll have more time to focus on web development, design and content strategy in the process.

We’re perhaps most looking forward to having content synchronization. TCC has 250 people contributing content to our website across five

campuses located in three cities. Enabling all these contributors to easily update the mobile site and main website using OU Campus will be critical.

Our key takeaways from this experience are that we could implement a mobile solution using OU Campus before implementing our full

site in the CMS. And, a “one size fits all” mobile solution for higher education doesn’t exist.

Researching our audience, getting a handle on our existing software limitations, and understanding the expectations of students and administration were all key factors to Tarrant County College’s move to mobile. ▲

CASE STUDY

Cerritos College Employs New Course To Speed Students through Developmental Courses

Graciela Vasquez, director of adult education & diversity programs and Bryan Reece, Dean, academic success & instructional efficacy student success, utilized MyFoundationsLab and AccuPlacer to improve scores on placement exams and accelerate progress through developmental courses at Cerritos College.

Nationally, nearly 60 percent of incoming freshmen lack some of the skills to qualify as college ready. At Cerritos College, as elsewhere, large numbers of students arriving from high school place into the lowest-level developmental courses, delaying their credit-level college studies and imperiling their retention and persistence toward graduation and career success. Vasquez and Reece examined the situation closely and identified three factors for redress at Cerritos:

High school graduates entering Cerritos are generally unaware that they will be assessed for placement, do not prepare for the assessment exam, and therefore do not achieve a score truly reflective of their abilities.

Students do not comprehend the ramifications of placing into low-level developmental courses. Students may spend several semesters in non-credit-bearing developmental classes, consuming time and financial aid. Too many stu-

dents run out of funds and/or motivation before achieving graduation, jeopardizing academic and future career success.

Some courses do not enforce stated prerequisites for basic skills in English and/or math, enrolling students who lack adequate preparation and unintentionally setting students up to fail.

Vasquez and Reece, both together and separately, are developing a range of programs to assist students and foster their academic progress. In this case study, we examine two new courses designed to prepare students for assessment and to accelerate their progress into credit-level studies using Pearson's AccuPlacer//MyFoundationsLab and MyFoundationsLab, respectively.

Vasquez explains, "We launched our assessment Prep with a 10-week pilot in fall 2011 and implemented the course fully in fall 2012 and spring 2013 using the reading, writing, and math portions of AccuPlacer//MyFoundationsLab on the mylabs+ platform. The course is voluntary, non-credit, open entry/open exit, and does not appear on students' transcripts. Students take the pre-diagnostic and then follow the MyFoundationsLab-generated personalized learning Path. Students work independently on the modules where they need remediation and are able to move forward once they achieve 80 percent mastery in each module. Students are required to spend

four hours per week in our success center computer lab. There, instructors and tutors review individual students' engagement and offer individualized assistance."

She continues, "Next, we worked with the Math Department to incorporate the lowest-level math course (math 20, 4 levels below credit courses) into our MyFoundationsLab Prep model with the goal of placing students into higher-level courses more quickly.

"Again using the emporium model, we have students work independently in MyFoundationsLab, targeting and strengthening only those skills that need remediation. At the end of the course, students re-take the assessment test with an opportunity to jump forward one or more levels."

RESULTS

In just a short time using MyFoundationsLab, Vasquez and Reece are meeting the goals of improving students' placement scores and fostering rapid progress through developmental studies and into credit-level courses.

"Students actually cried when they achieved results they weren't sure they were capable of," Vasquez said. "For instance, low math scores may have prevented students from matriculating into nursing school in the past but now students can move forward with their goals. With MyFoundationsLab, students are realizing their academic and career dreams." ▲

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