Empowering instructors to teach the way they want to teach

Using the D2L's Brightspace Platform, staff at University of Arizona put the power of change in faculty's hands

The University of Arizona wanted to rethink its course site design workflows to empower faculty to teach courses the way they want to teach them.

Courses for fully online degrees are supported by the Office of Digital Learning while support for all other degrees is provided by the Office of Instruction and Assessment. Teams in both offices work with instructors to create engaging and innovative learning environments. Technologies involved are many and varied. The two offices found themselves overwhelmed by the effort of building and maintaining 10,000 course sites per year for 3,000 faculty and 43,000 students.

"The structure and administration of the student information system and the learning environment can sometimes be problematic," says Mark Felix, director of instructional support at the University of Arizona. "We've struggled as a university over the last 10 years to create a shared understanding of the educational workflow, the workflow of academic technologies, and the bidirectional impacts of managing the student record."

Enter D2L's Brightspace Platform.

New workflows

A data sync process was first created to map out semesters, departments, course templates, course offerings and sections in the system. If a new semester or department appears in Oracle® PeopleSoft, it would be automatically created in the course management system and in Brightspace. A new mobile responsive website was also created using drag-and-drop functionality, with an alternative navigation process for those faculty requiring a screen reader.

Finally, a single click solution was created to pull final adjusted grades out of Brightspace and submit them to PeopleSoft at the end of a semester. This allows faculty to turn in their semester grades quickly, and allows students to see their grades as soon as they are posted by faculty. The solution is powered by Amazon Web Services.

To guide the two offices through the construction of the new workflow, a D2L Technical Account Manager was brought into the equation. Felix says there were questions too granular for standard documentation, past the expertise of tier one and tier two levels of support, and a sales rep couldn't devote the time needed to track a technical project, so having a Technical Account Manager "definitely saved us months and months of time."

"It has allowed us to double the number of course sites we provide services to."

Positive results

The use of the Brightspace Developer Platform's open API and integration tools saves the Office of Instruction and Assessment and Office of Digital Learning countless labor hours. Where in the past it would require two dedicated persons to manage change requests for 2,500 course sites, staff now spend about an hour collectively training faculty, who are able to manage all their own changes to 4,500 course sites containing 8,700 sections.

"It has allowed us to double the number of course sites we provide services to," says Felix. "It's made a huge difference in allowing our team to stay the same size at five people."

Felix says the system continues to evolve so instructional designers can create course sites without being given administrator rights to the entire learning environment. Since faculty are able to make all their own changes to course sites, they feel more empowered and in charge.

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