

Michigan Colleges Alliance:

Using IT to share resources, minimize expenses and maximize student success



Dynamic Campus

As student populations shrink, colleges and universities have been forced to compete harder than ever to grow enrollment and maximize their tuition dollars.

At the same time, these same institutions must race to cut expenses and achieve sustainability in the face of declining revenues. Cutting niche courses and majors allows the institution to invest those resources elsewhere — but it also eliminates the possibility of recruiting prospective students interested in those areas of study.

Do institutions have to choose one mandate over the other? Is it possible to attract and serve students' niche programs and majors sustainably, attracting the widest possible audience of prospective students *without* forcing those programs to run at a deficit?

One group of small private Midwestern colleges may have found the answer.

Coalition of the Willing

The Michigan Colleges Alliance (MCA) is a consortium of 14 independent colleges and universities across the state that collaborate on several common interests, enabling each participating institution to be more effective than they would be on their own.

MCA institutions are smaller, private and largely faith-based: the type of schools that are widely considered to be the most at risk in the current environment. Like all colleges and universities, MCA schools have programs and majors that lack the critical mass to support the campus student population in a financially responsible manner.

But rather than cutting these programs or migrating them to online coursework, MCA leaders asked, could the schools pool resources and support niche areas of study in a more cost-effective manner?

"Our vision was the Claremont Colleges," said Dr. Robert Bartlett, MCA's president. Claremont is a group of seven small schools in Southern California that share the same campus. "Students apply and enroll at one Claremont college, but they have the experience of a much larger university because of all the shared resources and their ability to cross-register," he explained.

Unlike Claremont, MCA schools are dispersed across Michigan, in some cases hours away from each other. So Bartlett tasked Cyrus Mistry, a group product manager at Google and a member of MCA's Board of Trustees, to investigate potential options.

In September 2017, Mistry invited a team of interested college presidents from Alma, Albion and Calvin Colleges, along with other MCA officials, to Google's office in Ann Arbor to demonstrate a solution that would make affordable course sharing among the institutions possible in a collaborative classroom setting.



How can we work together to deliver the rich interactions of a small private institution with the scope and scale of a large university?



Casting the Vision

Google's solution, dubbed the Google Course Share Collaboration, uses IT to bring the schools closer together, if only virtually. It relied on a mix of proven, readily available technology like tablets, flat-panel monitors and Chromeboxes—a desktop version of the Chromebook laptop PC—along with new innovations like the Google Jamboard, a cloud-based, collaborative digital whiteboard that until then had only been used by Google employees internally.

The vision was to allow a professor to conduct class on one campus, while students on other MCA campuses could not only attend, but participate and interact as if they were physically present.

"MCA institutions are known for that high faculty engagement in a smaller, personalized environment," said Karen Mulligan, MCA's senior vice president. "For that reason, we didn't want a solution that looked like a massive open online course. We needed a very engaging environment. You are there, with the faculty. You can ask a question. You can see facial expressions and body language of students and the professors and the students engaging with each other on each campus. What Google showed us met those criteria."

"Candidly speaking, my thought process during the demonstration was, 'That's interesting, we can think about that next year,'" Bartlett recalled. "Fortunately, one of our campus presidents said, 'Well, what about *this spring* instead of next year?' And that was sort of like one of these watershed moments, where everybody realized, 'Oh my gosh! You're serious about this.'"

The group committed to launching a pilot program in the spring, with Alma, Albion and Calvin Colleges each conducting a class while students at the other two pilot institutions would attend from their own Google-connected classrooms.



Making the Vision a Reality

With the Spring 2018 semester just four months away, MCA and the pilot institutions needed an IT partner that understood the specific needs of higher education institutions and had the expertise and manpower to bring an initiative like this to life across multiple campus simultaneously.

That partner was Dynamic Campus, a 16-year old managed services partner focused exclusively on the needs of higher education institutions. The leadership at Madonna University, an MCA member, had outsourced its entire IT operation to Dynamic Campus earlier that year, and they were impressed with the company's ability to blend on site and remote IT expertise to greatly improve the service levels and return on Madonna's IT investment.

"Our thinking was, let's kick it off in the spring, and cherry pick some classes, one from each campus, and make sure that we're successful," said Dr. David Hunter, a general manager and four-year employee at Dynamic Campus. "The initial success of the pilot project would give us the momentum needed to make this a full-scale production across the MCA."

"David was like the 'great comforter' for these college presidents," Bartlett said. "IT is not their area of expertise, but he continued to put them at ease by reiterating, 'Yes, that's possible. Here's what's been done in other places. This is how that would work with your [learning management system],' etcetera. Without David, we wouldn't have gotten this done."

Hunter began meeting with each college president and their IT representatives to gauge each institution's technical and cultural readiness. "Technologically they were all fairly ready, but they didn't *know* they were ready," Hunter explained. "Most of our discussions were about the higher-education specific challenges that needed to be addressed that really had nothing to do with technology, but had everything to do with making the solution work."

Key questions included:

- **How would registration for shared classes be handled at each institution?**
- **Who would set the grading scale?**
- **How are you going to show course completion on each student's transcript?**
- **If you're the offering college, how are you going to grant access to other students in the learning management system?**
- **How will the tuition for these courses be determined, and how would they be allocated?**
- **How do you schedule the courses so the collaborative classroom is available on every campus?**
- **How do you add this to your course catalogs?**



Laying the Foundation

The Google Course Share Collaboration solution consisted of:

- **Google Jamboard, a 55" 4K interactive whiteboard that served as the centerpiece of the connected classroom**
- **A pair of 55" flat panel monitors to broadcast other campus classrooms**
- **High resolution streaming video cameras and microphones to capture classroom video and audio**
- **Google Chromeboxes to host the Google Meets and Hangouts collaboration platform**
- **Samsung tablets running Google OS for each student to use in class**

Each of the three colleges allocated an existing classroom to be converted for the pilot project, which meant the spaces were far from purpose-built. Dynamic Campus conducted virtual site audits at each location with campus facilities staff, ensuring the infrastructure was sufficient to host multiple streams of high resolution video, audio and up to a dozen or more connected users at each location.

To add to the complexity, all of the devices had to be fully integrated not only with each other, but across all three campuses involved in the pilot program. If one campus went dark for any reason, the class could not continue. Uptime was essential.

"The main challenge was just making sure that each school had their networks set up for this to be a success," Hunter said. "With Google Course Share Collaboration, it's not like walking into a typical classroom and if the computer and projector doesn't work, the instructor switches to the whiteboard. We must have redundancy. It has to work, or you lose a good portion of your students at one or multiple sites. That was kind of an eye-opener for them."

To ensure maximum uptime, the Dynamic Campus team created a technical checklist for each institution's IT team. Dedicated LAN connections were needed. Firewall blocks had to be removed. Exceptions for that specific room had to be made so traffic from the Google devices could be prioritized over other network traffic. "With an initiative like this, the solution is only as strong as its weakest link," said Hunter.



Bringing It All Together

Once the fall semester concluded, Google technicians visited each of the three campuses during the holidays to install the new hardware exactly as Dynamic Campus and the colleges had specified.

"We did some testing about a week or so before classes started to confirm everything worked perfectly," Hunter said. "We also made sure the IT folks had somebody in each room for the first week of classes to handle any on-site support and ensure everything went well."

Despite the compressed schedule, the complex networking and connectivity needs and the fact that this was the first Google Course Share Collaboration to be deployed on a college campus, the pilot program went off without a hitch.

"We had a review after the first week of classes with Google people, faculty and IT people," Bartlett said. "Even after a week in this completely new pedagogical framework, there was nothing but enthusiasm."

Hunter added, "I think we avoided a lot of potholes in the beginning by some of our early discussions, and so luckily the pilot institutions didn't have any major showstoppers or any major issues. Once we got them that far, it actually went very smoothly."





'Living in the Future'

After the first week was completed, MCA held a touch-base meeting every other week with the core group "so the conversation never stopped," as Bartlett puts it. "And at the end of the semester, we brought every student from every class, every faculty member, Dynamic Campus and other partners, together for an end-of-the-semester conference to collect everybody's thoughts."

One student at Calvin College summarized the thoughts of many participating students when she wrote: "I LOVE THIS TECHNOLOGY! That's all I have to say for now. I feel like I'm living in the future."

"On many levels she is correct," said Roman Williams, assistant professor of sociology at Calvin College and one of the pilot program faculty. "Increasingly a company's workforce is spread across multiple locations and using meeting or collaboration technology like Google's Jamboard, Hangouts, and Meet are the norm. A student who experiences a course like the ones we're offering gains aptitudes and skills for thriving in the global economy."

With the pilot program considered a success by everyone involved, MCA will be expanding it over the next year to take better advantage of the new collaborative capabilities. Potential uses go beyond campus courses to include executive speaker series, collaborations with corporate partners, student recruiting efforts and more.

"The concept has proven itself," said Mulligan, "but complexity is a factor. The coordination, the student recruitment, scheduling, faculty training—it's pretty complex. So, the next phase of the pilot was really to increase the complexity around the technology and see how it goes."



The Power of Collaboration

The success of the Google Course Share Collaboration pilot program has sent a wave of excitement through the 14 colleges and universities that make up the Michigan Colleges Alliance as they look for ways to grow their enrollments and achieve their mission for less cost.

"The whole idea [of a pilot program like this] is to offer courses that might not otherwise be possible because they are so specialized that student interest on one campus might not be enough to achieve the desired level of enrollment," Williams said.

For example, Alma College only employs one French professor for the entire major. But if the college could pool its resources with other MCA institutions using the Google technology, French majors across the alliance could benefit.

"This technology definitely opens up all sorts of possibilities for increasing enrollment with very, very minimal cost," Hunter said. "The technology is not that expensive. This is a very modest investment for a potentially huge return on that investment."

"I think this is one great example, and there are many, of the power of collaboration," said Bartlett. "Every day you pick up the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and a small college is closing. These kinds of institutions really need to figure out how to leverage resources to provide optimal experiences for students. Michigan Colleges Alliance and its member universities and colleges are consistently at the forefront of innovation, forging new models of collaboration in private higher education. Our students, and ultimately many others throughout the country, will benefit enormously from this effort."

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