Canvas and Utah State University

University sets the standard for implementing Canvas, integrating with existing systems

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Chief Information Officer
Utah State University

The Challenge

In 2011 Utah State University (USU) was at the beginning of a major change. As a member of the Utah Education Network, they were instrumental in choosing Canvas as the solution to replace the existing Blackboard LMS for all of Utah’s higher education institutions. As a key consortium member USU became one of the first major institutions in the world to implement Canvas. As an early adopter, the university has served as a model for other institutions to follow.

“We were up against some major challenges,” says Robert Wagner, associate vice provost and executive director of Distance Education. “Many of our classes really push the boundaries of what an LMS can do. Nobody had ever run large classes like ours on Canvas. Nobody had integrated live with Banner. We had just one semester, really, to get these things tested and ready.”

The Result

One of the school’s first concerns was integrating Canvas with USU’s student information system, Ellucian’s Banner. The university required a real-time integration between Banner and Canvas using Luminis Message Broker (LMB) as middleware. USU collaborated with Instructure and soon had an integration solution that enabled Blackboard Vista and Canvas to run, integrated live with Banner, on the same LMB. In addition to the SIS integration, Instructure delivered on integrations for nearly all of Utah State’s third-party tools, including Wimba, Respondus, Turnitin, EQUELLA and others.

Course “Go Live” History

<table>
<thead>
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"We had just one semester, really, to get these things tested and ready. We did it and what we hear from students and faculty is positive."

— Robert Wagner
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Utah State University

“Thanks to our excellent faculty, our talented crew at USU’s Faculty Assistance Center for Teaching and Instructure’s ability to deliver, we did it,” Wagner said. “We now have thousands of courses in Canvas and integrations that work, and what we hear from faculty and students is positive.”

In 10 months, USU migrated more than 3,000 courses to Canvas, starting with the most difficult—the fully online. Canvas’ LMS migration tool accomplished most of the transfer work. In addition to copying content, quizzes, assignments, discussions and more, it also fixes most Blackboard-centric links.

“Once the content migration tool does its job,” says Neal Legler, instructional designer at USU, “it’s usually just a matter of clearing out links and pages that only existed to get around the inefficiencies of the prior system. We almost always end up with a better course in the end.”

USU’s content migration has resulted in nearly 3.4 million uploaded files plus 6,000 new media files. Nearly 1,500 teachers and 32,000 students have used the system, and weekly page views now consistently surpass 1 million per week. Canvas has scaled to meet the load.

“The LMS is one of the most mission critical systems at a university,” says Eric Hawley, USU’s chief information officer. “It has to perform well or our IT support staff hear about it. The uptime, stability and performance of Canvas far surpass our prior system. It fits in well with our other enterprise offerings, and escalated issues are quickly resolved.”

USU reports that its migration has been very successful. The most common feedback from users is that they prefer Canvas to the previous system. Canvas takes a different approach than Blackboard in many respects, so naturally some adjustment has been required, but USU’s implementation team says whenever there have been frustrations, Instructure has proven responsive and willing to recognize and resolve problems. In addition to attractive features like SpeedGrader™, multimedia integration, notifications and mobile apps, the team agrees that one of the best parts about being “a Canvas school” is the energy of the Canvas community and the willingness of Instructure to focus that energy for the greater good of education. With Canvas, faculty and students are more imaginative and sharing, and there is always that enlivening sense of moving forward.