THE CHALLENGE

Eastern Michigan University is a nationally recognized public university in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Eastern Michigan had used a learning management system (LMS) for over a decade. It was filled with thousands of courses that instructors had built, and because of the amount of content, people who used the former LMS were worried about migrating to something else.

But their greater worry was falling behind with a system that didn’t fit their future. The university knew it needed to switch to a new system that embraced the latest educational technologies. Bill Jones, the director of instructional technology and information management for Eastern Michigan, explained: “We wanted to make sure we were on the front edge of the newer technologies that were coming out. We needed to make sure we had a system that worked for everyone. We found it in Canvas LMS.”

KEY FINDINGS

- EMU migrated more than 5,000 courses from its previous LMS to Canvas
- Developers at EMU created a new application called the CanvasDataViewer to share with other institutions
- EMU’s Center for E-Learning developed a robust series of Canvas training courses for online and on-campus use
“The support that we got from Canvas throughout the migration and installation process was really good. It was very close support, a lot of collaboration, and we thought it was critical in helping us have a smooth rollout for the system.”

BILL JONES
Director of Instructional Technology and Information Management

THE DECISION

In May of 2015, Eastern Michigan launched Canvas campus-wide for online and web-enhanced classes and had taken care of one of its biggest concerns: migration. During the installation process, administrators and IT teams, working with Canvas representatives, transferred more than 5,000 courses from the former system to Canvas. With Canvas, EMU had more time to focus on pedagogy instead of trying to update technology. Jones, who helped implement Canvas, said, "I think the biggest factor that led us to choose Canvas was its usability. It was a simple, robust interface that instructors found easy to learn, and that made the migration and the deployment of the new system run very smoothly."

EMU put a premium on training. The school's Center for E-Learning prepared video guides for teachers about the switch and how to work best with the migrated content. They offered one-on-one training and group workshops online or on campus. They worked with teachers to build or redesign fully online courses. Training also covered Canvas Quizzes, Outcomes, and Collaborations. This gave teachers hands-on experience and enabled them to build the courses they wanted.

Students also received extra, on-demand training with Canvas, and EMU advertised its 24/7/365 technical support agreement with Instructure, which provided continued access to those services.

INNOVATION AND OUTCOMES

With the addition of CanvasData, a nightly release of all an institution’s data from the Canvas system, Eastern Michigan developers were able to create the CanvasDataViewer, an application which allows schools to automatically download Canvas Data files into an SQL server database and analyze the information. CanvasDataViewer automates the process so that teachers and program managers can analyze fresh data each day. EMU posted the application on the software development platform GitHub and introduced it to other institutions. This app reinforced the importance of having a system that fosters innovation, not just maintenance.

In choosing Canvas, EMU felt that it had gained control of its own educational innovation, and it appreciated that this modern, flexible, simple tool displayed the university's progress in several ways. Jones said, “Canvas helps us fulfill the mission of our institution by being transparent in supporting learning. When we use Canvas, instructors can concentrate on teaching in their discipline. That's what's important to them, and it helps their students concentrate on learning and their courses, and that's central to why we're here as a university.”