Touch Control Systems

Empower Faculty to Teach with Technology

Intuitive – that's the word Joe Mancini, executive director of technical services at Montgomery County Community College (MCCC), Pennsylvania, uses to describe the Information Technology (IT) department's approach to designing smart classrooms and meeting spaces on its campuses.

ALANA J. MAUGER
Director of Communications
Montgomery County Community College (Pa.)

Recent full-scale renovations to two major buildings at the college's Central Campus in Blue Bell, coupled with the expansion of its West Campus in Pottstown and construction of a brand new Culinary Arts Institute in Lansdale, have enabled Mancini and his team to re-think how they implement and support technology in the classroom and beyond.

A key component to their new design is the installation of Extron touch control systems, which feature touch panel graphics that can provide faculty with step by step instructions on using smart classrooms or video conference rooms, should they need it. As a result, instructors are able to get the most out of their classroom technology.

"The value of this technology is that it empowers users to take ownership," explains Mancini, who has been with the college for 21 years. "It also permits consistency so faculty can seamlessly move between rooms and even campuses without learning different technology."

The touch control systems consolidate the need for multiple remotes into one panel from which instructors can control all smart room technology. This includes a projector/smart board, laptop, VCR and DVD players, computer, sound and, for some, videoconferencing.

"We simplified the use of technology in the classrooms. We labeled the controls and eliminated remotes. If you can use a smart phone, you can use this technology," Mancini says.

Implementing controls that make technology more accessible for the end user also reduces the number of calls to the college's help desk for technical assistance. And, when there is a problem, help desk technicians are now able to remotely access the controls to resolve most issues.

"Previously, if an instructor called the help desk, they would have to wait 10 minutes for a technician to physically come to their classroom – sometimes for something as simple as turning on a projector or replacing remote batteries. Now, since the system sits on the network, we can assist instructors remotely, minimizing the disruption of student learning," Mancini explains.

Multimedia Specialist Frank Lieb also notes that the system significantly reduces the need for training, which is especially beneficial to adjunct instructors who may only be on campus for one class per week or who may be hired immediately prior to the start of a semester.

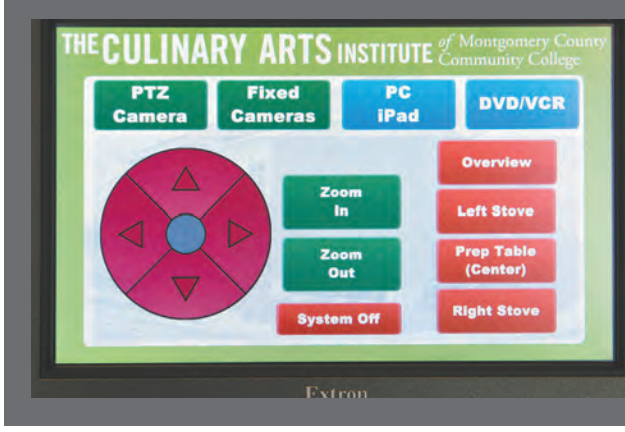
It is not only faculty that benefits from the touch control systems. IT has incorporated the technology into 15 of its video conference-enabled meeting rooms, allowing administrators and staff to facilitate meetings between the college's campuses or other locations without the assistance of a technician.

"Someone from IT used to be on hand to set up every single video conference call. This was fine when there were only six rooms, but now there are 35, and it's not sustainable for a technician to be running around campus between meetings," Mancini explains.

The system also enables IT to be proactive in terms of maintenance issues. For example, IT technicians are notified when a projector lamp is about to burn out. In addition, all technology is programmed to turn off automatically at 11 p.m., supporting MCCC's Sustainability Initiative.

Currently, MCCC has deployed the new system in 115 classrooms and 15 video conference enabled meeting rooms. According to Mancini, the goal is to update an additional 10-15 rooms each fiscal year going forward until 100 percent are outfitted with the now-standard technology. IT has also implemented touch control systems for two large video walls at its Central Campus in Blue Bell. The controls feature with icons that allow users to easily switch between live television feeds and student-produced content.

Of note, Mancini and his team designs and builds most the college's technology in house – which saves money and provides valuable learning experiences for employees and students.



TOP: Culinary Arts students watch instruction on one of several monitors positioned around the teaching kitchen. Instructors are able to control the camera and displays via touch control system.

LEFT: An close-up shot of a panel that controls the touch control system in MCCC's Culinary Arts Institute.

"Historically, our IT department is very self-sufficient. We do our own integration so we can better support the [technology] products down the road," says Mancini. "Doing this also enables us to partner with the college's computer science students for things like programming, providing them with a valuable hands-on work experience."

Mancini adds that one benefit of working with Extron on the touch control systems project is that the company allows users, once trained, to program the equipment themselves. This knowledge deepens IT technicians' understanding of the overall system and enables them to develop new and creative ways to design and implement classroom technology.

For example, the college's IT staff got creative in designing the technology for the kitchens and classrooms in its brand new Culinary Arts Institute (CAI). Using the touch control system, culinary instructors are able to control overhead cameras to display content on several large monitors positioned throughout the teaching and demo kitchens. Using the same controls, they bring up PowerPoint presentations or even search the Internet.

"The technology enables us to bring the lecture into the kitchen, and to switch seamlessly between a variety of teaching tools," explains Chef Francine Marz, director of MCCC's CAI. "We can easily show a variety of content that relates to a given lesson. For example, if we're making Indian cuisine, we can show video that relates to Indian culture so our students can better understand the area from which a particular style of cooking originates. We can even play cultural music while we work," she continues.

And, according to Lieb, that's not all IT has in store for the CAI.

"The next step is to configure the system so that instructors can control everything with an iPad," he shares. "The touch screen panels have an iPad app that enables everything to be controlled wirelessly." ▲

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The entire process to build and implement our mobile web app took about three months. OmniUpdate developed and delivered the mobile templates in two weeks, and then it was up to us to gather and edit content, then get approval from administrators.

Working with OmniUpdate gave us a solution to go live quickly, keep up with the increase in mobile traffic, and create a more efficient way to manage our content.

Our team is now looking forward to moving the entire TCC site into OU Campus. Since we're comfortable with the new CMS, we'll have more time to focus on web development, design and content strategy in the process.

We're perhaps most looking forward to having content synchronization. TCC has 250 people contributing content to our website across five campuses located in three cities.Enabling all these contributors to easily update the mobile site and main website using OU Campus will be critical.

Our key takeaways from this experience are that we could implement a mobile solution using OU Campus before implementing our full site in the CMS. And, a "one size fits all" mobile solution for higher education doesn't exist.

Researching our audience, getting a handle on our existing software limitations, and understanding the expectations of students and administration were all key factors to Tarrant County College's move to mobile. ▲