Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University is the world's largest fully accredited private university system specializing in aerospace and aviation. Embry-Riddle has more than one hundred locations in the United States and globally. It was one of the first universities to offer distance-learning classes and, later, online resources.

Embry-Riddle had used its previous learning management system (LMS) for many years, but the relationship began to change during system upgrades, which seemed like "new implementations," said Becky Vasquez, Vice President and Chief Information Officer for Embry-Riddle. Those upgrades would take up staffing time and resources and, despite extensive testing, would reveal new issues and halt production. Vasquez said, "When you have an unexpected downtime with your learning management system, it's like locking your classroom doors for your students, and that just isn't an acceptable place to be."

The moment that Embry-Riddle knew it needed to find a different LMS vendor came during an upgrade that took a couple of days and was too disruptive to campus. Additionally, faculty said they could not use the previous LMS the way they wanted in their teaching. "We weren't growing in our use of the LMS because of the restrictions we had with our current provider... the learning technology environment had changed around us and we weren't changing with it. We realized that it was time to do an evaluation," Vasquez said.

Embry-Riddle named for best online bachelor's degree

- 10% more courses placed online by faculty through Canvas compared to previous LMS
- Students and faculty say Canvas' biggest advantage is its easy-to-use, intuitive platform
- Administrators say Canvas helps with student retention
“Canvas is kind of the unicorn of LMSs. You don't think it's out there, but then you see it, and you're like, ‘Oh, maybe this is a real thing.’ And for us, it has been.”

BECKY VASQUEZ
Vice President and Chief Information Officer, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

THE DECISION

Administrators knew the change would take time and effort, but given the potential rewards of switching LMSs and the constant disruptions and mounting frustration with the current platform, the choice was clear. The chancellor of Embry-Riddle's worldwide campus opened the request for a proposal, put together a selection committee primarily comprised of faculty, and identified hundreds of LMS requirements. It issued an open invitation to anyone at Embry-Riddle to watch the vendor presentations and submit scorecards. The feedback showed a majority preferred the Canvas LMS because of usability, system impressions, and current Canvas-user recommendations.

“Everything was easy about it. The demonstrations were easy. The contracting was easy. We even set up single sign-on and had classes launched on day one of our implementation, which was unheard of for any system that we’d implemented,” Vasquez said.

After summarizing the input and working closely with faculty, Embry-Riddle administrators decided they would be in a much better situation leveraging Canvas as its new LMS.

THE RESULTS

In 2017, U.S. News & World Report named Embry-Riddle Worldwide for best online bachelor’s degree in the nation—the second straight year among the elite online educators. Though the university had built its reputation over decades, administrators credited Canvas in helping Embry-Riddle reach that top spot.

Canvas and its mobile app provided new opportunities to Embry-Riddle and its extensive online learning division, in which the Canvas LMS IS the classroom. “Aren’t all students on the go? That functionality, and Canvas being built around anytime, anywhere learning is tremendously helpful,” Vasquez said, who added that having an easy-to-use tool promotes buy-in and even retains students. You can credit part of that bond to the Canvas Support relationship—Embry-Riddle chose to contract with Instructure to receive 24/7 chat, phone, and self-service for help options.

Most importantly, the downtime problems and frequent interruptions didn’t happen with Canvas. Vasquez said that the seamless way engineers improve the application creates an opt-in scenario in which faculty can get comfortable with something before they use it. And the cloud-hosted nature of Canvas provides reliability, security, flexibility, and time saved.

Leaving its previous LMS for Canvas has also “shrunk” this worldwide institution, in a good way. Video collaborations in Canvas further connected students to professors and students to students. Students have also provided feedback to Embry-Riddle through the many tools at their disposal, including discussion boards, virtual classrooms, and “what-if” grades—all designed for engagement and student success. It’s the right tool for a world-class institution.

Vasquez explained: “Canvas allows faculty and students to have the kind of dynamic learning environment they deserve. It touches squarely on everything we do... It was one of the best decisions we’ve made.”