

CASE STUDY

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH U.

With more than 27,000 students, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) is the third largest research university in Virginia and a place where a diverse blend of students join together in a unique learning laboratory to make a difference. The VCU Medical Center, adjacent to the city's business and financial district, was founded in 1838 when the medical department of Hampden-Sydney College opened in Richmond, Virginia- and later became the Medical College of Virginia (MCV). In 1968, MCV and the Richmond Professional Institute merged to create VCU, an institution with two campuses in the heart of the state's capital, home to more than 110,000 alumni.

Challenge: Accessing Data From Multiple Locations

Jim Bostick is the Director of Academic Computing Services at VCU, responsible for the technology that supports the open computer labs and classrooms that comprise the two-campus VCU system, as well as its web servers, course management system and research computing resources. His staff of thirty people support 27,000 students as well as faculty and staff of more than 10,000.

Each student at VCU is assessed a student technology fee as part of his or her tuition. VCU then tasks a committee with overseeing how the money should be spent and on which projects. That led to graduate student representatives submitting a proposal to the committee in 2003. They needed to be able to access their files from multiple locations on campus – as well as off campus - and be able to share those files securely. This was particularly important when these students were working with their advisors and committee members on masters theses and doctoral dissertation.

To compound the situation, each of the students was responding to this problem differently. Some carried their files on zip drives; some used thumb drives while others relied on floppy disks and other media and storage methods. In every case, however, the students were forced to carry their electronic data, as well as multiple hard copies of the documents as they moved from class to class. On a fairly regular basis, Bostick's staff would receive a call from a very distressed graduate student whose dissertation had been on a floppy that no longer worked - or a CD that had been

VCU

Key Facts

Industry: Higher Education

Product: Xythos Digital Locker

Audience: Students and Faculty

Benefits

- Eliminates floppy disks and thumb drives
- Protects student work
- Enables file access from anywhere

Why Xythos?

- Provides cross-platform access
- Enables collaboration with external colleagues
- Integration with Blackboard
- Web-based, intuitive interface



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*Director of Academic Computing Services
Virginia Commonwealth University*

corrupted. Typically the students had no backup - and while Bostick and his staff did whatever they could to recover the missing data, unfortunately they were not successful in every instance. What was needed was a safer, centralized file access and storage solution.

The Selection Process

Responding to what they identified as an urgent request, the Student Technology Fee committee decided to address the issue of file storage and management. Their primary criterion, overriding all others, was that the solution chosen to provide this storage be web-based and have an easy user interface.

As part of the process, the Vice Provost of Academic Technology spoke to her counterpart at the University of Texas at Austin about a system that UT Austin had implemented the previous year. What she learned was that Austin, like VCU, had an 'any time, any where collaborative learning environment initiative' that encouraged faculty to put more of their course materials on the web and encouraged students to own and use their own computers. As a result of the success of this initiative, having a safe and secure place to store and share data had become the next initiative at UT Austin, similar to what VCU was experiencing.

Concluding that Austin's goals were similar to his own, VCU's VP asked Bostick's staff to conduct its own evaluation. The committee looked at four vendors including Xythos while relying heavily on UT Austin's evaluation. The task force short-listed three vendors, then evaluated each of them over the next three months.

Like many of its peer institutions, one of the key considerations that VCU valued in selecting Xythos was that its products are built on industry standards and that they worked well across multiple platforms in both server and client environments. Bostick's staff also noted that the document sharing features Xythos offered appeared to fit well students needs and the product's architecture appeared to be designed to scale well to serve increased demand in the future. "As we looked at Xythos more closely, we found that its products provide many advantages beyond student file storage and sharing possibilities. The ability to provide cross-platform access was important to us as we have PCs, Macs, Linux and Unix systems on campus," Bostick remarked. This open standards based system flexibility and overall ease of use and support ultimately led VCU to select Xythos at the conclusion of its product evaluation.

Enabling More Effective Collaboration

Beyond secure web file storage, Bostick has discovered a number of applications for Xythos that he had not planned on initially, including developing and sharing proposals and intra-university collaboration between faculty members to develop research papers and related projects - and he also knows of faculty that have used the product both to develop papers with internal and external colleagues. "We have used the sharing capabilities of Xythos with external users to collaborate more effectively. What we are expecting is that our graduate students will echo this experience and find a lot of



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VCU faculty sees tremendous value in being able to have a shared space in which they can work with students in different classes. They also appreciate using the Blackboard Content Management module, also developed using Xythos' WebFile Server technology. “Using Xythos as our underlying storage and web server, tying into Blackboard and being able to deploy the power and flexibility of WebDAV that Xythos provides enables us to provide one-click content publishing and support drag and drop file management from anywhere,” Bostick commented.

Bostick and his staff have found Xythos employees across departments to be very responsive to his staff's questions and the occasional problem that surfaces. Most of all, they appreciate that Xythos was built on industry protocols. “Xythos really seems to get it! They understand the need, in a university environment, for products to be based on standards. In a large university like VCU you will never have a homogenous setting - so products need to be able to work across platforms. By adhering to these open standards, that (and much more) is possible,” concluded Bostick.

**For more information please call 1.888.4XYTHOS
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