

University of Virginia: Prestigious History with a Focus on the Future

Charlottesville's University of Virginia (U.Va.) certainly has a past. It was founded by Thomas Jefferson in 1819, and boasts an impressive list of alumni, including Woodrow Wilson, Robert and Ted Kennedy, Edgar Allen Poe, Georgia O'Keefe, Walter Reed, Richard Byrd, three US Supreme Court Justices and NATO Secretary General Javier Solana. But last year, the current crop of students started looking ahead to the future.

Anyone who has ever been to a college campus knows that a huge amount of paper is used for flyers and advertisements. The U.Va. student council approached the administration with an idea to replace printed student materials with **digital signs**. "We have a very active student body," says Bill Ashby, Associate Dean of Students and Director of Newcomb Hall and Student Activities. "They are usually a few steps ahead of us on technology issues."

The council had three main issues they wanted to address. The first was creating a more efficient means of helping student groups get their messages out to the more than 20,000 students on campus. The second was fueled by green concerns. "We have a generation of environmentally conscious students, who wanted a sustainable way to deliver information," says Ashby. The third was preserving the look of their historic campus, called "the proudest achievement of American architecture in the past 200 years" by the American Institute of Architects and the only American university designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

"The system needed to be user-friendly and simple, yet robust and Web-based. We asked, 'should we build it ourselves or should we hire an outside programmer?' We finally went with something in the middle," Ashby explained. Some students already had experience with AxisTV digital signage software and suggested it as the perfect solution.

The administrators supported their choice and began doing their homework. Along with students, they contacted facilities that had already implemented **AxisTV**, including their own Zehmer Hall and Conference Center, as well as other universities that use the system such as the University of Maryland, the George Mason Law School in Arlington, and higher education campuses in Louisiana. The students liked what they saw and decided to go with the Visix software. Ashby explains, "It was a student project all the way, but we agreed."

AxisTV's Enterprise edition seemed best suited to U.Va.'s needs. A funding coalition was formed from the student council, the Division of Student Affairs and the Parents' Committee, who are very active in the life of the school. "It's safe to say that without the parents' contributions, we could never have afforded it," says Ashby. The Enterprise edition offers the largest feature set and maximum scalability for up to 500 endpoints. "Our campus is pretty spread out and AxisTV is a technological tool that can connect those decentralized parts."

PLANS REALIZED

U.Va. launched AxisTV in Newcomb Hall Student Center with three channel players running 46-inch Samsung LCDs on all five levels – in line-of-sight near the main entrance, in the large dining area on the second floor, at points of entry on the third floor where there are **meeting rooms**, and in the basement movie theater where AxisTV is channeled through a high-end digital projector and runs current content on the screen as a pre-show display. The displays use a three-window layout – one window taking up half the left side with student organization notices and advertisements, another window with building events and schedules, and a third with a video feed – usually CNN. They also include a weather ticker at the bottom of the screen.

Ashby was excited by the adaptability of the system. "One great thing is that you can use AxisTV with any display at the front end – we aren't stuck with only one kind of display so different departments can use what they already have."

They next included three of their libraries and four recreation centers with one channel player in each location feeding content to LCDs. They also added two players each in the Commerce School and the Engineering School – all running to 50-inch Sony displays strategically located in the lobbies of their buildings. "One of our best indications of success is that five or six other departments have seen AxisTV working and are clamoring for it as well," Ashby says.

Like many educational facilities, U.Va. was shocked by the shootings in April last year in Virginia. "After 4/16, it became very necessary to have a far-reaching emergency response plan in place. It's a real benefit to have something like this that can be used as a part of such a plan," continues Ashby. AxisTV has already become a key component in their updated emergency response system and looks to become even more integrated in the near future. "We are installing Enterprise broadly and will be implementing the Screensaver and Desktop Messenger options."

Students create content as a JPEG, TIFF or other graphic file format. Student organizations submit and post this content after staff approval using the Wire – a university-built web-based module that sits in front of AxisTV. "It's a front door for student organizations. Students are keen on it being so easy to use and so much more efficient than the old paper flyers, not to mention ecological as well," explains Ashby.

SUSTAINING MOMENTUM

"If you want to use more environmentally sustainable methods to reach students, you basically have two options. The first is punitive – you know, 'No Posting!' and then going after violators. The second is to use modern technology to try and change the culture. That's what we decided to do."

To further this 'less paper, more bytes' approach, Ashby is building an online archive on the Wire. "Sort of an electronic version of those flyers with little tabs at the bottom that you can tear off. Students can review older content and print out a flyer on their computer. That way they don't have to stand there and wait for something they saw to cycle back through the playlist."

"Our main measure of success is that the total number of submissions each semester keeps going up, plus the change in the behavior and the culture. Digital signage hasn't totally replaced old communications methods yet – that stuff will die hard, but I estimate it has reduced our paper usage by 10 to 15%. We hope we are changing the culture."

Ashby concludes, "Our goal is that, in three to five years, we can take down the last of the bulletin boards and use only the Visix system."