Video conferencing and collaboration brings a smart new approach to higher education

Customer Profile: Launched in 2010 by Oregon State University, Crook County Open Campus coordinates college courses, industry-specific training and other educational opportunities that would be otherwise unavailable to residents and businesses in rural Oregon.

Situation

In 2003, credit college classes stopped being offered in Crook County due to budget cuts. When these classes stopped, easy access to higher education and specialized training for residents in this and surrounding rural areas went with them. With the closest college campus an hour’s drive away each way, attending formal classes simply wasn’t a practical option for prospective students holding down full-time jobs, parents with young children or many other residents. Recognizing this void in the community, Oregon State University (OSU) launched Oregon Open Campus to build partnerships and convene educational delivery partners to bring higher and continuing education to Crook, Tillamook and Jefferson counties. Yet they realized providing traditional online learning courses wouldn’t be enough. “You have to have good study skills and discipline to succeed in online education,” says Jeff Papke, Coordinator, OSU Open Campus for Crook County. “That was not the profile of many of the people we were looking to serve. We knew in Crook County we needed to provide students with more interactivity and personal contact or we were setting them up for failure.”

Solution

As it turned out, both decisions were easy. Crook County and Oregon Open Campus contacted Obsidian Technologies, a Cisco Premier Partner that’s well-known within the community and has a great deal of presence in the public sector in Central Oregon.

Obsidian Technologies recommended a combination of Cisco Telepresence Video Conferencing with full Audio/Visual Integration, Cisco Media Experience and Digital Media Suite, and Cisco Unified Communications, all built on top of a Cisco Catalyst Network Infrastructure and Cisco WLAN. Each classroom has at least one Cisco Telepresence 1080p HD video camera, and many have two to record the learners, classroom activities and the instructor. Obsidian Technologies also recommended a 100 MB Internet connection, which allows 30 to 40 live connections or up to 50 people to view recorded events.

Business Results

Work on the new 12,300 square foot building was completed in time for the fall, 2011 quarter and it has been an immediate hit. The original four classes offered by Central Oregon Community College and 87 students scaled up to 13 classes serving roughly 350 learners, and it continues to grow.
“We are seeing a tremendous amount of interest within the community for both college courses and other types of training,” Papke says. “We have a beautiful building, so that attracts attention and draws people in right away. But when they see what we’re offering in terms of a unique learning environment they get excited, even if they had no interest in continuing their educations before. For 60 percent of our students this is the first college course they’ve ever taken.”

The convenience of attending classes locally, rather than having to travel an hour each way for an hour-long class, has definitely been a factor according to Papke. He estimates that they have saved their students 1.4 million miles on the road since January, 2011; at current gasoline prices that equates to a savings of between a quarter and a half million dollars. More important, however, is the time savings, especially for working parents who also have to pay for child care while they’re in class. The program is also having a positive effect on the local economy.

“We when the construction industry first hit its downturn in 2006/2007, it had a profound effect on this area,” Papke states. “By 2009/2010, unemployment was at 22 to 23 percent, and people here didn’t have the skills for other types of jobs. With the educational opportunities offered by a variety of partners in the COCC Crook County Open Campus Computer and Education Center, residents are able to learn new skills, including highly sought-after computer skills that make the area more attractive to new employers – particularly data centers that want to take advantage of our location in the high desert. They have a ready-made local workforce that can step in immediately and deliver what they need to be successful.”

The ultimate goal of the program is to give area residents the opportunity to become lifelong learners. So while the COCC Crook County Open Campus Computer and Education Center offers college courses that lead to an Associate of Arts Transfer Degree, allowing all credits to transfer to a university, and vocational training, future courses will provide additional learning opportunities “just for fun.” The Crook County Mobile Computer Classroom follows the Bookmobile to bring classes to residents, with Internet connections provided via satellite link instead of the slow dial-up connections many residents live with daily. Papke is thrilled with how COCC Crook County Open Campus Computer and Education Center has taken off, and credits Obsidian Technologies for a good portion of that success.

“We knew what we wanted to do, but we didn’t know how to make it happen. Obsidian Technologies listened to our goals, quantified them and put everything into a project-based solution. They were also very responsive. The IT world likes to throw out acronyms, but they would explain everything to us simply. They were definitely the right choice.”

— Jeff Papke, Coordinator, OSU Open Campus for Crook County