

Penn State's World Comes Together with Adobe Connect

"Geography is irrelevant to Penn State," said John Harwood, the university's associate vice provost for information technology—irrelevant because advances in the quality of communications technology have allowed students and faculty in even the most remote outposts to connect with each other in ways that obliterate time and space. "Penn Staters are not only all over the state but all over the world, and we need the technology to support them," said Harwood. "Adobe® Connect™ is playing an increasingly important role in bringing our world together. There are a thousand and one ways we're using it to meet our institutional goals."

With 96,000 students, 17,000 faculty, 24,000 staff members and 24 physical locations throughout the state—anchored by the main campus at University Park—Penn State is an expansive enterprise that touches many lives in many ways: One out of every 100 Pennsylvanians is a graduate.

"Our aim is to provide a high-quality education to every student, even if they can't come to our campuses," said Harwood. Toward that end, in 2006, after a year-long pilot, the school formally adopted Adobe Connect as its institution-wide web conferencing software. "Our faculty wanted a tool that they could use both synchronously and asynchronously," Harwood explained, a tool that enabled faculty to deliver lectures and encourage interaction with students online, in real time, as well as archive lessons for later viewing. "Similarly, our administrators were very conscious of the need to be able to communicate regularly and effectively beyond emails and blogs, and to control access to meetings." What's more, said Harwood, "we didn't want a solution that was distributed, but rather browser-based, something that would be friendly to both Mac and PC users."

The university introduced Adobe Connect to all the campuses at once, "without any real stress or strain," said Harwood. Part of the success of its implementation came from the fact that the university had several different units within its central IT group that could support the effort in a very cost-effective manner. "We didn't have or need anyone dedicated full time to Connect, just fractions of others' time to create a very lean operation," said Harwood. Support for end-users came from on-line training sessions as well as one-on-one consulting. A help desk was established but initial requests were minimal—less than 500 email requests for assistance and only 83 phone or walk in questions. "For complicated events we would have IT staff do the set up," said Harwood, "but after the first time, users easily learned to do it themselves."

Over the 18 months ending December 2010 the university had more than 162,000 meeting sessions using Adobe Connect. "We were interested in seeing what our peak usage might be," said Harwood, "and we discovered that in March, 2010, we had 791 meetings in one hour, and 539 in one hour in both

September and December of that year." Despite the large number of simultaneous users, sessions proceeded without a technical glitch.

A 2010 university survey found that 26 percent of the faculty responders were using Adobe Connect to teach at a distance. "By teaching we mean anywhere from a whole program to individual courses to bringing in a guest speaker," Harwood noted. One instructor in Education Leadership taught a course via Adobe Connect while in Alaska. In addition, the College of Education used the software to offer elementary and secondary teachers free online information sessions.

Individual departments across disciplines use Adobe Connect to offer academic support, virtual office hours, captured lectures, lab sessions, study groups and more. "There are a number of departments that employ Adobe Connect for regularly scheduled webinar series to discuss faculty research and course content," said Harwood. "It's a powerful means of communication and collaboration." Some departments use Adobe Connect to interview perspective graduate students. Others, because faculty are often traveling, use it to ensure that doctoral defenses occur as scheduled, even when not all members of the dissertation committee are able to be physically in the room at the same time.

"We do a lot of IT training," noted Harwood, "and our group is very committed to using Adobe Connect to extend the opportunities for faculty, staff and students to receive training." The university's human resources group as well uses Connect for a variety of training programs. "This again enables people to reduce their travel time whenever they have a session—and it also solves the problem that you can't be at two places at the same time, which is a huge benefit for us," said Harwood.

Although Adobe Connect is used by tens of thousands of people inside Penn State, it's not just for Penn Staters. "We often need to collaborate or communicate with people who are not Penn State faculty or administrators," Harwood explained. "They can get a free Friends of Penn State account and be easily added to a meeting. About a third of the people who are using Adobe Connect were invited into a session because they needed to communicate with someone at Penn State. I think that's an important point to note, that we use it both for internal and external communications."

Adobe Connect played a key role in the university's response to the recent flu pandemic. "We had information that this could be a serious disruption to education and so we said, 'What are we going to do to be prepared so that students, if they are sick, can still continue in their studies? If they needed to be at home, how can we do this?'" Part of the answer lay in making Adobe Connect central to the university's strategy for continuity. "It became part

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of our emergency preparedness system, simply because it is the tool that people use and we have a very robust infrastructure to support it," said Harwood.

Cost has been a driver in the university's increased use of Adobe Connect. "We saw it as a way to reduce internal Penn State travel expenses," noted Harwood. Rough calculations about the number of people in Adobe Connect meetings revealed the financial benefits to the university. "For 50,000 sessions held, we assumed that one quarter of the meeting sessions saved one person traveling 300 miles round trip. For the 50,000 sessions, Connect perhaps saved 3,749,925 gallons of gas; at 51 cents per gallon that's \$1,912,462 savings in travel reimbursements. That's real savings both in our carbon footprint and in dollars," said Harwood. Because of the budget challenges in the current economic climate, Harwood surmises that the university will see many more departments and campuses increasingly questioning the necessity of traveling to a meeting.

"Our agricultural extension program has transitioned from traveling to remote training via Connect," said Harwood. "One educator in Forest Resources met with folks from Penn State and seven other universities via Connect and saved in excess of \$3,000 for the National 4-H Forestry Invitational budget. That's a powerful illustration of the cost savings of Connect."

