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- CourseCruiser™, Learning Management System
- CampusCruiser®, Custom Portal
- CruiserEval™, Course Evaluation Solution
- CruiserAlert™, High Priority Notification System

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NICC Implements Award-Winning CourseCruiser™ LMS and Saves Big

"We wanted to get technology out of the way of education. This technology does that."

Lyle Luzum, Director, Computer Information Systems, Northeast Iowa Community College

Challenge: Low Success Rate, High Cost

Northeast Iowa Community College (NICC) serves nearly 5,000 non-residential students through two main campuses and six outlying centers, with more than 600 faculty and staff in full or part-time positions. The student-driven and community-focused educational program provides accessible, affordable, quality education and training to meet the needs of communities in eight counties.

NICC began offering distance learning in 2000 as a way to make quality education accessible to more students, but the isolated online-class experience did little to foster student retention and success rates or faculty buy-in. "Many instructors felt that online courses were 'less than' in value compared to face-to-face," said Jill Ferrie, director of Distance Learning, NICC-Calmar. "They had difficulty designing and conducting a course that connected meaningfully with students' overall academic experience, because the online classroom happened outside the college. In addition, there seemed to be little consistency in course content with their face-to-face courses." As a result, online classes had a 10 percent withdrawal rate and 21 percent failure rate, substantially lower than compared rates for face-to-face classes.

Ease-of-use barriers and on-going technical support issues also resulted in a less than acceptable faculty adoption rate, so progress toward improving the online courses was minimal.

In addition to issues related to quality and consistency, the cost of delivering courses online was rising. After using WebCT in a shared, hosted environment with other colleges, NICC had switched to WebCT's hosted solution at significantly higher cost. Per NICC, pricing based on a per-seat model became a disincentive to increase enrollment in the distance learning program. When Blackboard purchased WebCT in 2005, NICC's costs rose again. Each new version required hardware upgrades, integration fees and costly implementation services.

Solution: Low Maintenance, High Value SaaS

In 2008, NICC elected to switch to CourseCruiser, the learning management system from Timecruiser Computing Corporation. CourseCruiser works in conjunction with CampusCruiser, the campus communications portal that NICC implemented in 2005 along with the Datatel enterprise resource planning solution.

The Timecruiser products are Software as a Service (SaaS), offered via an annual subscription. Housed in a secure data center, the software runs under Oracle database technology with requisite backup and restore functionality. Timecruiser's service level agreement provides for a minimum of 99.7 percent uptime. System updates delivered during scheduled maintenance windows ensure that NICC would always be on the most current version of the software. There are no upgrades to manage and no version control issues.

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The NICC-branded portal known as Xpress seamlessly integrates all the Timecruiser solutions: CampusCruiser, CourseCruiser and CruiserAlert (an urgent messaging system). “We wanted to get technology out of the way of education. This technology does that,” said Lyle Luzum, director, Computer Information Systems, NICC. “It’s design is such that it functions in a ‘natural’ and unobtrusive way that blends into other course support tools.”

When CourseCruiser was implemented, faculty who wanted to teach online were required to take an online training program that introduced the new learning and teaching tools. The program taught faculty how to use the course designer to develop their online classes, guiding them through the process of creating and converting content and materials for use in the new system.

Results: High Success Rate, Low Costs

By the end of the 2008-09 school year, 126 faculty had completed CourseCruiser training—more than twice the number that had been using the previous LMS. Following standards and guidelines developed by the online committee, these faculty now ensure that their online courses deliver the same quality and consistency in education as face-to-face courses. “Increased faculty and staff adoption resulted because it’s so similar to the rest of the environment they use on a daily basis, including email communication, committee collaboration, and student services.” This consistency improves the student experience for the same reason.

Online course enrollment is up, and retention and success are improving. During the 2008-09 school year, the first year CourseCruiser was fully implemented, student registration in online courses increased 22 percent over the previous year. A recent study found that online retention is now just 4 percent lower than face-to-face retention, and the student success rate is just 6 percent lower.

“We wanted to make online class retention equivalent to or higher than the face-to-face retention rate,” Ferrie said. “Our goal is 100 percent for both retention and success, and I think we can get there with CourseCruiser.”

Online class materials are accessible to students and faculty 24/7, and system uptime consistently exceeds the SLA minimum, with monthly reports indicating 99.8-99.9 percent. “I could not find a way to provide equivalent uptime at a reasonable cost if I had to host it myself,” Luzum said.

Students, faculty and staff use Tracker, an online reporting system, to report problems or suggest new features. Timecruiser’s tech support team prioritizes issues and incorporates enhancements in the scheduled maintenance updates. Luzum noted, “The response time compared to our previous LMS is so much better.”

Timecruiser’s SaaS model provides improved quality, performance and customer support—all at significantly less cost than the legacy LMS. “CourseCruiser costs about one-third of what we paid for the hosted version of WebCT, and it allows an unlimited number of users vs. the limited number allowed in the WebCT per-seat pricing model,” Luzum said. A point-by-point cost comparison is a challenge—as some variables, such as local labor, tech support and alternative systems costs no longer exist. However, using a total cost of ownership spreadsheet to compare the cost of an SaaS solution with the cost of a licensed solution hosted on site, with an equivalent level of redundancy, he estimated that using CourseCruiser saves NICC quite a large sum of money; in the range of \$200,000/year.

By selecting an SaaS solution, NICC avoided the cost of software, hardware and staff to administer an LMS. In fact, the staff required to locally administer CourseCruiser is about one quarter of a full time equivalent, because administration is dispersed among faculty and staff who use the system.

At a total cost of about 35 cents per month per student, CourseCruiser is an economical alternative to a legacy LMS. More importantly, as part of the NICC Xpress portal, it unites the campus community under one umbrella. “We don’t have the disconnect anymore,” Ferrie said.

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Jill Ferrie, Director of Distance Learning, Northeast Iowa Community College