



University Uses Portal to Reduce Dissertation Review Time by Up to Half

Overview

Country or Region: United States

Industry: Education—Higher education

Customer Profile

Liberty University®, founded in 1971 by Jerry Falwell Sr., prepares Christian leaders to influence their world. With more than 72,000 students, Liberty is America's eighth-largest university.

Business Situation

The School of Education at Liberty University wanted to increase the completion rate in its doctoral program.

Solution

The university replaced its email system, which had been the primary communications and collaboration medium for the distance-learning-based program, with portals running on Microsoft SharePoint Server.

Benefits

- Boosts students' sense of connectedness
- Reduces dissertation review time by up to half
- Saves tens of thousands of dollars
- Increases dissertation quality

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Amanda Rockinson-Szapkiw,
Assistant Professor and Chair of Doctoral Research, Liberty University

Liberty University® wanted to reduce an already-low attrition rate in one of its distance-learning—based doctoral programs. That meant addressing students' frustration with, and sense of isolation from, a process that could take up to four months for faculty to review a dissertation draft, during which the student would hear little or nothing from the university. After considering Google Docs and open-source software as collaboration solutions, Liberty chose Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007 (and, now, Microsoft SharePoint Server 2010). In one year, dissertation portals based on SharePoint Server have boosted measures of student connectedness scores by 9 percent, significantly reduced dissertation review time and allowed for a greater focus on dissertation quality. Once Liberty has enough data to measure the attrition rate, it expects to see positive results there, too.

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Situation

Liberty University® was accustomed to grading its doctoral students, but grading one of its own dissertation programs proved a bit harder.

The university—often called the largest and fastest-growing Christian university in the world—started a distance-learning doctoral program at its School of Education in 1999. Today, that doctoral program has about 350 students, perhaps 10 times as many as similar programs at other U.S. universities. The doctoral students seldom see the campus; the program is conducted mostly online. In fact, the students go to the university campus, located in Virginia, for just three relatively brief residencies during the program, which lasts from one to three years.

Implementing a major academic program online may be unusual for most brick-and-mortar universities, but not for Liberty. The university capped its on-site enrollment at around 12,000 students a few years ago. Today, most of its 72,000 students are, like the doctoral students at the School of Education, distance learners. Enrollment continues to grow at least 20 percent annually.

Retaining students through the duration of a doctoral program can be challenging. At other U.S. universities, only 50 percent stay long enough to earn their degrees on average, according to Amanda Rockinson-Szapkiw, Assistant Professor and Chair of Doctoral Research at Liberty University.

Liberty does much better, with a 60- to 70-percent retention rate, but for Rockinson-Szapkiw and her colleagues, better wasn’t good enough. They wanted to make the program as successful as

possible—both for the students’ sake and the university’s.

Boosting the retention rate would require addressing student concerns with the dissertation process. Email was the program’s main communication and collaboration medium, which had been fine just a few years earlier, when the program was much smaller. But growth had outpaced technology, and email alone could no longer do the job. It often took weeks for faculty members to sort out the incoming dissertation drafts, review them, and pass them along to their fellow reviewers. Putting a single draft through a full dissertation committee review and getting it back to the doctoral candidate could take two to four months. The delay was frustrating for students and made more so because they often didn’t hear from anyone at the university during that time. Students felt isolated from their dissertation committee and their fellow students.

“When doctoral candidates feel frustrated and isolated, they’re more likely to drop out of a program,” says Rockinson-Szapkiw. “That’s a key contributor to attrition rates.”

It wasn’t only the students who were frustrated. Faculty members also voiced their concerns about trying to keep track of their students and the many documents generated for each one during the dissertation process. It was easy to lose email messages. It was easy to complete a review of a student’s fourth revision—only to find that the student was already working on his or her sixth. It wasn’t easy to counsel students as effectively as the faculty would have liked.

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With such a system, student attrition was inevitable. The university didn't want to give its own dissertation program an unsatisfactory grade. It decided to change the system.

Solution

The university assigned Rockinson-Szapkiw to head an effort to identify what that change should be. Because the student and faculty concerns related to the technology of the dissertation program and because Rockinson-Szapkiw's own background was in educational technology, she and her colleagues looked for alternatives to the email-based collaboration system.

“I originally thought the solution would be Google Docs or open-source software such as WordPress,” says Rockinson-Szapkiw. “But neither of these choices seemed as robust to us as we wanted. They also lacked the functionality that we thought was necessary, such as security and integration with familiar word-processing technologies.”

There were other concerns, too. “We wanted a technology that the university could easily support, preferably one that it already supported,” Rockinson-Szapkiw says. “And it was crucial that we could easily manage and aggregate information from each student into a single location. We wanted a one-stop shop that included collaboration and discussion, joint calendars, file-sharing, and content management. We could do some of this with Google Docs, but it wouldn't have been easy, and it would have required workarounds. Many commercial packages, unfortunately, were too expensive.”

Rockinson-Szapkiw consulted with the university's IT personnel and found that

the technology she wanted was already in place at Liberty: Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007. The technology, far more than a document-management system, offered the sweep of capabilities that Rockinson-Szapkiw sought, such as discussion forums, team calendars, workflow with email notifications, version control, and task lists. It provided ready interoperability with the Microsoft Office software that students and faculty already used, and their familiarity with Microsoft software would make SharePoint Server relatively easy for them to learn and for the university's IT staff to support.

The university made the decision to base the new dissertation-process technology on Office SharePoint Server 2007 in August 2007 (an upgrade to Microsoft SharePoint Server 2010 is now underway). With the assistance of the Justin Tucker, Student Worker for Chair of Doctoral Research; Brandon Murray, Business Process Specialist; and Michael Szapkiw, Instructional Tech—Liberty Online, Rockinson-Szapkiw developed, tested, and launched the new solution, Dissertation Portal, about a month later, in time for the start of the academic year. The Dissertation Portal comprises a SharePoint site on the university's intranet and several SharePoint subsites, all accessible through a web browser.

The Dissertation Portal is a central resource for information and links to the dissertation handbook, program forms, manuscript templates, video tutorials about the portal, a discussion forum, and a calendar that aggregates proposal and defense dates for all the candidates. When students pose questions in the forum, the portal sends an email notification to Rockinson-Szapkiw's inbox in the Microsoft Outlook 2010

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draft. (See figure 1.)

- **The Administration Portal**, which aggregates, sorts, and organizes program data. Forms, letters, and email are stored and modified here. Student information is included through the use of InfoPath forms.

Doctoral students and their advisers have now used the Dissertation Portal for one academic year. Looking ahead, Rockinson-Szapkiw envisions connections among the portal and other elements of the university infrastructure, such as its student information system.

“The interaction of doctoral students with the university isn’t limited to the dissertation process,” Rockinson-Szapkiw notes. “They have to register for the right courses at the right times—and it isn’t always easy to navigate that process. Having course information show up in the student’s My Dissertation Portal could be a way for students and their advisers to work together on the students’ course requirements, as well as on their dissertations.”

Benefits

The School of Education at Liberty University is well on its way toward boosting the retention rate in its doctoral program. Students report greater feelings of connectedness with their peers and professors, while greater efficiencies have the potential to make the program both shorter and less expensive for students.

With additional quality-control steps in the dissertation process, the university also expects to see an increase in dissertation quality.

“Given the importance of distance-learning to Liberty, what we’re learning

with SharePoint Server in this doctoral program may well be transferrable to other programs throughout the university,” says Rockinson-Szapkiw.

Boosts Students’ Sense of Connectedness by 9 Percent

Rockinson-Szapkiw and her colleagues at the university saw student frustration and isolation as key contributors to attrition in the doctoral program. Now, after a year with the Dissertation Portal in place, they see less of both.

Rockinson-Szapkiw conducted a research project centered on student surveys taken in August 2010, prior to the introduction of the Dissertation Portal, and again in February 2011, after students had several months of access to the technology. A key finding: The students’ sense of connectedness to the doctoral program rose significantly, boosting mean scores on this measure by 9 percent.

“Findings provided evidence that the adoption of this collaborative web-based workspace to share documents and to facilitate ongoing discourse among doctoral candidates, their peers, and their committees resulted in increased student-to-student and student-to-faculty connection when compared with traditional dissertation communication methods (e.g., email),” writes Rockinson-Szapkiw in the research paper *Improving Doctoral Candidates’ Persistence in the Online Dissertation Process*.

“Additionally, students reported medium to high levels of satisfaction in using SharePoint [Server] to facilitate the dissertation process. This aligns with research that recommends SharePoint [Server] as a way to streamline and organize the dissertation process.”

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Cuts Dissertation Review Time by Up to Half

Students feel better about the dissertation process now—but does that translate into higher retention rates? Rockinson-Szapkiw says it will take more time with the technology, and additional research, to say definitively. But she does see the technology having a measurable impact on the dissertation process at the university. Prior to adoption of the Dissertation Portal, it typically took four to eight weeks for a faculty committee to complete one full review of a dissertation draft. With the portal, that time can be significantly reduced because several committee members can review a manuscript at the same time. Students can see the reviews as they are completed for each chapter, rather than having to wait until feedback on three chapters (the number typically submitted at one time) are compiled and sent via email, as had been the case before.

“SharePoint Server is helping us to reduce the time frame of a key process—dissertation review—by up to 50 percent, and we expect it to help reduce the entire one- to three-year dissertation process significantly,” says Rockinson-Szapkiw.

That savings is substantial. A shorter—and, consequently, less expensive—doctoral program is one that can more easily attract and retain students until they earn their degrees. A more concise program also frees faculty time that can be immediately reinvested in providing greater counsel to students. That will enable the current faculty to support the continued growth of the doctoral program. Administrators also gain free time that they previously spent on clerical duties. They can reinvest that

time in program improvements and student service.

“We adopted SharePoint Server to help make our doctoral program more successful for our students and faculty, but all the results we’re seeing also make the program more marketable,” says Rockinson-Szapkiw. “That directly supports the university mission of bringing quality education to students around the world who might not otherwise have access to it.”

Saves Tens of Thousands of Dollars in Licensing

Some of the commercial technologies that Rockinson-Szapkiw and her colleagues considered for their portal were beyond their budget, costing tens of thousands of dollars that the university didn’t have allocated for this purpose.

That wasn’t the case with SharePoint Server, however. The university’s existing Campus Agreement for Microsoft licensing already included SharePoint Server.

“By choosing to base the portal on SharePoint Server, we incurred no additional licensing costs—we didn’t have to pay anything extra to adopt the software,” says Rockinson-Szapkiw. “Another commercial package would have had to go through our budget process to be approved. Besides the expense, the budget process itself could have delayed our project until the next fiscal year.”

Increases Dissertation Quality

Liberty is also seeing an increase in dissertation quality as a result of its use of the portal. The faculty committees rate the dissertations they review based on 15

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For more information about Liberty University, call (434) 582-2000 or visit the website at:

www.liberty.edu

factors, including quality of writing, overall argument, and research design. Rockinson-Szapkiw and her colleagues haven't yet formally researched the effect of the technology on these factors, but committee members have shared their impressions.

"Our faculty members have commented consistently on the increased quality of the work they're reviewing this year," says Rockinson-Szapkiw. "For example, faculty comment on the increased rigor of the research designs and statistical analyses of dissertations managed through the SharePoint portal. One way we've used the portal is to give students more opportunities for interaction with their research consultants. It's had a clear effect."

Microsoft SharePoint Server 2010
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