



Algonquin College: Building a Partnership to Drive Digital Evolution

Algonquin College consolidates the online learning experience with a single reliable and user-friendly platform

As an early adopter of online learning, Algonquin College always looks to deliver the most innovative and effective digital engagement for its thousands of students. Together with D2L, the college worked to migrate 35,000 courses to the Brightspace platform, boosting usability, reliability and accessibility for students and teachers alike.

AT A GLANCE

User Numbers:

40,000 students, 1,500 faculty

Interviewees:

- Dr. Patrick Devey, Dean of the Centre for Continuing and Online Learning, Algonquin College

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Keshana Kind, Business Management & Entrepreneurship Student at Algonquin College

SUMMARY

To enhance its digital learning experience, Algonquin College wanted to simplify its complex infrastructure and replace six learning management systems with just one: D2L's Brightspace platform. With the help of D2L and its community, the college successfully migrated over 35,000 course sites, trained 1,500 faculty members, and built a flourishing student ambassador program for the new platform within just six months.

QUICK FACTS

- Created a single, reliable and scalable platform for future growth
- Successfully migrated over 35,000 course sites, representing two full academic years of content, in just six months
- Reduced IT costs and complexity by retiring six legacy learning management systems
- Significantly increased student and faculty satisfaction with the online experience
- Accelerated adoption, with 4,000 students accessing online training within the first few months of deployment

EMBRACING DIGITAL LEARNING

Some years ago, Algonquin College took the bold step of announcing its intention to be a fully 'digital college'. To achieve this, the college aimed to adopt technology platforms that would enhance the delivery of all its 35,000 courses, and make many of them fully available online. As an early adopter of the learning management systems (LMS), Algonquin College knew what digital learning platforms were capable of, and saw their potential to make education accessible to a broader population of students than ever before.

Patrick Devey, Dean of the Centre for Continuing and Online Learning at Algonquin College, explains: “Over the years our online learning systems had grown organically, and we eventually found ourselves maintaining six separate instances of two different LMS platforms. As a result, the online experience became unwieldy, disjointed, and unreliable, and we realized that the best course of action was to consolidate everything onto one central learning platform.”

Moving to a new platform also presented an opportunity to enhance the user experience and apply some of the lessons that the college has learned over many years of delivering hybrid and online courses. The new solution wouldn't just be a technical upgrade — it would spark new ways of thinking about digital teaching and learning.



KEEPING STUDENTS ENGAGED

“Engaging with students is the biggest challenge with online learning,” says Devey. “In a classroom it’s easy to read students’ reactions to what you’re teaching them—but online they can’t just put up their hand and say that they don’t understand something. The onus is on them to reach out when they are struggling.

“It’s a different world for teachers too, because with online learning the locus of control shifts to the learners. Teachers can’t govern how or when students log in, or set a pace for the whole class to follow. At the same time, they’re expected to respond to students’ questions as quickly as possible—ideally within 24 hours—so it’s very different to a focused classroom environment.”

Dr. Patrick Devey, Dean of the Centre for Continuing and Online Learning, Algonquin College

“Solving these issues would help meet our goal of boosting our online student retention rate. It’s even more challenging than in-person to establish if digital learners need more support, but with a mix of different teaching tools, ample instructional support, and the right solution, we believe that online learning can be just as powerful as a traditional face-to-face approach.”

CONSOLIDATING TO A SINGLE SOLUTION

Faced with all these challenges, Algonquin College put potential vendors through a thorough request for proposal exercise, interviewing each supplier and scoring them on a range of characteristics including performance, analytics, mobility, security, and usability. Ultimately, the Brightspace platform came out on top, and the D2L team were chosen as the best partner to assist with the migration project.

“D2L opened up a sandbox for us to trial the Brightspace platform, and after hearing the feedback from the faculty and students who tested it, as well as the answers we got from D2L during the interviews, we were sure it was the right choice,” says Devey. “The next step was to migrate all 35,000 of our online courses to the new solution. Our College President set us the goal of fully transitioning to the new system within six months of signing the contract. Needless to say, we were thankful to have such great support from D2L.”

The D2L team worked directly with Algonquin College’s dedicated migration and training team, and used their experience of many previous large-scale migrations to guide the process. The college was able to pilot the new solution with 13 programs in Spring 2018, and completed its full-scale deployment in September 2018.



“We had the D2L Usability team come on site once or twice to deal directly with our faculty and showcase some opportunities for improvement. We also got in touch with the client success manager at D2L, and she pointed us towards some other schools using Brightspace so we could build up a network, and learn from each other.”

Dr. Patrick Devey, Dean of the Centre for Continuing and Online Learning, Algonquin College

“D2L laid out a detailed roadmap for our implementation and helped guide the training of our 1,500 faculty members within the timeframe,” says Devey. “Without their help we would never have met our six-month target.”

ADDRESSING STUDENT NEEDS

With Brightspace acting as a single LMS platform for the whole institution, Algonquin College has been able to gain greater control of its online presence. By eliminating the need to maintain six different systems, the college can now fully concentrate on developing high-quality, accessible courses, and begin to tackle the challenge of boosting student engagement.

“The key was to get our faculty and students involved from the get-go. We used our instructors as a sounding-board, to help us pick the best ideas and make decisions collaboratively. And for the students, knowing that they had a say in how their platform would function was important. They were excited about having mobile access to their courses, and even just having a system that wouldn’t crash once a week!”

Dr. Patrick Devey, Dean of the Centre for Continuing and Online Learning, Algonquin College

By taking the opportunity to rethink its existing processes around online learning, Algonquin College has been able to rebuild its architecture with an eye on established best practices.

“We worked with some of our partner organizations here in Ottawa who are already using the Brightspace platform,” comments Devey. “We picked up a few tips and tricks from them which, in addition to the templates and expertise provided by the D2L team, really helped to get the ball rolling.”

MEASURING SATISFACTION

Since implementing the Brightspace platform, Algonquin College has seen positive results, primarily in the form of feedback from students. In a student satisfaction survey taken shortly after Brightspace went live, a large proportion of students mentioned they were highly satisfied and six months later, their satisfaction continues to increase!

“We’ve already had more than 4,000 students take part in our Brightspace training course, and over 1,500 have been served at our peer-to-peer Brightspace Ambassador help desk,” explains Devey. “It’s great that students are embracing the new resources, and our surveys show that satisfaction with the online experience has increased significantly.”

Keshana Kind, a Business Management and Entrepreneurship student at Algonquin College, supports Devey's sentiment: "I was very impressed with the easy navigation, clean interface, and simplified content features when I used Brightspace for the first time. Brightspace is allowing me to succeed in my courses by helping me keep track of deadlines, and stay on top of announcements."

Faculty at Algonquin College are also heavily invested in the performance of Brightspace. Angela Lyrette, faculty member in the Department for Finance, Office and Legal Studies, highlights the difference the solution has made to her teaching practices:

"What I like most about Brightspace is how easy it is to make everything learners need to succeed available in one click. The website layout keeps the content organized in concise links, making my communication with learners professional and accessible. Learners now have conversations with me about the content, not the due dates or where to find the material."

Angela Lyrette, Faculty Member of the Department for Finance, Office and Legal Studies, Algonquin College

ESTABLISHING BEST PRACTICES

Building on the feedback of the students and teachers, Algonquin College is working with D2L to continuously fine-tune the Brightspace platform and deliver the most effective system for students. The college has also continued to engage with D2L support teams to establish best practices for using the platform.

"We had the D2L Usability team come on site once or twice to deal directly with our faculty and showcase some opportunities for improvement," recalls Devey. "We also got in touch with the client success manager at D2L, and she pointed us towards some other schools using Brightspace so we could build up a network, and learn from each other."





For example, Algonquin College was inspired by another Canadian D2L client, Fanshawe College, to develop a student ambassador program — recruiting volunteer students to help onboard new learners at the beginning of each term.

“It’s proved to be a great method to get feedback about Brightspace, and we often take new students’ initial thoughts into consideration,” says Devey. “We also recently hosted our inaugural Brightspace Symposium which was well-attended by faculty, staff, and students. We had some very interesting presentations from partner institutions, as well as from D2L themselves—including sessions on usability, competency-based learning, and using gamification and other techniques to motivate learners.

Devey concludes: “We’re very excited about showing off our faculty to D2L and other schools, and we can’t wait to pick up new tips on optimizing our Brightspace platform. By boosting our effectiveness we’re confident that we can enhance the student experience even further.”