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SUNY Implements Consolidated Digital Learning Environment, Transitioning 58 Campuses to D2L Brightspace

CASE STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

The Institution: The State University of New York (SUNY) has 64 campuses across New York and is the largest comprehensive university system in the US. As of fall 2023, the SUNY System had approximately 370,000 students enrolled in credit-bearing or degree programs.

The Challenge: Before 2022, each SUNY campus chose its learning management system (LMS), had individual responsibility for hosting and supporting its LMS, and made separate decisions regarding how it was branded and configured. Security and authentication protocols and the faculty and student user experiences varied among campuses, as there was no standardization across the LMS solutions. Students participating in courses from more than one institution logged into each system separately.

The Solution: SUNY System Administration sought to develop a centralized digital learning environment (DLE) to provide all SUNY campuses with a consistent modern teaching and learning experience and a single interface for their course needs across campuses while consolidating contracts and support. The System selected D2L Brightspace as its LMS platform and elected to implement Brightspace for all the campuses for which it provides IT infrastructure.

The Result: SUNY System implemented a cohesive Brightspace ecosystem for 58 campuses across three instances, with 56 campuses in one multi-tenant Brightspace instance. SUNY has standardized the LMS interface and navigation and centralized the information students and faculty require for SUNY courses across all campuses and modalities. SUNY's DLE enables the SUNY System to provide all campuses with consistent, robust LMS functionality while offering new opportunities for cross-campus collaboration and insights. Implementing the D2L Brightspace environment has reduced LMS license costs for SUNY campuses and implementation costs per tenant.

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK SYSTEM

Founded in 1948, The State University of New York (SUNY) has 64 campuses across New York and is the US's largest comprehensive university system. SUNY includes twenty-nine state-operated institutions (university centers and doctoral degree-granting institutions, comprehensive colleges, and technology colleges) and five statutory colleges throughout the state. The SUNY System has approximately 370,000 students enrolled in credit-bearing or degree programs as of fall 2023. SUNY employs over 83,000 faculty and staff and offers a wide range of noncredit and microcredential programs, registering over 1 million students in noncredit offerings in the fall of 2022. SUNY provides IT infrastructure for 58 SUNY campuses, while the remaining six leverage IT infrastructure provided by private institutions outside of the SUNY system (Cornell University, Alfred University, and Syracuse University).

SUNY RECONSIDERS ITS DIVERSE, DISTRIBUTED TECHNOLOGY ENVIRONMENT

Before 2022, the SUNY System had a decentralized, distributed technology environment. The 64 campuses negotiated and leveraged independent technology contracts for their technology systems, including learning management systems and other teaching and learning solutions. Each campus had its own LMS instance, integrations to other products, end user support solutions, and security protocols. While many SUNY campuses utilized a SUNY-level contract for one LMS product, overall, the SUNY System campuses had 58 LMS instances, leveraging five different vendors and platforms.

According to SUNY System Senior Associate Provost for Digital Innovation and Academic Services Kim Scalzo, the instructor and student user experience varied significantly across campuses and did not reflect that SUNY is a coordinated higher education system. Students who took courses and faculty who taught at more than one SUNY campus required separate logins and processes to access their campus-specific course information and tools.

SUNY LAUNCHES DIGITAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT INITIATIVE TO CONSOLIDATE TECHNOLOGY

In 2020, as many of SUNY's institutional LMS contracts approached their expiration dates, SUNY System stakeholders saw an opportunity for a coordinated approach to selecting and implementing an LMS solution. The COVID-19 pandemic presented novel and urgent challenges, highlighting the criticality of providing all SUNY campuses with the technology infrastructure and centralized support required to accommodate effective digital operations. SUNY System Administration and campus representatives came together to assess SUNY's overall technology landscape and the digital experiences for students and faculty.

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After conducting its digital experience assessment, the SUNY System Administration launched a new initiative to develop a centralized Digital Learning Environment (DLE) for all SUNY campuses. They envisioned a coordinated DLE that would provide faculty and students with a consistent modern user experience across all SUNY campuses, leveraging a SUNY federated ID and authentication to the secure virtual environment. Consolidating campus systems and services would also provide cost efficiencies and enable SUNY System Administration to offer centralized support and share resources across all campuses. Finally, the SUNY system sought a platform that could provide a central data architecture to ensure campuses and faculty had reliable data to support students and position SUNY administrators to make data-informed decisions in their recruitment, enrollment, and retention strategies.

SUNY SELECTS D2L BRIGHTSPACE AS A FOUNDATION FOR ITS DIGITAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The SUNY system worked with its stakeholders to publish an RFP for a new cross-campus LMS to be the foundation for its DLE. SUNY required an LMS with administrative flexibility to enable its diverse campuses to configure the system for their needs. The LMS had to support a range of instructional modalities from fully online to traditional credit-based to noncredit and professional development programs. As a state system, SUNY needed to ensure its diverse faculty and student populations could easily onboard and leverage the system. Thus, it prioritized accessibility and usability, including a modern mobile-first user experience.

SUNY faculty and staff developed a list of the LMS's most critical features to inform the RFP requirements. The SUNY system invited potential vendors to respond to the RFP and invited finalists to demonstrate SUNY's requested features in their platforms. Following its comprehensive best-value RFP selection process, SUNY signed a contract with D2L in September 2021 to deploy Brightspace across 58 SUNY campuses. SUNY elected to deploy Brightspace for the 58 campuses across three instances, with 56 campuses in one multi-tenant Brightspace instance.

> *Following its comprehensive best-value RFP selection process, SUNY signed a contract with D2L in September 2021 to deploy Brightspace across 58 SUNY campuses.*

SUNY MANAGES EXTENSIVE CHANGE WITH DLE INITIATIVE

SUNY System Administration stakeholders identified clear goals and objectives from the start of the DLE initiative, taking ownership of messaging across the campuses and emphasizing

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the need for change. SUNY developed a successful governance structure, enabling rapid decision making around a wide range of issues throughout the implementation. It included a steering committee, a core strategy team, and an advisory team with broad representation. The advisory team intentionally provided opportunities for faculty and staff representatives from each campus to engage in the project. SUNY created two implementation working groups and another set of teams to determine academic and technical policies to guide the implementation. Finally, SUNY developed sub-working groups to create course templates and training resources and offer faculty support for Brightspace.

The SUNY System project team developed a specific communication plan to support SUNY System administrators in socializing the DLE and another communication plan to guide individual campus stakeholders. The SUNY System project team also hosted webinars for campus stakeholders about how to build campus champion programs, engage stakeholders across the campus, and communicate the DLE's goals and associated changes for students, faculty, and staff. Additionally, the SUNY System project team attended all relevant SUNY conferences and SUNY-wide meetings to keep the broader campus community updated on the DLE initiative throughout the Brightspace implementation.

SUNY AND D2L IMPLEMENT BRIGHTSPACE FOR 58 CAMPUSES

SUNY's DLE brought together all participating institutions, regardless of their existing technology environments, and required them to implement the same infrastructural components, including multifactor authentication (MFA) and SUNY System-issued Global IDs. The Global IDs connect student, faculty, and staff records across the system and provide each user with a SUNY-wide email address. Transitioning from institution-specific email addresses to SUNY-wide email addresses has been one of the most challenging aspects of the DLE initiative for faculty and students. D2L continues to partner with the SUNY System team to understand their campus-level issues and identify possible solutions to improve student and faculty experiences.

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D2L worked with SUNY to implement the system's best practices for designing navigation bars, home pages, and widgets. Each SUNY campus has unique requirements, and campuses continue to work with SUNY System Administration to build custom widgets, links, and API applications. D2L leveraged its custom tools to integrate Brightspace with the over 55 SUNY campus student information system (SIS) instances and migrate approximately 360,000 courses to Brightspace, including 75,000 courses converted in bulk from previous LMSs. D2L implemented automation in Brightspace that branded and configured courses from each student system so they migrated over in a consistent, usable format. When necessary, D2L worked with SUNY's course management vendors to ensure the course footprints were as small as possible before migrating. D2L also worked directly with third-party vendors to enable LTI integrations in the multi-tenant environment. SUNY and D2L have had over 1,000 LTI integration requests and have integrated over 200 unique tools with Brightspace. SUNY manages more than 435,000 user accounts in Brightspace.

> *D2L leveraged its custom tools to integrate Brightspace with the over 55 SUNY campus student information system (SIS) instances and migrate approximately 360,000 courses to Brightspace, including 75,000 courses converted in bulk from previous LMSs.*

SUNY FINALIZES BRIGHTSPACE ROLLOUT

SUNY's D2L Brightspace rollout has taken just over two years. After signing its contract with D2L, SUNY started the implementation in late 2021, and the final cohort finished its transition at the end of January 2024. SUNY developed four cohorts with three implementation phases per cohort. Campuses selected their cohort, and the first was the largest with 30 campuses.

D2L trained administrators and instructional designers, who then served as internal trainers for staff and faculty. SUNY System built a robust training program with various options for faculty, including drop-in workshops and fully online options. D2L has held group sessions for each cohort and continues to offer weekly open office hours so SUNY students, faculty, and staff can drop in to ask questions.

SUNY has also licensed D2L dedicated technical support. The SUNY System project team meets with D2L weekly, and SUNY System leaders meet with D2L senior product leaders monthly to discuss D2L's roadmap. D2L has created an operationalized collection process to prioritize SUNY System Administration's feature requests in D2L's development pipeline. SUNY System has also licensed support from D2L Learning Administration Managers to help the System address its support tickets from campuses.

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SUNY CONTINUES REFINING AND OPTIMIZING DLE AFTER RAPID LMS TRANSITION

Overall, SUNY's Brightspace implementation timeline was aggressive because the cohorts sought to avoid or minimize the time spent paying for two LMS systems simultaneously. Compounding the condensed implementation timeline, the community had just emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, when faculty had worked tirelessly to learn their existing LMS platforms as they moved their courses online. Just as many administrators and faculty gained confidence in their LMS systems, they faced the challenge of translating their processes into a new system.

SUNY institutions are fully invested in the DLE concept to provide a consistent and seamless experience for students who shift between campuses. Still, the extensive change is not without growing pains. As the largest comprehensive university system in the US, SUNY institutions are diverse, and each SUNY campus has unique LMS requirements. SUNY faculty and staff are still adapting their processes from their legacy LMS solutions to Brightspace and its specific functionality. As expected with such a large significant system migration, some users have found learning a new system with different functionality challenging. In contrast, others have been pleased to gain a more robust system.

SUNY AND D2L WORK TO BALANCE STANDARDIZATION WITH INDIVIDUAL CAMPUS AUTONOMY

With SUNY's previous distributed purchasing model, each campus had significant control over its specific LMS instance and configurations. Campuses promptly addressed student and faculty issues by working with their LMS vendors and readily adapted their LMS platforms to meet faculty and student needs. The new centralized DLE approach has required SUNY to standardize the Brightspace platform and the process for adjusting it. Campuses submit support tickets to SUNY System Administration when they have unique configuration requests or identify campus-level data points they need for decision making.

SUNY System administrators address most tickets and elevate tickets to D2L when needed. The SUNY System team is working to find ways to provide more autonomy and flexibility for each campus to configure Brightspace for its individual requirements without needing to submit tickets. SUNY System is also working with D2L to enable each campus to analyze its campus-level real-time data and build live queries in Brightspace's engagement dashboards. SUNY System Administration and campuses have access to the same centralized data to ensure they work from a single source of truth when reporting. SUNY System Administration has worked with D2L to create consistent data structures and data elements in Brightspace that enable administrators to create custom reports on cross-campus data while taking care to limit what data each campus can see. SUNY System administrators can also parse the data by campus.

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BRIGHTSPACE IS THE HUB OF SUNY'S COST-EFFECTIVE DIGITAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

SUNY's Brightspace implementation allows the system to provide students and faculty with one virtual door to all the tools and information required for SUNY courses, regardless of campus or modality. SUNY provides shared services for training, user technical support, and LMS administration support and has reduced LMS license costs for campuses and implementation costs per tenant. SUNY is working to build a Learning Object Repository in Brightspace to provide more opportunities for sharing EIT Accessibility-compliant content, resources, and materials across the system. SUNY is also working to provide its shared resources in an adaptable format that individual campuses can readily alter for their unique requirements.

D2L, SUNY System administrators, and cross-campus faculty and staff continue to work together to fully realize SUNY's vision of empowering students to take advantage of its vast course and program offerings across the system more seamlessly. SUNY staff and faculty stakeholders say a positive outcome of the DLE initiative has been that it initiated collaboration and communication among SUNY institutions at an unprecedented scale as they have shared resources and best practices. Administrative leaders and technical staff from institutions that transitioned to Brightspace in the first cohort leveraged their experience to support subsequent cohorts through their cultural and technical challenges. To continue encouraging cross-institution collaboration, the DLE has been a regular agenda item in SUNY-wide constituency meetings among chief academic officers, chief information officers, directors of online learning, instructional designers, the University Faculty Senate, and the Faculty Council of Community Colleges.

> *SUNY's Brightspace implementation allows the system to provide students and faculty with one virtual door to all the tools and information required for SUNY courses, regardless of campus or modality.*

REFERENCES

Tambellini interviewed eight cross-institution SUNY staff and faculty stakeholders for this research. Tambellini also used publicly available information, including SUNY System Senior Associate Provost for Digital Innovation and Academic Services Kim Scalzo's D2L Fusion 2023 on-demand session *Transforming SUNY's Digital Student Experience*.

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The Tambellini Group has been the leading provider of unbiased and proprietary research and advisory services to higher education since 2001. Our mission is to equip educational institutions with the impartial insights, tools, and market predictions needed to make informed technology decisions while maximizing return-on-investment and constituent experience. We empower institutions to overcome challenges, seize opportunities, and pave the way toward a brighter future for higher education.

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The purpose of this report is to provide higher education institutions with information about the objectives, solutions, and outcomes related to the utilization of technology in colleges and universities across the US.

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