Improving and Expanding Online Learning

St. Joseph's College NEW YORK

Founded in 1916, St. Joseph's College is a private university in New York with nearly 4,000 undergraduate students and 1,200 graduate students enrolled across three campuses. A pioneer in online learning, the college launched its first virtual learning programs in the 1990s, and in 2015 established a fully online campus, with 30 programs offering anywhere from 250 to 300 online classes each semester. Today, St. Joseph's serves about 500 fully online students, and more than half of their in-person students also take at least one online class each semester.

With online learning already a vital part of its culture, St. Joseph's had a leg up in the transition to virtual learning in Spring of 2020. But as an institution with a low teacher-to-student ratio and a prominent in-person program with a long history of hands-on learning, college leadership knew that both students and faculty would have high expectations for their online coursework. The e-learning team, headed by Michelle Papajohn, CTO and vice president for information technology, and Amy Poland, associate dean for online learning, was tasked with a daunting mission. They needed to expand online programming to the entire college without losing the individual attention and interactive teaching that is a foundational part of the college's mission. That journey would lead them to Class, a new virtual classroom based on Zoom and designed with instructors in mind.

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Making the Online Transition

St. Joseph's already had a strong online program before COVID—but the pandemic meant providing more online classes than ever before, as well as helping many students and faculty transition to a digital sphere for the first time. Papajohn and Poland had to move fast; by the fall of 2020, a staggering 70% of students at St. Joseph's would be taking all of their courses online.

Faculty resistance was an early obstacle to the transition, with many professors worried that they would not be able to provide the same high-quality teaching experience in a virtual setting. St. Joseph's answer was an outpouring of communication, support, and collaboration. In the early days of the pandemic, the e-learning team hosted more than 20 virtual "tech chats" in a single week, where instructors could Zoom in to learn more about online learning. They also leveraged Kaltura and Canvas to offer video tutorials and professional development opportunities for faculty. And they tapped faculty who were already proficient with teaching online to share their skills with less tech-savvy instructors.

This effort led to incredible results. Many reticent faculty members now love teaching online and want to continue offering virtual and hybrid courses in the future. But despite their early success, Papajohn and Poland realized they needed more. As they looked toward a future that would include more hybrid and online learning options, they envisioned a virtual classroom that would engage students and give faculty the same breadth of pedagogical options they have in-person. In their search for a better solution, they found Class.

class

Looking Ahead With Class

In fall 2020, St. Joseph's started looking for a better synchronous learning platform. Zoom had worked well during the transition to virtual, but instructors were still struggling to get students to engage. For instance, students were talkative on Canvas but often hid behind blacked-out screens during synchronous Zoom sessions.

St. Joseph's College chose Class because it is designed to streamline teaching and improve student experience. They particularly loved features like:

- Front of Class, which places speakers at the "front" of the virtual classroom.

- Interactivity, with the ability to share web pages and follow along on the same screen.

- Functionality for in-class assignments and polls.

The team at St. Joseph's was immediately drawn to Class because it expanded Zoom's capabilities for the classroom environment— meaning that the learning curve for instructors would be minimal. "Class came up during one of our tech chats, when it was still in its beta stages," says Poland. "We loved what Class brought to Zoom to enhance teaching."

The e-learning team particularly liked the interactivity enabled by Class. With Class, students could look at websites or videos together, participate in polls, and quickly complete in-class assignments without leaving the platform. Another key benefit is the ability for students to turn on their video so only the instructor can see them—with this feature, students maintain their privacy, while instructors still receive visual feedback cues. Class also makes it easy for students to share their knowledge and practice public speaking via the Front of Class feature, which mimics the experience of standing at the front of the classroom.

For St. Joseph's, the ability to make online learning interactive is a necessity—and they can't wait to see how students and faculty respond to the new functionalities in fall 2021.

Expanding Opportunity With Online Learning

As St. Joseph's expands their online programming, they continue to find new ways to learn and improve. "The pandemic changed things so drastically, and we are still adapting," says Michelle Papajohn. "But this new format offers students much more flexibility."

With campuses more than 60 miles apart, St. Joseph's expanded online program will allow unique courses and programs, like their Peace and Justice Studies minor, to be more accessible for more students. And with Class providing improved synchronous learning options for students and professors alike, the college's ability to provide hands-on learning will undoubtedly continue to set them apart from the competition.