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PROFILE



University of Akron



- Maintain competitive edge
- Increase course offerings
- Enhance the education experience for students by connecting with high-profile experts

"Understandably, today's students expect leading universities to use technology to enrich the content and to offer more options. It's really inspiring to walk into our classrooms and see instructors, students, and guest lecturers interacting using an array of tools - all integrated with video. Distance learning is definitely one element driving the creation of new and exciting educational opportunities at the University of Akron."

THOMAS KEMP
MANAGER, DISTRIBUTED EDUCATION FACILITIES
UNIVERSITY OF AKRON

UNIVERSITY OF AKRON ENHANCES EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE WITH DISTANCE LEARNING

Founded in 1870 and now the leading research university in northern Ohio, the University of Akron (UA) has a long and impressive performance record of providing an enriched educational experience. With approximately 80 percent of UA's almost 25,000 students coming from its home county of Summit and the surrounding five counties, the university is a key community resource in northern Ohio.

THE CHALLENGE: SHARPENING THE COMPETITIVE EDGE

To maintain its lead in today's intensely competitive world of higher education, UA offers an outstanding faculty and a broad range of academic choices - in fact, more than 350 undergraduate, masters, doctoral and law degree programs.

It also focuses on progress and innovation, as evidenced by its new \$200 million "Landscape for Learning" initiative that includes improved campus access, inviting park-like spaces, and new buildings. This milestone project also reflects UA's growing commitment to distance learning - and the choice, flexibility, and enhanced educational experiences it enables.

Within the recently completed Leigh Hall are state-of-the art distance-learning classrooms that feature a wide variety of integrated technologies. Video communications is the cornerstone technology in those leading-edge instructional environments. In fact, UA tapped into the expertise of TANDBERG, its video partner, early on in the design phase of Leigh Hall to ensure the facility could seamlessly accommodate technology advancements without disrupting the comfort levels or productivity of instructors and students.

THE SOLUTION: HARNESSING DISTANCE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

According to Thomas Kemp, manager of distributed education facilities, UA initially embraced distance learning in 1996, when it set up video systems to connect with high schools in the region. This enabled top juniors and seniors to take post-secondary "college prep" courses and earn credits that, after graduation, they could apply to their

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college degree programs. Not surprisingly, many of those participating students go on to enroll full time at the University of Akron after graduating high school.

Jillian Hinegardner, now a junior at UA studying education, was a student of UA's post-secondary courses while attending Buckeye High School in Medina County. "Coming from a small, rural high school, I didn't have access to a wide variety of academic opportunities. Distance learning allowed me to take a variety of challenging classes and exposed me to people of different backgrounds and perspectives. It has immensely enhanced my education."

UA has continued to grow its distance learning opportunities for students. In addition to the post-secondary programs with surrounding high schools, UA also collaborates with seven other northern Ohio colleges and universities to share distance learning classes, so students can choose from more course subjects and scheduling options.

Eric Veigel, distance education facilities coordinator, confirmed the popularity of distance learning. "The students love it. They experience the same spontaneous interactions as if they were face to face with the instructor and other students. And, the instructors get hooked very quickly. In addition to expanding their reach to more students, video enables them to enhance their curriculum with more frequent and notable guest lecturers."

He cited many examples of how distance learning at UA enriches educational content. Ohio Senator Kevin Coughlin teaches a political science course from the state capital of Columbus and often brings in political experts as guest lecturers...A professor of economics delivers a keynote speech over video to The Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest, Romania... The School of Law sponsors an all-day, continuing-education session in conjunction with The International Trademark Association that connects Akron legal professionals with experts at law firms in Chicago and New York City.

BEHIND THE SCENES: SELECTING AND OPTIMIZING THE RIGHT VIDEO NETWORK

To fully leverage its video investment, Kemp and his team are migrating from a proprietary and sometimes troublesome ATM network to an IP network. IP will enable them to easily connect with more locations around the world, to transmit distance learning sessions without relying on third-party bridging services or incurring long-distance phone charges, and to reduce equipment costs for each classroom.

Given their decision to transition to IP and the importance of their video investment, Kemp and his staff thoroughly compared the various video communications systems on the market before unanimously agreeing on TANDBERG.

"The units are reliable, easy to operate, and compatible with all other brands. And, the centralized management features are very robust. With TANDBERG Management Suite (TMS), we can easily implement software upgrades to all units at once, receive automatic trouble tickets, maintain control of all system settings, and schedule conferences from any machine. But, the real kicker is the powerful combination of TMS on an IP network. Because TMS is a web-based tool, our technicians can remotely manage the network and troubleshoot from anywhere. As a result, we can fully maximize our resources," said Kemp.

In addition, with their mix of TANDBERG internal and external MCUs, UA can run up to 100 point-to-point calls (or classes) simultaneously. Kemp likes the fact that, in addition to being user friendly, the MCUs are capable of speed matching so that the network doesn't reduce multiple end points running at different connection speeds to the lowest common denominator.

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THE RESULT: MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Combining video communications with an intelligent and creative content delivery strategy, UA is making academic excellence more accessible and more convenient to a more diverse base of students. In only six years, it has grown the number of distance learning courses from two to almost 70, with numerous classrooms on campus and at area high schools. The number of students in each course has also grown at an impressive rate.

Kemp underscored the need for universities to embrace technologies in order to remain competitive. "Understandably, today's students expect leading universities to use technology to enrich the content and to offer more options. It's really inspiring to walk into our classrooms and see instructors, students, and guest lecturers interacting using an array of tools - all integrated with video. Distance learning is definitely one element driving the creation of new and exciting educational opportunities at the University of Akron," he concluded.

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