

case study

University of Tennessee

University of Tennessee Nearing a Decade of Distance Education Using Saba Centra Live

Solution Overview

Industry — Higher Education

Challenge

Offer the dynamic interaction and collaborative learning of a classroom environment while expanding academic outreach to growing numbers of traditional students and adult learners in a range of programs

Benefits

- Replicates a physical classroom environment, allowing for real-time interaction and sharing of information online, regardless of the geographic distance of students
- Accommodates guest lecturers and enables professors to lead classes from different locations — anywhere in the world
- Supports more effective informal collaboration and social interaction among students
- Allows students to easily catch up on coursework from classes missed, or re-play lectures or discussions with no extra effort by the professor

Solution

Saba Centra Live



A few years ago, a University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UT) professor got the opportunity to spend an entire semester in Germany. The professor was very excited; he had been looking forward to conducting additional research in his field of study, while having the chance to live abroad and travel. The problem was that he was scheduled to teach an engineering class that same semester.

Fortunately, the University of Tennessee was one of the early adopters of Saba Centra Live, a solution that facilitates distance education in innovative ways. Since 1999, Centra Live has enabled UT students living hundreds of miles from the Knoxville campus to enroll in a variety of classes and fully participate in discussions, share information, and “raise their hands” in real time using Web-based tools — without leaving home. In addition, it provides UT professors the freedom to travel — even overseas — and still teach courses.

“Most people who use Centra Live really like it. If it makes their life easier and more convenient, they’re all for it.”

Andi Damewood, Saba Centra Program Coordinator
University of Tennessee

So with Centra Live’s help, the professor used his desktop computer to effectively teach his class to students thousands of miles away over the Internet. “As Web connection speeds have increased, professors can travel for a week or for an entire semester, and not have to miss class,” said Andi Damewood, program coordinator for Saba Centra at the University of Tennessee. “Centra Live effectively replicates a physical classroom setting for online students. It’s very exciting.”

Reaching Out to Adult Learners

One of the biggest benefits of implementing Centra Live at UT has been to simplify the lives of nontraditional students such as adult learners. According to Damewood, the earliest proponents of Centra Live were departments looking to reach out to more nontraditional students. In some cases, the results have been dramatic.

“Programs in the College of Business and in the School of Information Science have become so popular the schools have had to limit the size

of the cohorts,” Damewood remarked. “We started with one nontraditional MBA program, and now we’ve added three more. Centra Live has certainly played a role in the programs’ growing popularity.”

One of UT’s highly successful nontraditional MBA programs is its Physician Executive MBA (PEMBA). Since 1998, approximately 250 physicians from 38 states and a number of foreign countries have graduated from the program with needed skills ranging from business plan creation to managing organizational change. For the past three years, *Modern Physician* and *Modern Healthcare* magazines have dubbed UT’s PEMBA “the #1 MBA program exclusively for physicians.” The vast majority of online interactive learning for the program is supported by Centra Live.

Sweeping the Campus

Today, UT has approximately 750 students and 50 faculty members representing a dozen schools and programs that regularly use classes taught using Centra Live. There are 50 nontraditional classes a week, representing hundreds of hours of online instruction. Damewood’s group provides help-desk support 13 hours per day, plus on weekends.

Because all Centra Live classes are recorded, students can easily review a professor’s lecture before exams, or go back and “attend” any classes they may have missed. This is very valuable for traditional and nontraditional students, and saves considerable time for professors as well.

UT also has an initiative called “Ready for the World,” which promotes faculty and student learning and collaboration not only across the nation, but also around the globe. Centra Live is playing a key role in supporting this — easily allowing guest lecturers to provide input from anywhere, and helping students and faculty work together in real time, regardless of where they are located. In the near future, UT researchers are even planning to use the solution to collaborate on projects with researchers at other UT sites as well as at other colleges and universities.

Making Students’ Lives Easier

Parking has long been a vexing issue on the Knoxville campus. Finding an available space can be a challenge after hours, and is virtually impossible if a UT football or basketball game is being played at the same time. Centra Live has helped both commuter students and adult learners to eliminate parking concerns from the equation.

“Honestly, parking at this campus is one of the biggest nuisances we have for evening and weekend classes,” Damewood explained. “The fact that students can stay at home and not have to drive to campus has been a real positive.”

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Facilitating Department Meetings and Collaboration

The University of Tennessee is also taking advantage of the Centra Live for E-Meetings solution to streamline regular meetings within departments and university extension groups. UT has even used Centra Live for E-Meetings to host meetings for statewide nonacademic groups.

UT also encourages students to use Centra Live for E-Meetings any time to collaborate efficiently on school projects or conduct research without the obstacles of distance. “The capabilities are just great for any small group collaboration,” Damewood commented.

Reaping the Benefits

Considering that Centra Live was initially deployed as an alternative to videoconferencing, the solution has been a substantial cost saver for the university, according to Damewood. With Centra Live, students and faculty members use their own PCs, so there's not as much special equipment for UT to purchase. The solution has added support for a range of popular PC operating systems such as Windows — including Vista — and the Apple Macintosh platform, which has a big following in some educational circles.

UT also has strong anecdotal evidence that Centra Live is helping prepare students for real-world challenges they will face in the future. Several MBA students have commented that having experience in Web conferencing — for example, being able to meet and review a key spreadsheet online in real time — gives them a highly marketable business skill they'll need after graduation.

“Most people who use Centra Live really like it,” Damewood stated. “If it makes their life easier and more convenient, they're all for it.”