Texas A&M empowers students and faculty with Zimbra

Texas A&M raises student satisfaction while reducing total cost-of-ownership using feature-rich, next-generation collaboration platform.

TEXAS A&M

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

About

Established in 1876 as Texas' first public institution of higher learning, Texas A&M is now the seventh-largest university in the United States with over 49,000 full-time students in ten colleges. It is located in College Station, Texas. Texas A&M also has two branch campuses, one in Galveston, Texas, and one in the Middle Eastern country of Qatar. This research-intensive flagship university was recently ranked first in the nation by The Washington Monthly for "tangible contributions to the public interest." U.S. News and World Report ranked Texas A&M third nationally as a "best value" among public universities.

- Flagship state university
- Many top-10 degree programs
- 39,000 undergraduates, 10,000 graduate students, 8,500 faculty and staff

Goals

- Deploy new collaboration solution quickly with minimal disruption to students and faculty
- Provide a full-featured, next-generation collaboration system, and not just a communication tool
- Reduce administration overhead and costs

Challenges

With the 2007 fall semester drawing to a close and the campus community winding down for the holidays, campus IT leaders at Texas A&M University geared up for a major overhaul of their campus communications systems. The problem they faced has a familiar ring -- one echoed on many other campuses across the country: "Our legacy e-mail system was stuck in the 1990's, and we desperately needed to upgrade," Said Tom Golson, Chief Systems Engineer for Infrastructure systems. Students, faculty, and staff -- increasingly tech-savvy -- had high expectations for a full-featured email and collaboration solution.

The migration to a new solution had many requirements. First, it had to minimize student and faculty disruption: the transition had to be smooth, it had to be accomplished within the time window allotted, and it had to offer significantly more functionality than basic e-mail. Moreover, as with any organization of such a size, the new system had to compatible with a wide range of operating systems including Windows, Mac and Linux, as well as working smoothly with various email clients such as Thunderbird, Outlook and Apple Mail. Lastly, the solution had to be implemented on hardware that had already been purchased for a project that had fallen through.

The Solution

Texas A&M conducted a through evaluation of several options including Sendmail, Communigate Pro and Zimbra. None of the alternatives matched Zimbra's scale and feature set. The team was excited by Zimbra's state-of-the-art Ajax web client, which had great features such as conversation view and a high advanced customizable search function. Zimbra supported multi-tenants, allowing individual departments to use Zimbra in their sub domains. Zimbra's open standards meant that the university could integrate email with other IT systems.

Moreover, system administrators were impressed with the prospects of more mobile options. Zimbra's supported push email on iPhone, Windows, Palm, and Symbian OS devices with Zimbra Mobile, as well synchronization with blackberry using Zimbra Mobile Connector for BlackBerry Enterprise Server. Other features such as shared calendaring and document sharing would greatly help increase collaboration among students and faculty. Most importantly, the IT team knew that Zimbra was a significant improvement over their email-only system, fostering a culture of engagement throughout the campus without disrupting users who wanted to remain loyal to their client of choice.

Deployment Overview

The team spent about two weeks working on customization, including developing custom code for automated migration and for on-going administration. The conversion was extensive, including more than 22 million messages and 5TB of data. But as Tom Golson, Chief Systems Engineer for Infrastructure systems, explains, "The

deployment went exactly as planned. We accomplished the cutover in one day."

By February 2, 2008-- a mere five weeks from initial installation and testing-- the entire university e-mail customer base had been moved to the Zimbra Collaboration Suite platform. There had been only 12 hours of downtime. The new e-mail and collaboration platform was integrated with hardware, software, and storage platforms from IBM, Novell, and NetApp, without incident.

Zimbra engineers very worked closely with the team at Texas A&M to ensure that any issues were quickly resolved. "We had a lot of questions during the deployment, -- especially on how to configure and administer a system of this size – but the Zimbra support team was fantastic. We had direct access to the Zimbra engineers, and this made the transition extremely easy" commented Golson.

> " We are very happy with our decision to choose Zimbra. It boils down to this: the solution is very good and the support has been extremely helpful. We've really enjoyed working with the entire Zimbra team."
>
> Tom Golson,
> Chief System Engineer
> (Infrastructure),
> Texas A&M

Key Benefits

ZCS has proved to be extremely popular among all users. While Zimbra is still accessed through a wide range of mail clients including Outlook, Thunderbird and Apple Mail, the Ajax Web interface has proved to be a great hit among students. Even students who lack a personal computer check mail, contacts and calendar through mobile devices and on lab computers scattered over the campus. The email system also supports users from the Texas A&M University System in College Station, and local state agencies such as the Texas Forestry Commission. Additionally, professors who visit the university for a short period get temporary accounts. All key features of Zimbra, including *Email*, *Contacts*, *Calendar*, and *Task Sharing* are used every day by some 80,000 students, faculty and staff.

The administrative cost savings was also a critical benefit. Currently the ZCS system has 80,000 accounts, running on 13 servers, and requires the equivalent of ½ FTE. In contrast, the Texas A&M IT team is also supporting an Exchange system for 5000 users, which requires 2 FTEs and 10 servers. "In addition to the cost savings, the reduction in headaches is also quite beneficial" said Golson.

The intensive conversion to the new platform was successful and timely, but the Texas A&M IT team isn't stopping there. They want to deploy custom "Zimlets" which allow more third-party programs to work inside the suite. Business units on campus are already developing solutions tailored to their departments. One will populate student calendars with their class schedule automatically. He is also hopeful that more and more people will start using Zimbra on their mobile phones and he sees a lot of potential for this going forward.

About Zimbra

Zimbra, a division of VMware, is the leader in next-generation, open source email and collaboration. Zimbra supports both private on-premises and hosted public cloud deployments and is popular with universities, business, government and services providers.

Learn more at www.zimbra.com.