Davenport University Graduates to Smart Data Storage

The month of August sets off a flurry of activity for higher-education IT teams across the US. Preparing for the start of the academic year means tuning Wi-Fi networks, monitoring application performance, and handling a wave of student tickets.

“Traditionally, infrastructure upgrades are out of the question at this time of year, because August just isn’t a good time to break things,” says Joe Bliss, virtual infrastructure administrator for Davenport University, Michigan’s second-largest private, nonprofit university.

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But that rule of thumb no longer hobbles Davenport. In fact, it took just two hours in the middle of August for Davenport University to take advantage of its Evergreen™ Storage subscription to improve and expand its Pure Storage infrastructure.

“The process was so non-disruptive that no one outside of IT even knew an upgrade was taking place,” Bliss says. Seven months later, when COVID-19 sent most of the campus community home, the university’s up-to-date storage helped it quickly shift to remote operations.

One Data Storage Platform, Less Work

In 2017, Davenport replaced its old storage arrays with Pure Storage to gain the speed that comes with an all-flash environment. Within a year, they'd migrated all campus systems and data, including the critical Ellucian Banner ERP and Blackboard applications, to Pure. And the results spoke for themselves. The time to run Blackboard Analytics reports dropped from eight hours to six. Oracle read times decreased by 85-90%, improving the user experience. And consolidating from 48 to 5 rack units reduced data center space, power, and cooling costs.

Bliss is basically a one-person virtual infrastructure management team, so he appreciates the simplicity of Pure FlashArray™ devices. "I rarely have to do anything with the Pure Storage environment other than occasionally adding storage space for VMware," he says. "It just sits there and does a really good job."

This has given Bliss more time to bolster security, add more automation capabilities, and migrate applications to new server operating systems.

Data Storage Upgrades without Disruption

Fast forward two years, and the university was ready to take advantage of its Evergreen subscription, which offers a fully upgradable, non-disruptive architecture and investment-protected, on-demand upgrades.

"Any other solution would require a quote from the vendor, installation, and testing, taking weeks or months from start to finish," says Bliss. "But with Pure, the whole refresh only took about two hours—and we did it in the middle of the day. All I had to do was schedule a time and bring the new controllers to the data center. Then the Pure Storage team did the rest."

Keeping storage perpetually modern paid dividends in March 2020 when most faculty, staff, and students were sent home.

"Part of our role in IT is helping to keep students involved and focused on their work," Bliss says. "And because we hadn't let our technology get out of date, we were ready to react."

Good IT Economics

The Evergreen subscription is also easy on the university's IT budget. After Davenport upgraded to the new arrays, support costs dropped 33%—savings compounded by the Evergreen upgrade discount. "We were already paying for support, so adding on a little for hardware refreshes through Evergreen was the smart thing to do," Bliss says.

Continually improving the storage system allows Davenport to focus on supporting students, faculty, and staff with new offerings, such as wireless upgrades and a virtual lab.

"It's important to remember why we're here in IT—to help the campus community," he says. "With Pure Evergreen, we don't have to worry about a major storage refresh every five to seven years, which means we can spend our time making the Davenport experience even better."