

# case study

## East Carolina University

East Carolina University Puts a New Face on Academic Outreach With Saba Centra Live

### Solution Overview

#### Industry — Higher Education

#### Challenge

Create the interactivity and social atmosphere of the traditional classroom by incorporating engaging audio and visual components to increase collaborative learning and social interaction among students and faculty

#### Benefits

- Creates an interactive virtual classroom environment for geographically distributed students
- Supports more effective collaboration and social interaction among students
- Builds a sense of community with ECU among remote students
- Simplifies the process of offering multiple sessions of the same class at different times and for students in different locations
- Accommodates guest lecturers and out-of-town professors with minimal time or cost constraints

#### Solution

Saba Centra Live

In 1907, East Carolina University (ECU) was founded to alleviate a severe shortage of teachers in eastern North Carolina. A century later, ECU has grown to become an emerging national research university with an enrollment of more than 23,000 students and nearly 200 undergraduate, graduate and professional degree programs.

ECU has been a recognized leader in distance education for more than 50 years, and was among the first schools in the nation to offer a degree completely over the Internet. Relying on Blackboard as its Web-based course management system, the university's distance-education program serves a far-flung group of students living hundreds of miles or more from the main campus in Greenville, North Carolina. While the Blackboard system has been effective in delivering online course materials for nontraditional students, ECU was looking for a solution that could provide the same kind of interactivity and social atmosphere that exist in a traditional classroom environment. Saba Centra Live was the answer.

"We are pleased to add Centra Live as a learning tool at ECU," said Elmer Poe, associate vice chancellor for academic outreach at ECU. "It is the perfect complement to our primary learning platform, Blackboard, and offers faculty and students ways to communicate and collaborate that expand the horizons of online learning."

#### Creating Communities of Learners

Although ECU's distance-education programs have been very successful in terms of serving students, something has been missing, according to Sharon Collins, Centra administrator for academic outreach at ECU. With the Blackboard system, ECU had some of the tools it needed to deliver course material online and facilitate distance-learning programs, but these tools simply weren't very effective in supporting chat rooms and discussion boards that are essential for duplicating a classroom environment.

"We were hearing that students were just not feeling connected," Collins explained. "Because they were unable to come to campus and sit in a classroom with the professor and fellow students, many didn't feel like they were part of the university."

*"I feel like we've been able to create a community of learners with Centra Live. Because we can see one another, it fills a social presence that distance education has lacked in the past."*

Elizabeth Hodge, Professor,  
College of Education  
East Carolina University

With Centra Live, students can upload and share PowerPoint presentations over the Internet, and participate in real-time discussions using audio alone or Web cameras. Students can also respond to yes-or-no polls and “raise” their hands with a click of the mouse. Thanks to Centra Live, many students and teachers are seeing one another for the first time.

“I feel like we’ve been able to create a community of learners with Centra Live,” said Elizabeth Hodge, a professor in the College of Education. “The students are sharing experiences aside from what they are working on; it allows them to become friends. Because we can see one another, it fills a social presence that distance education has lacked in the past.”

### Reaching Out to Wide-Ranging Resources

Another significant improvement under Centra Live is that it has made it possible to bring more teaching resources into the virtual classroom. For example, guest lecturers can be scheduled without the time and cost constraints of flying them into Greenville. A variety of programs, from nursing to construction management, have used Centra Live to incorporate subject-matter experts into the curricula efficiently and economically.

In addition, when professors have to travel, they can now teach their classes, rather than arranging for a substitute. “We had a faculty member who went to China, and we were able to use Centra Live to get him in front of his class,” remarked Collins. “Class leaders don’t have to be locked behind their desks anymore.”

Timing is sometimes an issue as well, with nontraditional students unable to attend classes during the business day, and guest lecturers or faculty members in different time zones creating logistical challenges. Centra Live is especially helpful in providing flexible and interactive programs that meet the needs of busy professionals who would like to return for graduate degrees, but often have scheduling constraints that make it difficult to participate in traditional, on-campus classes.

All distance-education courses supported by Centra Live are recorded, so it’s simple for faculty members to offer multiple “on demand” sessions of the same class to allow students to attend whatever session is most convenient for them. The recorded class meetings also enable students to review lectures to prepare for exams or to easily make up a session that was missed.

### Growing Rapidly in Popularity

Although the Centra Live solution was first piloted by ECU in the spring of 2006, and didn’t begin a wider rollout until the fall semester, its popularity has grown rapidly. Already more than 1,500 of ECU’s approximately 4,000 distance-education students are attending classes using Centra Live. There are Centra Live-based courses representing every college at the university. In addition, the solution has been extended to support regular and ad hoc faculty meetings, as well as informal collaboration sessions among small groups of students, and one-to-one meetings between faculty members and students.

“The faculty at ECU loves the Centra Live solution,” Collins said. “There isn’t a single curriculum where we don’t have at least one faculty member using it. A lot of our growth has come from satisfied faculty members telling other faculty about how much they like using Centra Live.”

Because such a large portion of ECU’s curriculum is based on the Apple Macintosh platform, Collins is also looking forward to implementing the Macintosh-based version of Centra Live — which should further expand its usage.

Throughout the implementation period, Collins and her group have provided comprehensive, highly responsive support — with an ECU person always online days and evenings, and the Saba Centra toll-free number available for technical support. “We tell our faculty, ‘You’re in a session to teach the class — we’ll take care of the technical details,’” commented Collins. “So, we’ve been able to quickly get the faculty comfortable with the tools, and they’re very interested in incorporating Centra Live into their classroom.”