



Focus on Higher Education: An Interview with Western Kentucky University



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VIA recently had the pleasure of attending the ACUTA Conference and VIA had the opportunity to interview Edwin Craft, Director of Telecommunications, Western Kentucky University about technology in higher ed. Here's an excerpt of that conversation:

VIA: What do you view as the top challenges Western Kentucky University faces with regard to technology?

Edwin: Like most campuses today, our biggest challenge is how we bridge the gap between technology and our users. In IT, it's our job to fully understand the technology, but it's also critical to understand the needs of the academic world we serve, so that we deploy technology that is widely accepted, utilized to its fullest potential and benefits our users.

Deploying the best technology in the world may not be a good investment if it doesn't fit our "customer base".



Edwin Craft
Director of Telecommunications & IVS



VIA: How does your campus determine the needs of your customer base?

Edwin: One method that we utilize is a focus group of our students, the Millennials, who grew up using technology as a way of life. They are early adopters of new applications and devices and in most cases, can use the technology instantly. They are also the generation of instant communication, using text as the preferred method to communicate. A study conducted in spring 2009 showed that 97.8% of our student population owned a cell phone and 78.6% of those used them for texting. To determine whether an IT deployment will be successful, not only do we perform surveys of our students, but we also develop a focus group called "A day in the life of Kelley". Kelley is given access to many of the new tools and applications being considered for campus rollout. We learn that applications which seem to have uses in academia are not necessarily adopted quickly.

With texting being a widely used communications tool, one may assume that presence on the desktop would be important to a student. With students living in a very mobile environment, we see that the application needs to be easily accessible from the mobile device in order to be fully utilized.

VIA: How active a role does the IT staff take in determining the best technology deployments for the campus?

Edwin: We have to be forward thinking in order to deploy the technology the students, faculty and staff need. It's critical to be proactive, to identify the need and quickly fulfill it so that we stay in front— supplying the best tools for the job. The IT staff here at WKU drives the technology path that is required and we've experienced high adoption rates.

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VIA: What types of applications are being quickly adopted?

Edwin: We offer over 100 courses by synchronous interactive distance learning with more than 5,000 students utilizing these services, we're experiencing success with both the students and our faculty. Faculty and staff are seeking to use their time more efficiently. With video and collaborative applications they are experiencing reduced travel time and reduced costs. We're empowering them to work mobile and both students and staff are quickly adapting and adopting virtual office hours.

VIA: What role does technology play in addressing the needs of the parents and staff?

Edwin: Parents, the Baby Boomers, are placing their trust in us to educate their children, many of whom are away from home for the first time. While parents may not be comfortable with some of the newer technologies and applications, they are concerned with providing a safe learning environment for their children and will utilize technology to achieve this goal.

Staff and faculty, much like the parents, grew up in a very different time when technology was not a part of everyday life. While adoption rates may be lower than students, they are comfortable learning how to utilize newer technologies to engage their students.



When we rolled out our SMS notification system a few years ago we were able to notify over 15,000 students/staff of a weather closing. Using technology to alert our staff, faculty and students has been used many times since then and is one way we use technology to meet concerned parents and staff.

VIA: What other technology trends do you see on the horizon?

Edwin: We're looking at applications that integrate course management with communications so that students and faculty can collaborate more efficiently and effectively. Utilizing virtual round tables, faculty can collaborate from different campuses or from different parts of the world, without incurring expensive travel costs or time investments. Whether students are in different cities or countries, with virtual live meetings and smart boards, the ability to share documents and desktops can truly make it a global learning environment.