

Wesleyan University chooses Google Apps to reduce data storage costs and refocus IT resources on strategic work



At A Glance

What they wanted to do:

- End ongoing storage expenses and headaches
- Reallocate IT talent to higher-value projects beyond email server maintenance
- Provide an email system that would be both familiar and preferred by student body

What they did:

- Quickly deployed Google Apps mail for all students
- Integrate Google Apps with Wesleyan's existing single sign-on platform
- Activated other Apps services such as Docs, Sites, and Calendar

What they accomplished:

- Avoided major hardware expenses required for storage upgrade
- Increased available IT resources for special projects
- Provided student groups easy-to-use web apps for site creation, collaborative work, and calendaring

Institution

Wesleyan University is among the most selective and highly ranked liberal arts institutions in the United States. Its 2,800 undergraduate students, drawn from across the country and around the world, and its 600 full-time and part-time graduate students pursue individualized courses of study that emphasize self-determination and creative, innovative work at a high level. Throughout its 178-year history, Wesleyan has expected its students to develop their passionate interests and apply them in ways the world finds meaningful and productive.

Challenge

The IT team at Wesleyan University faced a constant challenge with disk capacity on their Unix-based email system. "We tell all students they'll have their @Wesleyan.edu addresses for life," explains Karen Warren, Director of User and Technical Services, "but cramped mailbox space had become a critical issue for users. We would have trouble keeping pace with our projected storage requirements." Looking for a solution, Warren and her team began exploring options, and discovered Google Apps.

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—Karen Warren, Director of User and Technical Services

Solution

Because Google Apps is offered free of charge – and free of ads – for academic institutions, it was clear that Apps could help Wesleyan avoid the looming costs of a storage upgrade. "At the start, we did our research and talked about how we might re-vamp our existing system and re-do things ourselves," Warren recalls. "We simply couldn't find a compelling reason why Wesleyan shouldn't let people who were doing email well for millions do it for us, too."

Choosing Google Apps also allowed Wesleyan to redirect in-house UNIX staff to opportunities that went beyond email server maintenance. "We needed those people to focus on more important things that would make a real difference on campus – after all, it's not as if our group was going to design a system that was better than Gmail."

In fact, watching how students used their email accounts was a factor that influenced Wesleyan to choose Google Apps. "We did an analysis of how many students were actually using their school email, and discovered that well over half were already forwarding all their mail directly to Gmail," Warren notes. "For the majority of our students, using Google Apps wasn't a big adjustment. It was more like coming back to the norm."

About Google Apps Education Edition

Google Apps Education Edition 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.

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Results

Warren sees the deployment of Google Apps as one of her first big milestones at the university – one that went smoothly for all. "I'm relatively new to this role at Wesleyan. This project was the first thing handed to me as I walked in the door in 2008. I was told there was a mandate to make the change happen – and quickly. The team had started the process in mid-September, but had a firm launch deadline of January 19, right after the holidays."

Among the extra challenges faced by Warren's team were making sure additional requirements, such as single sign-on and opt-out abilities were also in place for launch.

"Wesleyan is a campus where the student body has a strong voice," she notes. "Simply dictating decisions that impact students doesn't work as well as actively engaging them from the get-go. In this case, we had vocal minority of about 30 users who didn't like the idea of outsourcing school email, so as a compromise, we offered an opt-out that would let them continue using the old system." Luckily, Google Apps' built-in support for external single sign-on systems, along with the relative ease of deployment, meant that her team could quickly move past the basics and focus instead on school-specific customizations.

They met the deadline without problems. "It was easier than expected," Warren says.

"We came into this looking to solve a problem with our student email, and Apps definitely solved that," she continues. "It helped us cut impending storage expenses. We're now starting to see how students are adopting Apps for much more than email. We have student groups who use Google Calendar and Google Sites to do things like run the farmer's market on campus, and professors who request Google Docs for group assignments and presentations, since it works well across both Mac and PC. I've watched firsthand as our student help desk organically started using forms in Google Docs and Google Calendar to manage their shift requests and scheduling."

User education was also a key activity driven by Warren's team. "You can't overestimate users and assume that just because they're college students they're automatically tech-savvy. Most are, of course, but not all." Her team supplemented the existing user help system in Google Apps with a special blog showcasing tutorials and screencasts designed specifically for Wesleyan network users.

"Our IT team and student help desk are on the frontlines with users, and usually we're the first ones to hear about it when people aren't happy," Warren explains. "The absence of complaints since we moved to Apps has been pretty telling."

