AN INTEGRATED SOLUTION
Combining Portal, LMS and Alert Software

The College of Westchester needed to renew or replace their LMS vendor, PLUS find a robust enterprise portal and emergency notification system— while cutting costs. What they found was an effective cloud-based solution that met all their criteria.

BACKGROUND

In a world in which many software applications are necessary for any educational institution, one of the biggest challenges is interoperability among solutions. A college or university might select one product for its learning management system, another for the institution's email, and so forth.

That means the various solutions must smoothly exchange student, course, and other institutional data. Furthermore, when issues arise, it can be extremely difficult to determine which vendor is at fault. IT is also faced with a myriad of solutions and interfaces to train users on, and to manage, update, backup, and keep secure.

A fully integrated software suite addresses those issues because the software comes from the same vendor. That makes back-end integration far simpler, since each solution draws from the same databases or uses the same formats. User training is vastly simplified, since each piece of an integrated solution has a similar look and feel.

Add to those benefits a software-as-a-service (SaaS) component, in which the vendor retains responsibility for running, managing and upgrading the software, and integrated solutions can significantly ease an institution's software management burden. An integrated solution running as software as a service can have a huge

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impact on the bottom line, shifting responsibility for hardware, upgrades, security, backup and much more away from the institution and on to the vendor.

Just outside New York City, the growing **College of Westchester** has done just that—managing to do more with less in challenging economic times by combining its learning management system with both an enterprise portal *and* an emergency notification system, all from the same SaaS vendor.

The College of Westchester is a private, for-profit, bachelor-degree-granting institution that has been providing career-focused education since 1915 from a single small campus in White Plains, New York. The college serves 1,200 academically and culturally diverse students with 160 faculty and staff; students are a mix of traditional day learners, and evening and weekend adult students.

As director of institutional information and technology at the college, Kelly Walsh brings a strong background in private enterprise to the college. Before joining the College of Westchester in 2008, Walsh worked for over 20 years in IT management roles in businesses involving manufacturing, sales, and distribution. Walsh joined the college shortly after it expanded beyond its two-year associate's degrees. In March of 2008, the College of Westchester was authorized as a baccalaureate degree granting institution. The college recently added its second baccalaureate degree program and intends to continue expanding from there.

WESTCHESTER'S SOLUTIONS

The College of Westchester has selected these three fully integrated CampusCruiser products:

CampusCruiser Portal

An online collaboration platform allowing institutions to disseminate information campus-wide, share best practices among user communities and classes, and provide students with secure online access to their courses, administrative records, and more. Westchester is using CampusCruiser as its campus-wide academic portal and email solution.

CampusCruiser LMS

CampusCruiser's learning management system (LMS), for designing, deploying, and managing courses. Appropriate for completely online courses, hybrid courses, and face-to-face courses with online components. Westchester is replacing its Blackboard WebCT system with CampusCruiser LMS, and plans to use it for both online and face-to-face courses.

CampusCruiser Alert

An instant notification engine that allows institutions to create, schedule, deploy and track emergency and important notifications via text message, voice message, email, RSS feed, and portal announcements. Westchester has set up CampusCruiser Alert to be used both for true emergencies, and for less critical campus-wide communications such as class can-

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THREE PROBLEMS TO ADDRESS

Westchester didn't begin its search by looking for a single solution to address its need for new web portal software, a better new learning management system, and an emergency notification system. But after a few months at Westchester, Walsh realized the college indeed needed three new software solutions.

- First, it was struggling with its current *learning management system*, originally WebCT, now part of Blackboard. Issues included slow response times despite a well-equipped server, what Walsh says struck him as poor web-enabling of the application -- and the high cost of the software license each year.

- On another front, Westchester, like many schools, needed a robust *emergency notification system* right away -- preferably something they could also use for more general messaging capabilities.

- Finally, the college also wanted a stronger *portal application* than the scaled-down tool they were using as a companion to the student information system.

THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

The college began its search for the all-important learning management system first, exploring a number of stand-alone solutions including products such as the Angel Learning Management Suite, Moodle, Sakai, and Blackboard Release 9. For its emergency notification needs, Westchester also looked at a number of stand-alone products.

When Walsh happened upon CampusCruiser in his search, he was intrigued. CampusCruiser is a private company based in Fairfield, New Jersey that is a leading vendor in higher education offering software-as-a-service, or SaaS, solutions. "The more I learned, the more I realized that this [had] real potential for not just one, but *all* of our needs," Walsh says.

Key deciding factors for the college included the fact that CampusCruiser's suite of LMS, portal, and emergency management system met all three of the college's needs in a single integrated environment. The SaaS aspect, Walsh says, "was a nice added bonus. And of course, the applications were affordable and scalable, so it would be easy to grow."

During robust due diligence, Walsh evaluated CampusCruiser's products carefully. CampusCruiser's SaaS model wasn't a must-have criteria—the college had no mission-critical appli-

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cations running as software-as-a-service yet—but Walsh immediately saw the potential benefits in avoiding implementation and maintenance issues, as well as server overhead costs.

- **Price:** The price of the CampusCruiser package—CampusCruiser LMS, CampusCruiser Portal, and CampusCruiser Alert—was a pleasant surprise. "I was thrilled to learn that after our first year, which had extra implementation costs, the annual licensing was actually less than just our [content management system]," Walsh says. "So we could actually lower costs overall, eliminate servers, and add a tremendous amount of functionality."

- **SaaS model:** The software-as-a-service model also offered a solid solution to the all-important scalability issue. As Westchester continues to grow, its additional needs can be met by CampusCruiser—the college won't need to deal with adding servers or other issues. "We won't have to add additional horsepower on our end in order to be able to grow with the application," Walsh points out.

- **Interoperability:** The college deployed the emergency notification system almost simultaneously with the portal system—a move made easy because the products work together closely. "All of these products are nicely integrated in a tightly wrapped environment," Walsh says. "It's very evident that all of the CampusCruiser products are part of an overall environment."

- **Integration:** Previously, the college used Outlook for email, Blackboard for course management, and a third tool for portal management. Having everything delivered through a single interface will make the learning curve easier for students, who can be quickly trained on all three products during the orientation process. "They don't have to wonder why one application versus another isn't working," Walsh says. "They're working in one consistent environment."

Other points in CampusCruiser's favor, Walsh says: the company's sole focus is academia, it has been in business since 1998, and it is deeply experienced in software-as-a-service (the company pioneered the SaaS solution in education).

Ultimately, Westchester selected CampusCruiser and is now running CampusCruiser Portal as its portal and email solution, along with CampusCruiser Alert as its emergency management system. Finally, the college is in the process of converting to CampusCruiser LMS.

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IMPLEMENTING CAMPUSCRUISER

Westchester began implementing its new software over a summer break, beginning with CampusCruiser Portal. CampusCruiser's prefigured "communities" worked well in letting the college create specific groups, such as an "office of the president" or "office of the registrar" community. That configuration allowed communities individual portal pages and easily share file content and web links, and use a community message board. Each of the college's clubs could also be a community, giving students an online tool for sharing files, bookmarks and messages.

In its initial training for users on CampusCruiser, the college included an introduction to CampusCruiser Alert, the emergency alert system. The advantage to having both systems from the same vendor was quickly made apparent: Each package had the same basic look and feel, making training much easier.

CampusCruiser's flexibility began to reveal itself early on, as users found purposes for the product well beyond what the college had originally envisioned. "Many people find, as I have," Walsh says, "that the product has a great deal of utility on an individual basis, independent of the college and the day-to-day work process." One example: bookmarks. Once a Web link is "bookmarked" in the portal, a user can be at any Internet-linked computer, log into the portal, and access individual bookmarks.

Walsh also has used the product itself to solicit feedback. Using CampusCruiser, he and his staff set up message boards seeking comments from students, staff, and faculty on what they liked about the software, and what they wanted added or changed. One result of that is a bookstore area, where students can discuss buying, selling and swapping textbooks.

EMERGENCY ALERT SYSTEM

CampusCruiser Alert's integration with the portal system has enabled a tight working relationship between products. For example, when users first log in to the CampusCruiser portal, they receive a message about the emergency notification system that encourages them to sign up. So far, Westchester has required faculty and staff to sign up, and is strongly encouraging students to participate. "We're almost looking forward to that first snow cancellation to really leverage the system," Walsh says jokingly.

CampusCruiser Alert comes with channels to allow different kinds of communication, including an emergency alert channel. The college has chosen to set up three additional channels—a delayed opening channel, a class cancellations channel, and a buildings closing channel. That allows students to enter multiple numbers—a parent's phone number for class cancellations, for example, and another number for messages about delayed classes.

To see who is signing up and what is most effective in reaching various groups, CampusCruiser Alert includes an export feature. That allows the college to examine all profiles and determine when particular groups have high and low enrollment numbers.

FINAL STEP: CAMPUSCRUISER LMS

The college is now readying for its move to its third CampusCruiser solution, CampusCruiser LMS. Walsh is anticipating far greater integration eventually that what is possible now with the current system. "When we completely move off Blackboard and put CampusCruiser LMS in place, there is going to be great synergy," he says, predicting that use of both CampusCruiser LMS and CampusCruiser will shoot up because of the ease of access.

All of Westchester's courses have at least a syllabus online, Walsh says, but he'd like to consistently make all courses available online as well, in order to supplement the learning process. "We're using this migration as an opportunity to kick things up a notch," Walsh says, "and to make sure that all materials that should be online, *are* online."

Westchester's CampusCruiser portal is a one-stop shop where students, faculty and staff can connect with each other and access important news, information and materials.
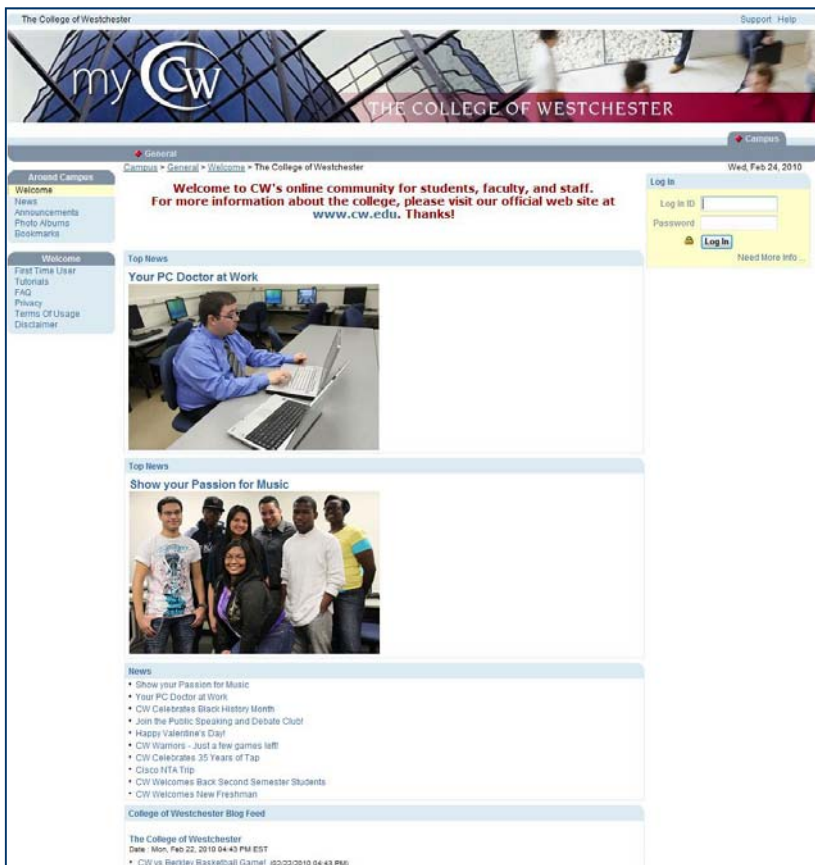
CUTTING APPLICATIONS

A key benefit of the move to CampusCruiser's SaaS solution was cost—in particular, the elimination of several servers and software products. Moving to CampusCruiser Portal for email, for example, enabled Westchester to eliminate an Exchange server dedicated to student email. A previous portal solution will also be cut soon, along with a test server, and the cost of licensing Blackboard. That's a reduction of four applications and four servers—resulting in considerable savings, Walsh points out.

CONCLUSION

The combination of software-as-a-service and powerful, affordable, fully integrated software solutions is clearly working for The College of Westchester. With its LMS, campus-wide academic portal, and emergency management system all hosted offsite by the same vendor, cost savings ensure that the college can maintain tuition at affordable levels—a huge benefit in the current economy. Clearly, the college has benefited in numerous ways. "We've really lowered costs in two ways here," Walsh says. Not only are our overall licensing costs less than they were," Walsh says, "but our functionality is considerably enhanced."

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The only monthly publication focusing exclusively on the use of technology across all areas of higher education, Campus Technology provides in-depth coverage of specific technologies and their implementations, including wireless networks and mobile devices; enterprise resource planning; eLearning and course management systems; 'smart classroom' technologies; telecom, Web, and security solutions—all the important issues and trends for campus IT decision makers.

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CampusCruiser is a private company based in Fairfield, NJ. We have been quietly serving the higher education community for over ten years. Since that time, CampusCruiser's CampusCruiser Portal® has been adopted enterprise-wide by colleges and universities, serving more than 2.5 million students on campuses across the U.S. serving faculty and staff every semester, 24/7. To learn more, visit www.CampusCruiser.com.

ABOUT KELLY WALSH

Kelly Walsh is the director of institutional information and technology at the College of Westchester in White Plains, New York. He has been in the information technology field for over 20 years, in senior management roles for much of that time. An avid user of Internet technologies, Walsh writes about the instructional uses of current and emerging Internet technologies in his blog "Emerging Internet Technologies for Education." To see how these tools can help educators and administrators engage students, improve learning outcomes, and enhance administrative productivity, visit his blog at www.emergingedtech.com.

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