Hiram College Improves Online Learning Efficiency with Moodle by eThink Education

Hiram College, an innovative liberal arts institution in Hiram, Ohio, partnered with eThink Education to create an enhanced online learning experience for their students and faculty. By consolidating multiple learning platforms and incorporating a number of integrations, Hiram was able to make online learning more accessible and efficient, ultimately enhancing the user experience and creating improved workflows to save administrators time and resources.

About Hiram College

Founded in 1850, Hiram College continues today as one of the nation's most respected liberal arts institutions. Located in Ohio's Western Reserve, Hiram has long been committed to educational excellence, helping students develop a 21st-century skill set and mindset that will allow them to thrive in their personal lives, at a time when societal changes are constant and complex. The College's New Liberal Arts™ program prepares students to answer tough questions, solve complex problems, and communicate their ideas through a broad, interdisciplinary curriculum. Recognized by Colleges of Distinction, The Princeton Review, U.S. News and World Report, and as a top baccalaureate college by Washington Monthly, Hiram enrolls approximately 1,000 students in its traditional program and about 200 adult learners in its Center for Adult Studies programs.

Challenges & Goals

Consolidation

One of the main reasons that Hiram College began looking for an alternate Learning Management System (LMS) solution was to unify the two separate learning platforms they had previously been using, which caused confusion for faculty and students. Hiram was using the open-source Moodle LMS, hosted by a Moodle Partner, for their face-to-face and blended courses and an online program manager for their completely online courses. Hiram wanted to consolidate their LMSs into one centralized platform to simplify training and support and allow for a better user experience. In order to keep Hiram's online courses and sites running throughout the transition, they required a multi-step implementation process to transition their sites during a single calendar year and achieve all of their goals without interrupting the learning experience for students and faculty.

Real-Time SIS Integration

Additionally, achieving a seamless integration between the institution's Student Information System (SIS) and their LMS was incredibly important to Hiram College. Many of Hiram's faculty and staff had previously been required to become familiar with two different systems. Some aspects of their previous system were integrated, but others required duplicate efforts and additional manual intervention. The redundant processes were a large drain on Hiram's resources. In their transition to Moodle by eThink, Hiram wanted to ensure they were using their LMS and its available functionality to its full potential.

iOS Compatibility

Another of Hiram's challenges was to integrate Moodle into their iOS dependent campus. In Fall 2017, Hiram College became the first higher education institution in Ohio to fully implement a 1:1 iPad Mobile technology initiative with its rollout of the Tech and Trek™ program. In 2019, Hiram was named an Apple Distinguished School for 2019-2022. All students, faculty, and staff were issued iPad bundles that include keyboards and Apple Pencils, and the technology has been fully integrated into the curriculum. Therefore, it was extremely important for all software applications to be compatible with the iPads. Hiram needed a thoughtful and responsive partner to help craft a Moodle instance that integrated well into the iOS environment to encourage faculty innovation and significantly improve the student user experience.

Quality of Service

Hiram was looking for a solution that would provide excellent quality of service while avoiding the costs associated with having two platforms and hosts. The host for Hiram's completely online courses was responsive, but the number of courses being offered did not justify the cost. On the other hand, they were experiencing challenges with the service they were receiving from their previous Moodle Partner that hosted face-to-face and blended courses, both in terms of ticket response times and their inability to integrate a plugin or configure integrations without additional costs. Hiram was looking for a cost-effective Moodle Partner who fully supported their goals and gave them their desired level of service. Hiram also felt that it was important to host their Moodle site with an official Moodle Partner that would have a closer line of communication to Moodle headquarters. Their previous Moodle Partner lost its Certified Moodle Partner status, giving Hiram another reason to seek out a new Moodle Partner who would provide them with the level of support and innovation they desired.

> *We were growing more dissatisfied with [our previous provider] because of poor customer service and their unwillingness to install any plugins for us without additional expense. In addition, Moodle publicly announced that [our previous partner] was no longer a partner and could no longer use the "Moodle" name, so it rebranded itself. Meanwhile, I started attending webinars on course design and other topics offered by eThink, a Certified Moodle Partner, and they mentioned their great stats for ticket response times, which caught my eye.*

Litsa Varonis
Project Manager for the transition to eThink at Hiram College

Solutions

After systematically evaluating the list of Moodle Partners and speaking with eThink clients, Hiram College chose to partner with eThink Education due to the high level of support their team offered and the positive experience of eThink customers. eThink's fully-managed LMS solution and unlimited support model provided Hiram with a true partner dedicated to helping them reach their institutional goals surrounding learning outcomes.

In order to meet all of Hiram's goals without causing dramatic pauses to student site access, eThink developed a multi-phase implementation process that involved the building of three separate Moodle instances. First, Site 'A' was created to house all of Hiram's completely online courses to be taught in Spring 2019, as well as all courses offered in the first session of Summer 2019. The site went straight to live so students, faculty, and administrators could pilot the new platform. Site 'B' was then developed to transfer over Hiram's larger Moodle instance that had been hosted by their previous Moodle Partner, and allow for testing automated solutions for authentication and enrollments. The final implementation, Site 'C', is the final, unified platform that now serves as their comprehensive hub of learning across the College. This site was implemented in the second session of Summer 2019, which allowed for a full capture of user data and content. The integration logic tested during the Site 'B' phase was applied to Site 'C' to allow for fully automated user and course management systems.

The eThink Team deployed multiple patches to reduce some of the issues caused to the Moodle site when used on an iOS system. Two main patches had to be applied. The first patch assured correct marking capabilities on PDFs generated from student assignment submissions. The second patch fixed issues that occurred when scrolling through the Moodle site using an Apple Pencil. These two patches were both crucial to making Hiram's Moodle site function with ease on the iPad bundles used by Hiram students and faculty. In order to identify and patch issues like those experienced when using Moodle on an iOS system, the eThink Team works closely with Moodle HQ and the open source community to formulate patches quickly and effectively and create a user-friendly experience for all learners.

eThink implemented seamless integrations for Hiram College to make sure their LMS and other solutions were working together. A full enrollment integration between Hiram's SIS and the Moodle LMS eliminated time-consuming duplication efforts. A real-time SIS and LMS integration greatly improved workflow by automating the process of moving data from one system to another including courses, enrollments, attendance, and grades.

eThink also configured the LTIs, integrations on the Learning Tools Interoperability standard, that Hiram had previously been using seamlessly into their new Moodle site. During the eThink transition, Hiram College continued to use Digication for student ePortfolios and assessments and McGraw Hill and other publishers for content building, resources, and testing. The integration of these other platforms made the transition to the new LMS smoother for Hiram by streamlining access to these important third-party tools through the new LMS. Students can now complete activities on a publisher's website and have those grades automatically recorded in the Moodle gradebook, where it would have been previously necessary for the instructor to manually enter the grades into Moodle.

Results

Consolidation

eThink streamlined Hiram's learning experience by consolidating their multiple LMSs into one unified platform and integrating the institution's most important systems. With Hiram's online resources now available in one centralized location, the user experience for students and faculty alike has been greatly enhanced. Additionally, the amount of time needed to transfer data between systems has been drastically reduced if not eliminated completely. Most importantly, eThink was able to work with Hiram to create a custom timeline for the implementation of their new site in stages, allowing Hiram's students and faculty to maintain access to their learning resources throughout the transition.

Customization, Automation, and Integrations

eThink optimized Hiram's new Moodle environment with a number of integrations to automate backend processes and provide users with a seamless learning experience. eThink's real-time LMS and SIS integration automated course enrollment between the two systems, leaving more time for Hiram staff and faculty to focus on their students and course design.

"Now that we have moved to our permanent site," continued Varonis, "we will explore sending grades directly from Moodle into our Banner SIS, which will make the process much easier for faculty who use the Moodle gradebook with large classes."

The integrations with Digication and multiple publishers allowed Hiram to employ a best-of-breed content strategy by easily integrating this outside content into the Moodle platform. Being able to do this ensures that Hiram is able to choose the best learning content, regardless of its source, to meet their students' learning needs without having to navigate multiple interfaces. Lastly, with the ease of use improvements and patches for iOS compatibility within Moodle, Hiram has furthered improved the learning experience in an Apple Distinguished School. These integrations allow Hiram to improve the effectiveness of their learning program in a variety of ways while enhancing the end user experience.

Additionally, eThink's unlimited support model means that Hiram doesn't have to worry about being charged for plugin or integration requests, giving them unhindered flexibility to customize their site as needed to meet their learning goals. eThink's integration policy will allow Hiram to add new components in the future or remove ones that they feel are no longer benefiting them with no hassle. With eThink, Hiram has the flexibility to make Moodle work for their institution rather than having to change their processes and goals to fit the limitations of their Moodle instance, as was the case with their previous providers.

Unlimited Service with eThink Education

In eThink, Hiram College found a partner that alleviated their team's workload when it came to the LMS, fixed problems quickly and efficiently, and was willing to work alongside them on new endeavors.

> *We did our due diligence and reviewed the list of Moodle Partners and asked for testimonials from eThink's customers. After hearing their glowing responses, we decided to move forward with eThink. They have excellent customer service, are very attentive to our questions, respond quickly, and have worked with us on adding plugins that will allow faculty more options in integrating other software they are using.*

- Litsa Varonis

Conclusion

Partnering with eThink Education has transformed Hiram College's online learning experience for students, faculty, and administrators alike. Working with eThink has simplified the LMS process for Hiram College and has led to an optimized experience for both learners and back-end administrators. Through the incorporation of effective integrations and plugins, eThink has improved learning workflows and has greatly reduced the amount of manual maintenance needed by Hiram's staff. With eThink's help, Hiram College is now able to utilize Moodle to its full potential.

Learn how **Moodle** by eThink can help your institution:

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About eThink

eThink Education provides a fully-managed eLearning solution including cloud hosting, implementation, integration, consultation, and management services for open-source Moodle and Totara. Managed by experts, eThink's total solution provides a dynamic and customisable platform to meet specific institutional and organisational needs for clients in various industries including Healthcare, Education, Nonprofit, Government, and Corporate. eThink also offers LMS and eLearning trainings through eThink Academy, as well as custom content solutions. Learn More.