Building an amazing student experience in the cloud

A look at Norfolk State University's connected campus

NORFOLK STATE
UNIVERSITY

Norfolk State University (NSU) in Virginia serves 5,500 students through over 50 undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

NSU's Director of Enterprise Applications, Lana Ludanova, is laser focused on ensuring those students have a first-rate experience. So much so that she calls her department the "BASE" team, which stands for Building an Amazing Student Experience.

Ludanova and other university leaders believe that improving the student experience is critical to increasing enrollment numbers and solidifying their reputation for excellence. And they know that modernizing NSU's technology infrastructure will play a key role in their success.

"I want us to go from being system-oriented to services-oriented," says Ludanova. "We need to make things like billing and registration painless for students and free-up faculty and staff to support them in more strategic ways."

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> **LANA LUDANOVA,**
> Director of Enterprise Applications, NSU

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Becoming more service oriented includes migrating core applications and data to the cloud, which NSU began doing in 2017. Their student information system, Colleague by Ellucian, is now being hosted in the cloud, and they've begun using software-as-a-service (SaaS) applications like Ellucian CRM Recruit and Ellucian Mobile Platform. Their ultimate destination is an all-cloud, all SaaS campus—a truly connected campus.

Why cloud?

The primary drivers behind NSU's move to the cloud are cost reduction and the ability to provide all constituents with a modern, mobile experience.

Cost reduction

After calculating its current infrastructure and labor costs (see chart & worksheet), the university estimated that moving their ERP to cloud hosting would save $230,000 a year. Part of that amount comes from a reduction in hardware and facilities expenditures, while a significant portion comes from anticipated labor cost savings.

In the past few years, keeping up with time-intensive functions like server and database administration, upgrades, and user support had become untenable for NSU and—without the move to cloud hosting—would have required a number of new hires.

"I would have needed at least four more people just for system administration," says Ludanova. "Not to mention the time it takes to recruit and retain people with the right skills." By outsourcing these functions, NSU is getting stable, reliable support from world-class experts—all while lowering cost and risk.

Cloud hosting also frees NSU's IT team to focus on strategic priorities. Instead of managing servers, they can work with departments like recruiting and advising to figure out how technology can improve outcomes.

Providing a modern, mobile experience

Students today have different expectations when it comes to using technology to manage all areas of their lives, including higher education. They are used to a consumer-like experience where accomplishing tasks is easy and content is personalized.

This type of experience is best delivered through the cloud, where information and tools are far more portable, and there are less barriers to growth and innovation. Cloud delivery forms the backbone of today's connected campus.

One of the top priorities for NSU is providing key student services electronically and automating cumbersome processes that frustrate both students and staff.

"Instead of running around campus looking for different information in different places, students want a one-stop shop," says Ludanova. "They want registration and billing to be easy and painless." And that means a more open, integrated, mobile environment.

NSU also wants to ensure that faculty and staff are spending time helping students solve problems, not complete administrative tasks. They are adding mobile, self-service tools that empower students to manage financial aid, pay bills, register, and plan their degrees.

In addition to hosting their licensed applications in the cloud, the university is choosing cloud-native, subscription-based (SaaS) solutions wherever possible to improve flexibility and agility even further. This includes constituent relationship management (CRM) software with powerful cloud-based analytics that will play a key role in NSU's ability to raise its enrollment numbers.

Putting the student in Amazing Student Experience

As it pilots, implements, and refines technology to improve the student experience,

Key factors in cost analysis

Datacenter/Infrastructure	Labor
• Server hardware • Network hardware • Hardware/network maintenance • Power for servers • Power for HVAC/utilities • Facilities (including UPS, rack, maintenance) • Storage • Systems and data backup, offsite storage	• Application management • Database management • Operating system administration • Infrastructure/server administration • After hours support • Technology refresh

Data Center Infrastructure Worksheet

Item	Cost/Unit	Useful Life (Years)	Annualized Cost/Unit	Units	Annual Cost
Server hardware (Servers + Licensing for VMWare)	$_____ per server /	_____ =	$_____ x	_____ =	$_____
Network hardware (Including rack switching)	$_____ per server /	_____ =	$_____ x	_____ =	$_____
Hardware & network maintenance	$_____ per server /	_____ =	$_____ x	_____ =	$_____
Power for servers (@.14/ KWH per server)	$_____ per server /	_____ =	$_____ x	_____ =	$_____
Power for HVAC/utilities (2.5 x power cost for servers)	$_____ per server /	_____ =	$_____ x	_____ =	$_____
Facilities (including UPS, rack, maintenance)	$_____ per server /	_____ =	$_____ x	_____ =	$_____
Storage (SAN costs + maintenance)	$_____ per GBs /	_____ =	$_____ x	_____ =	$_____
Systems & data backup & offsite storage (100 MB per users per month)	$_____ per GBs /	_____ =	$_____ x	_____ =	$_____
Total					**$_____**

NSU is engaging the students themselves in defining success.

Student beta groups have been testing the new "MyNSU" mobile application and serving as ambassadors as it is rolled out to the larger campus community.

"A peer telling a peer how great it is to register online carries more weight than if a faculty or IT person says it," says Ludanova. "We've got a great basketball team at NSU, and if we can show these beta students how they don't have to miss a game standing in line for registration because they can do it on their phones, that's something they'll share with others."

As NSU continues to roll out new cloud applications and mobile tools, these beta students will play an invaluable role in shaping the experience for thousands of their peers.

The importance of communicating change

In addition to engaging students, NSU has been careful and proactive about communicating with other stakeholders as campus technology evolves.

"The biggest challenge is not just communicating, but communicating on time," says Ludanova. "Often people hear about things after it's too late, when their questions and concerns can no longer be addressed."

Working closely with their cloud-hosting vendor, NSU created a communications plan that outlined exactly what and how they would provide information to various stakeholders. Ludanova also created a group of leaders

> "Some students aren't able to log into a computer every day, but everybody has a smartphone these days. So, students should be able to view their NSU accounts, and find out which departments can help them with which issues, right from their phones at any time. I'm glad to see that with the new app."

ALEXANDRIA HOOD, NSU alumna who participated in MyNSU beta group

called the "Reinvent Student Experience Committee" that meets monthly to talk about changes in technology that affect the university community.

University leaders are fully supportive of NSU's move to the cloud. They know how integral technology is to growth and innovation and have supported Ludanova and her team every step of the way as they build a truly connected campus.

Ludanova says it helps that the university already had a strong partnership with Ellucian when they began considering cloud. She says: "There is a lot of trust there. It's a real partnership—one that I know will be there for a long time."

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