

# Ontario Tech University

Re-imagining Learning with Canvas LMS and Catalog



 Oshawa, Ontario  10,000+  Adopted Canvas: 2020

## SUMMARY

One of Ontario Tech University's strategic priorities is a re-imagined learning approach: adapting to the ever-changing educational landscape by providing flexible and dynamic educational opportunities that give more choices to more people. So when the innovative, 10,000-student university in Oshawa, Ontario found its legacy learning management system (LMS) hindered rather than helped the student learning experience, administrators sought another solution.

One thing was clear from campus feedback: the LMS had to be easy to use. Canvas fit the bill, and with the pandemic driving a shift to remote learning, the timing was ripe for a change. After migrating to Canvas LMS in 2020, Ontario Tech took it a step further and implemented Catalog to offer myriad learning opportunities. The university's switch to Canvas improved the student experience and expanded Ontario Tech's reach to non-traditional students, truly re-imagining learning in the way they hoped to.

## THE CHALLENGE

Blackboard was Ontario Tech University's LMS for 15 years. But as the university's Blackboard contract neared an end and the market offered more options, administrators sought a change.

"We had never asked, 'What do we need, and why do we need it?'" says Christine Cairns, a senior business analyst in the university's Teaching and Learning Centre. "We are a tech-based university. How are we leveraging our funding to get the right tools for our users?"

For the Information Technology (IT) Services team, the challenges with the current LMS were obvious: no access to the backend,



## Key Insights

01

**Ontario Tech prioritized ease of use and cloud-based storage when selecting its campus LMS. Canvas' simple, intuitive interface came out on top.**

02

**Canvas' robust training resources and tiers of support allowed for a smooth, successful mid-pandemic migration.**

03

**Ontario Tech expanded its reach and impact using Canvas Catalog to offer university preparatory courses, micro-credentials, skills-based training from industry partnerships, and, internally, training courses for human resources (HR), legal, diversity and inclusion, and accessibility.**

cumbersome extraction of data, frequent downtime for upgrades, and high costs for storage overage. But these challenges were invisible to the most important LMS users: students and faculty.

During the LMS selection process, Ontario Tech invited several vendors to campus to demonstrate their software. Students and faculty members tested the software and provided feedback that the university used to inform its decision.

"Like-for-like functionality is very similar with learning management systems," says Cairns. "There's no single tool out there that does everything for everybody. We took the top five priorities from faculty and top five from students and married those."

“The LMS selection process was a long road but definitely an exercise that had value because it gave us insight into where we needed to go as an institution and how technology could help us get there.”

—Christine Cairns,  
Senior Business Analyst, Ontario Tech University

The most pressing LMS need for students and faculty? Ease of use. Users described the previous LMS as clunky and difficult to use.

“It was an antiquated interface. Everything took six or seven clicks to make it happen, instead of one or two,” says Michael Guy, educational technology analyst at Ontario Tech.

Cairns says the team tackled the RFP process based on need rather than cost. “It tends to be the other way: you just buy what you can afford. But it was really important to us that the functionality of the tool met the needs of our faculty and students.”

#### THE SOLUTION

With ease of use being Ontario Tech’s top priority, Canvas and its simple interface stood out as a frontrunner from the beginning.

Cairns describes the legacy Blackboard LMS as the, “Cadillac of learning management systems.” It had endless features, but, “did a whole bunch of everything ‘ok.’” Ontario Tech sought a pared-down design with a core group of features that students and faculty needed to be simple and intuitive.

“The beauty of Canvas is that it is much cleaner. It is a nice, clean interface, and it’s easy to use,” says Guy.

From an administrative perspective, Cairns says Canvas’ cloud-based infrastructure addressed the storage constraints and added costs for overages that Ontario Tech faced with Blackboard.

“As the university grows, we didn’t want LMS storage limitations to be a hindrance,” says Cairns. “Putting things in the cloud was definitely where we needed to go. With all-new technology, the cloud is our focus.”

After several months of evaluating options, in June 2020 Ontario Tech selected Canvas as its campus LMS.

#### THE RESULTS

Mid-pandemic, Ontario Tech migrated 3,500 courses to Canvas. The forcing function of remote learning allowed faculty to immediately see the benefits of Canvas’ simple interface and quick load time.

“Nobody could have anticipated it, but switching to Canvas couldn’t have come at a better time for us,” says Cairns. “Student experience was better. They didn’t have to download all these files in order to participate in classes.”

Prior to the LMS migration, Ontario Tech trained faculty on streamlining courses to reduce load time. That adjustment, coupled with Canvas’ efficient cloud-based storage, gave users quick access to course materials.

Between Fall 2019 (with Blackboard LMS) and Fall 2020 (with Canvas), course size reduced 43 per cent. In the winter semester, the reduction was 55 per cent.

“The beauty of Catalog is we now have a single platform that’s going to provide alternative learning outside of our traditional undergraduate and graduate offerings.”

—Michael Guy,  
Educational Technology Analyst, Ontario Tech University

To pivot during the pandemic, administrators and IT staff relied heavily on Canvas training modules and documentation.

“We didn’t have time to create training from scratch,” says Ade Oyemade, manager of student systems. “I’ve deployed a lot of systems and applications and I was really wowed with the communication and training modules and all the documentation that Instructure came with. I was amazed.”

“The key to our success was because of Canvas’ success,” says Cairns, referring to the tiers of Canvas support Ontario Tech benefitted from during migration.

In addition to its LMS migration, Ontario Tech is finding success with Canvas Catalog — an all-in-one learning solution for continuing education and professional development — to expand its reach beyond traditional students.

Launched in early Spring 2021, Ontario Tech’s Canvas Catalog offers university preparatory courses for incoming students, micro-credentials for adult learners, skills-based training from industry partnerships, and, internally, training courses for HR, legal, diversity and inclusion, and accessibility.

“Catalog is very easy to use. It allows our business units a degree of autonomy to manage their own programs and offerings. It’s allowed us to ramp up these offerings very quickly,” says Guy.

Cairns says the switch to Canvas helped Ontario Tech adapt during a challenging year and expand future possibilities.