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Customer Spotlight
Niagara College Canada

Niagara College creates custom Digital Toolkit to future proof student outcomes

nc Niagara College Canada

Niagara College (NC) is located in the heart of the Niagara Region just minutes from one of the world's most well-known tourist destinations, Niagara Falls.

NC offers more than 130 pioneering programs between their state-of-the-art campuses in both Welland and Niagara-on-the-Lake. Both campuses were recently renovated thanks to the $65-million campus redevelopment project as part of their strategy to embrace a transformational shift in learning and support a culture of modernization in their programs and services.

This support can be seen in the types of courses they offer which are vastly different to other colleges. Examples of this include Canada's first teaching winery, brewery, artisan distilling, and even commercial cannabis production!

Like the vast majority of higher education establishments around the world, NC were thrown a curveball when COVID-19 hit. When staff and students were sent home for their own safety, approximately 45 computer labs could no longer be used. Due to their continuous ability to innovative they already had remote learning (VDI) in place ahead of the pandemic however, it wasn't the perfect fit for the extreme situation we all found ourselves in. Instead, NC looked towards creating their own Digital Toolkit to tackle the situation head on.

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What is a Digital Toolkit?

When we discuss Digital Toolkits, we are referring to a set up where a university or college uses multiple pieces of software to create a unique combination which fits their needs. When NC reviewed their pre-pandemic remote learning environment they discovered that their VDI infrastructure could be tricky to work with.

"VDI did make our journey slightly easier pre COVID because we had moved many large student applications to the cloud such as Microsoft O365 and our LMS. So that was one piece of it. But we still had about 160 applications that we needed to deliver to our students, luckily most of those could be virtualized, and we mostly found ways of doing it through our VDI infrastructure. There were some applications that needed remote vendor support and that was a little bit tricky to come up with ways to be able to get around it. Licensing was always a struggle with some of these products because they're not made to be VDI based or not made to be run remote, which was a little tricky."

In an **article** with The Globe and Mail, Paul Zammit, Professor at Niagara College's School of Environment and Horticulture, discussed how different courses have different needs and requirements, so they adapted depending on the program. This in itself shows how one solution couldn't possibly fit all, meaning a Digital Toolbox was the best solution.

Consortium Collaboration

Thankfully NC identified some of their remote learning issues pre COVID meaning they had time to assess what they needed. This was further aided by the fact that NC is a member of the OCCCIO (Ontario College Council Chief Information Officers). The OCCCIO is a collaborative member run organisation created to help improve its members' ability to effectively run information technology support across Higher Education. One of the many benefits to being a member of the OCCCIO is that the 24 colleges regularly communicate and inform each other of new technologies. In this case NC was informed about AppsAnywhere from George Brown College during an OCCCIO conference.

"When the CIOs and other managers and staff at the various Colleges all saw the power of this software we put our money where our mouth was and decided as a group (coordinated by Lisa Grothier at St. Lawrence College) to buy the software together, and I think that was the first semblance of a consortium. The cost savings were also intriguing as we are always struggling with funding for technologies."

The Student Experience

Before the pandemic NC were starting a project to make AppsAnywhere the central control for their computer labs meaning they we were only updating software in one location at the College.

Due to this previous understanding they were able to navigate the tight deadlines triggered by COVID-19, and crunched from what was going to be at least a one year project to implement remote access to all of these applications for students into approximately two weeks!

NC further added to their Digital Toolkit by building and configuring a student VPN so they could give the students the back-end experience in a secure way. They configured AppsAnywhere to open on the student computer but with the VPN in place meaning they could use a shared database or files on the College network as if they were connected to the College's wireless or wired network.

> "I think they were just so happy that they were able to get as much access as they got because they never expected to have a great experience during COVID-19. I think our experience was far more enhanced because of the combination of AppsAnywhere and other network/security innovations to make sure that it worked well."

Referring back to The Globe and Mail article, Professor Zammit claimed that the hybrid learning settings could actually be better than classroom because the remote students seem to enjoy the creative freedom!

The Future is Bright

NC say that their programs immerse students within a highly experiential learning environment enhanced by digital technologies. This can clearly be seen in how they have adapted to COVID-19, combining software to create a unique recipe which gives all their students the digital equity they deserve, even beyond pandemic life.

"I don't think it's ever going completely back to in person and I think we're always going to have a little bit of hybrid and flexibility. It's going to become the new normal and we're only going to get better at it."

The students expect access from anywhere, anytime and any place and we can deliver that with AppsAnywhere.

NC's transformational shift is remarkable. Their commitment to ensure that their students have the digital equity they deserve can be seen as clearly as Niagara Falls itself! We are proud to call them a partner and are looking forward to growing alongside them.

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