

University of Minnesota deploys Google Apps to all students, staff, and alumni – with an expected annual savings of between \$2-3 million



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

The Institution

Established in 1851, the University of Minnesota (U of M) is a public research university with two flagship campuses located in Minneapolis and St. Paul and four other campuses across the state. With over 67,000 students, 17,500 staff and faculty, and around 400,000 alumni, U of M has the fourth-largest main campus student body in the United States.

Approach

As one of the largest public universities in the country, University of Minnesota has a formidable task in providing collaboration and messaging tools for all students, staff, and alumni. To do so, the university was using a number of disparate tools – some homegrown and some delivered by vendors – many of which were lacking in functionality. They also increased complexity for the university's IT staff, according to Bernard Gulachek, Sr. Technology Director at the University of Minnesota.

“Not only did our entire student body, faculty, and staff feel the pain of not having consistent, integrated collaboration tools,” says Gulachek. “But so did the IT staff responsible for managing the systems and delivering services. Sitting at the help desk explaining the lack of functionality, features, and uptime was not a very rewarding job.”

U of M found it difficult to improve the quality of service for its diverse set of users. It was also complex and time-consuming for in-house IT staff to operate and manage many disjointed systems. Email and collaboration systems were sometimes unavailable, and service outages for planned maintenance and upgrades were challenging to schedule, in addition to requiring extensive and time-consuming communications to the user base.

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—Bernard Gulachek, Sr. Technology Director, University of Minnesota

IT management saw that legacy systems and time spent managing them no longer delivered value to the institution. “Our management of the institution's systems for email and collaboration services was not competitive and did not provide comparative value,” says Ellen Puffe, Associate Editor and Communications & Advancement Specialist with the university's Office of Information Technology. “We began looking for a fully integrated suite of services that was platform-agnostic and standards-based, simple to support, compatible with mobile devices, and cost-effective.”

Solution

While this seemed like an overwhelming list of requirements, after evaluating several options, U of M quickly zeroed in on Google Apps for Education, a suite of tools which many students and faculty were already using to forward their U of M

About Google Apps for Education

Google Apps is an enterprise-ready suite of applications that includes Gmail, Google Calendar (shared calendaring), Google Docs and Spreadsheets (online document hosting and collaboration), Google Sites (team site creation and publishing), and Google Video (easy, secure sharing of video content).

For more information, please visit:

www.google.com/a/edu

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**—Ellen Puffe, Office of Information Technology
Associate Editor and Communications &
Advancement Specialist**

emails to Gmail. In fact, this grassroots U of M Google Apps usage had grown to a user base of over 3,000. "The tipping point for us was when we realized that people were already using Google Apps and Gmail," says Gulachek. "We decided to let our users lead the way and provide them with the tools that they chose on their own, rather than trying to force something else upon them."

Starting in November 2009 with the student body, U of M began a switch from a potpourri of other services to a consistent, integrated messaging and collaboration solution from Google. Faculty and staff subsequently began to migrate to Google Apps for Education in May 2010. In addition to Gmail, the institution uses Google Sites to compile and share research materials on the web, Google Calendar for group calendaring, Google Talk for instant messaging, and Google Docs for document collaboration – all integrated into a single, cohesive solution.

Results

According to Puffe and Gulachek, the list of benefits of Google Apps for Education is long. A top advantage is the integration among email, calendaring, instant messaging, and online documents – a factor that is increasing productivity and enhancing collaboration among students, faculty, and staff.

Google's tools, according to the IT team, are easy to use, reducing support time and effort. IT support for email has now dwindled to a minimum, and if support is required, the standardized system from Google makes issue resolution fast and easy. Gulachek also notes that there is a collaborative and growing community of Google Apps users outside U of M to support the university's efforts and answer any questions about the use of Google's tools.

"One of the immediate benefits that we realized from Google is its innovation and continuing feature enhancements and new capabilities," says Gulachek. "With Google Apps, we have the brains and insights of Google and the entire Google Apps community to help us update our communication and collaboration solutions on a continuous basis – and this innovation comes at no extra charge."

Since implementing Google Apps for Education, U of M reports that uptime and availability have improved substantially. There has been no planned or unplanned downtime to schedule and communicate. Mobile compatibility is a great asset, and the intuitive navigation and usability of Google Apps has led to extremely positive feedback from users. Technologists at the university, according to Puffe, find Google Apps much easier to support and extremely stable.

"We view Google Apps as a new platform from which a range of integration opportunities exist," says Gulachek. "There are many avenues to explore new solutions as a result of using Google Apps, and despite new growth opportunities, we are drastically reducing our costs. We purchased six new mail servers at this time last year to increase capacity. There will be no such purchase this year! Our effort has moved from keeping infrastructure systems running to more value-added activities such as integration, faculty tool support, and other strategic initiatives. With Google Apps, we expect to save over \$1 million in annual support, and will avoid a \$1 to \$2 million investment into new systems that would have been required to replace our legacy systems."

Puffe agrees, "The features and functionality of Google Apps for Education are far superior to the services previously offered by the University of Minnesota. Additionally, Google's architecture, data center infrastructure, and security policies are unparalleled in the industry."

