Ease of Use With Canvas LMS Helps University Overcome Fears of Migration and Focus on Student Success

THE CHALLENGE
Switching your routine is uncomfortable, and using new tools can be difficult, but change is even tougher when it’s by necessity. Palo Alto University is a private, nonprofit institution in California with a heavy research emphasis and faculty throughout the world. For five years, Palo Alto used Pearson LearningStudio for its learning management system (LMS), mostly as a reporting tool for accreditation.

Scott Hines, who directs academic technology at the university, said the system was reliable but fell short in its ease of use and interface, and it lacked a way to measure student success. “It was the unspoken promises that they didn’t keep. The unspoken promise of, ‘Hey, this can be an exciting LMS.’ We really wanted that. But they weren’t fulfilling it,” said Hines. What’s more, Pearson decided to get out of the LMS business and left Palo Alto, and other schools, hanging. “We were looking to break up with our old LMS for a long time. And then all of the sudden our old LMS broke up with us!” said Hines. Palo Alto needed a new LMS that was aesthetically pleasing, with the functionality to match, and something that students could get excited about.

But the first step was convincing faculty that the switch was worth it.

KEY FINDINGS
• Since adopting Canvas, the percentage of faculty using the LMS has increased from 60-70% to 90-95%
• Administrators say getting data for accreditation/evaluation is smoother in Canvas
• Favorite Canvas features: SpeedGrader, Calendars, Notifications, and To-Do Lists
• Palo Alto consulted peers and Canvas Community before deciding to switch
“The transition was really easy. We knew we were getting something that we didn't have before when we transitioned to Canvas.”

SCOTT HINES
Director of Academic Technology and University Librarian, Palo Alto University

THE DECISION
Hines said even though administrators knew they needed an LMS, many teachers were apprehensive about picking up a new platform and potentially losing features they’d used before. They also worried about migrating all of their lessons and classroom content out of LearningStudio to another LMS. The ultimate goal for the change was to have a system that promoted student success in three specific ways: real-time interaction and feedback between teachers and students, easy-to-manage rubrics, and a reporting tool the school could rely on. Palo Alto’s LMS selection committee had a broad representation of students, faculty, staff, and administration to evaluate different systems prior to migration. From the beginning, they received answers from customers on the Canvas Community who were completely open about their experience with Canvas—this included people who’d used Pearson LearningStudio and showed Palo Alto how to migrate their courses to and integrate their student information system with Canvas. “Our old LMS was kind of quirky. Some of the files they used were very difficult to work with. In the transition to Canvas, our administrators found that it was a breeze, and we weren’t sure it was going to be. We were afraid at first, but we saw Canvas could do the job,” Hines explained.

Another advantage for Canvas was that California universities and colleges, including Stanford, with whom Palo Alto has consortial programs and shared research groups, were also moving to Canvas. But most of all, it was ease of use—especially the ease of navigation and the ease of teaching others to use it—that brought everything together and prompted Palo Alto to switch to Canvas. Users started to take advantage of a wealth of information, tutorials, and Tier 1 (24/7) Canvas Support.

THE RESULTS
“Canvas allows our faculty to teach in a way that’s not just creative, but that extends their presence to the students in a way they couldn’t before,” Hines said. Adoption of Canvas continues to rise at Palo Alto, and now teachers are taking techniques they used in class and making modules and simulations in Canvas that allow them to do more than traditional course work, whether that’s a certificate course, a training course for professionals, or a massive open online course (MOOC). Canvas has enhanced learning for students, too, with new ways to access information, collaborate with classmates, and connect with their professors.

Palo Alto’s mission is to “engage minds and improve lives,” and Canvas has helped the university achieve that internationally. “Our emphasis on social justice, research, and clinical work, as well as teaching, has led us to work with researchers, clinicians, and students in the Central African Republic and Rwanda as well as Mainland China, India, and South America. There was no way we could reach out to those international collaborators with our old LMS, because it was too slow, too clunky, too hard to learn. With Canvas, we can reach out to those collaborators and students around the world easily, quickly, and without a lot of training involved,” said Hines.

The major migration that Palo Alto had feared went smoothly with its new LMS and a little help from peer institutions. “We had a very good plan for our transition to Canvas, but in the end it really depended on Canvas coming through as an LMS that could quickly hit the ground running with us. And that’s exactly what it did,” Hines said. “Now that we’re with Canvas, we can really be the university we’ve always wanted to be.”