Boise State University saves $90,000 annually and decreases help inquiries by migrating students, faculty, and staff to Google Apps for Education

BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

At a Glance

What they wanted to do:

• Deliver a more functional and reliable mail system while introducing tools to foster collaboration

What they did:

• Deployed Google Apps for Education to students, staff, and faculty

What they accomplished:

• Realized $90,000 annual savings
• Significantly decreased volume of calls to the help center
• Ability to re-allocate IT Staff to work on other value added projects

Institution

Boise State University, located in Idaho's capital city, is a comprehensive urban center serving a diverse population through undergraduate and graduate programs, research, and public service. As Idaho's largest university, the school is comprised of 19,000 students and 2,400 faculty and staff. It offers more than 175 fields of interest and boasts over 200 student organizations, including one of the largest internship programs in the Northwest. Boise State has articulated a strategic plan called Charting the Course, which provides a framework and road map for becoming a Metropolitan Research University of Distinction.

Challenge

Boise State started evaluating new email services in February, 2008 when it became clear the current email system could not keep pace with the technology students were demanding. What's more, that email system – a service facing declining growth and reduced vendor commitment – offered no promise of ever keeping pace with innovation, even with the installation of costly upgrades. According to Brian Bolt, Team Lead in Boise State's Office for Information and Technology, "from a technical standpoint, we were falling behind the curve because we were tied to a vendor who was losing market share, meaning upgrades and innovation were drastically declining."

By May 2008, after choosing and successfully deploying Google Apps for Education as the email system for the University's 19,000 student population, the school's IT team saw an opportunity to further upgrade by choosing a more forward-looking service for the rest of campus. The ease and benefits that Google Apps delivered to the student population inspired them to also migrate faculty and staff, whose email system was in desperate need of a change.

> *"We saw an opportunity to extract ourselves from the business of administering two email systems and instead focus on other projects that provide a higher value to the institution."*
> **—Brian Bolt, Office for Information and Technology Team Lead**

Facing a large and disruptive upgrade with a new version release of their previous declining mail system, Brian recalls, "Upgrading would have required a significant investment in engineering, training, and hardware resources." Observing a decline in the level of support from third-party vendors – including important add-ons like backup and anti-virus software – also raised concerns. As he saw it, "Declining market share and a lack of third party developers show that a product does not have the ability to incorporate innovation into future releases. These factors also contribute to an increase in the support costs and risks involved with supporting a product."

Boise State was also considering the need to integrate various mobile devices and clients that are commonly used to access email. As he looked at the various options, Bolt knew that the best way to minimize costs associated with client side support, while increasing the accessibility of a messaging interface, was to move to a hosted platform available through any web browser. With the declining third party support and increasing technical maintenance inherent in his legacy service, Bolt needed stability – like the stability they had found in their student email solution. "I wanted something better," he recalls. "We needed something that was functional and more reliable – and I knew Google could deliver that for our staff since they already had for our students."

Solution

What started as a project to improve the student email experience eventually turned into a much larger project as Boise State proceeded to also deploy Google Apps for their 2,400 faculty and staff. After first initiating a successful pilot and receiving endorsements from executive officers, they completed the migration over four months. Bolt says, "The climate was all about cost savings; so not only did Apps have more benefits from a technological standpoint, but it also won out in the 'how much could this save us' discussion."

A critical part of the decision to migrate staff and faculty was identifying objections and addressing misinformation, since faculty and staff weren't as familiar with the new technology as students had been. Bolt and his team carefully analyzed the usability, ongoing support, and security of Google Apps as compared to their previous system. Helping users understand the benefits of a hosted solution, rather than something run from on-premise servers, was a first step.

"At Boise State, every IT employee is security minded," he says, "and each staff member consciously implements best security practices. However, we don't devote any employees solely to securing our technology infrastructure. Google, on the other hand, has entire teams working to ensure security of the infrastructure that houses our data. Whereas Boise State has not pursued data center security certification, Google has achieved SAS 70 Type II certification of its data centers. In addition, Google provides redundant data centers for critical services such as Gmail. It was easy to make the case that our data was safer 'in the cloud' than it could be on campus. The reality is that Google is capable of deploying far more security resources than Boise State."

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Benefits
Bolt reports a range of benefits resulting from the migration to Google Apps for students and faculty:

- ability to re-allocate IT Staff to work on other value added projects
- reduction in infrastructure, support, and maintenance costs by $90,000 annually
- increase in faculty access to functionally superior tool sets
- provide faculty and students with a system that fosters collaboration
- reliance upon market driven product improvement and innovation
- minimized downtime and maximized access to messaging
- ability to support disparate computing and hand-held platforms
- significant reduction in calls to the help center

About Google Apps for Education

Google Apps for Education is a free suite of hosted communication and collaboration applications designed for schools and universities. Google Apps includes Gmail (webmail services), Google Calendar (shared calendaring), Google Docs (online document, spreadsheet, presentation, and form creation and sharing) Google Video (secure and private video sharing – 10GB free) and Google Sites (team website creation with videos, images, gadgets and documents integration), as well as administrative tools, customer support, and access to APIs to integrate Google Apps with existing IT systems.

For more information visit:
www.google.com/a/edu

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What's more, the move to Google Apps took Boise State less time than upgrading their traditional email client would have required.

Google Apps for Education will save $90,000 annually in ongoing email system costs, and has markedly reduced the number of calls logged at help desks. The migration also enabled Bolt's team to begin consolidating their server operating system platforms. Previously, eight engineers worked to support services implemented across four separate operating systems, but since switching to Google Apps, they've removed 11 servers and have allocated just 1/10th of one full-time employee to system support. "Engineering resources that were previously allocated to our waning system have been reassigned to build the framework for a new identity management system." Bolt says. "As these engineering resources continue to make gains, a cascading effect of freeing up additional resources in other areas is expected."

Across campus, users are finding ways to innovate and work together using Google Apps. Bolt says, "We've extracted ourselves from the business of administering two email systems and can focus instead on projects that provide a higher value to the institution." Boise State is now proud to easily foster collaboration between students and faculty, letting students share documents with instructors and get feedback online before turning in assignments. An instructional software developer is using Google Sites to administer a Teaching Scholars community.

But Bolt sees this as only the beginning. "You have to ask yourself how you want your campus to communicate and work together and whether you can do that with your current tools without significantly increasing cost or resources," he concludes. "My guess would be that this isn't possible without embarking on the next level of collaboration products – and that's where Google Apps comes in."