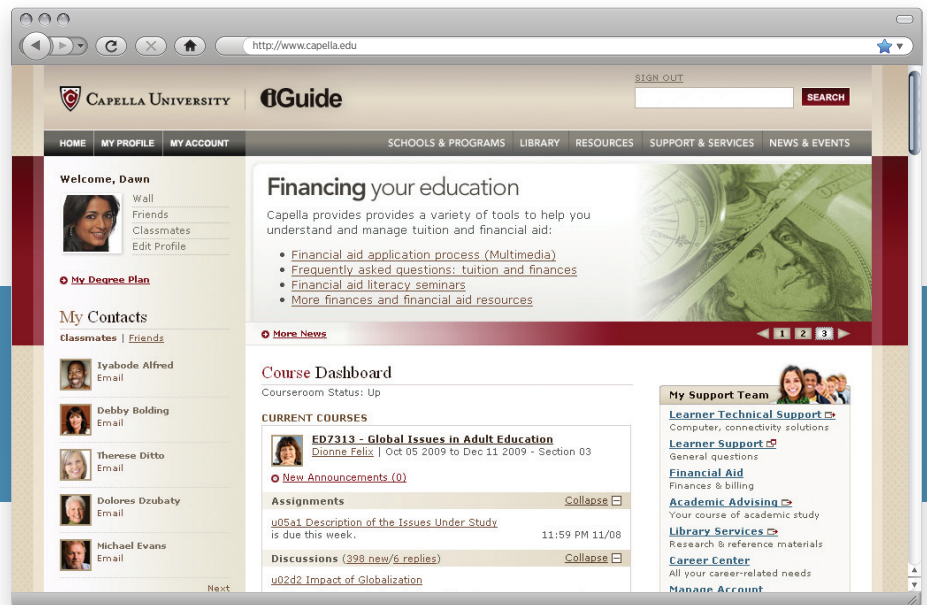


Capella University

www.capella.edu



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JASON SCHERSCHLIGT
Manager of Online User
Experience

ORGANIZATION

Capella University, a leading online university, aims to take online education to a higher level by providing high quality bachelor's, master's, doctoral, and certificate programs for adults who seek to maximize their personal and professional potential. It offers innovative programs that are responsive to the needs of adult learners and involve active, engaging, challenging, and relevant learning experiences offered in a variety of delivery modes. As a widely acknowledged leader in delivering high-quality education over the web, Capella was the first online university to be recognized by The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) for its work on student learning outcomes

CHALLENGE

As an institution that hosts all of its courses online, Capella University is heavily reliant on complex web-based systems that can help students and professors navigate university life. While much of this experience occurs within Capella's online course rooms, which are powered by the Blackboard learning management system (LMS), students also need access to resources like billing, course selection, and grades. Capella's portal, iGuide, also provides Capella's learners with essential support and academic content and tools for managing their academic career. When Capella implemented the PeopleSoft ERP system in 2007, it was able to deliver this portal functionality through PeopleSoft's built-in tools. While its ERP system is a valuable asset, Capella needed to enhance it with a portal and content management system (CMS) that allowed design flexibility and additional integrations.

It was determined that a new portal platform was needed to integrate all of Capella's technologies for a unified, personal, and intuitive user experience. Capella wanted the ability to create a state-of-the-art web experience instead of a generic portal look and feel. In other words, it was time for a richer user experience that would allow iGuide to become the virtual representation of the university that Capella had originally envisioned.

RESOLUTION

Capella decided to enhance the essential core business functionality of the PeopleSoft ERP with a feature-rich, personalized web experience. After drafting some new criteria, Capella engaged a technical consulting firm to perform an unbiased evaluation of various portal technologies. Issues like flexibility, architecture, interface and content, user base vitality, and use (in total, over 40 different high-level criteria) were taken into account.

Although Capella considered many portal products, it chose Liferay Portal for its plethora of out-of-the-box features and social networking capabilities. The community and networking tools would help learners build academic and professional networks, as well as their own professional identities. The ability to integrate existing systems was also a key deciding factor, as Liferay's adherence to open standards allowed it to be easily integrated with PeopleSoft ERP.

Liferay's open integration capabilities have provided Capella a service-oriented architecture (SOA) layer that helps them access data. The most innovative and popular use of this technology is Capella's course dashboard, personalized for every learner, which uses web services to display real-time academic activity from the Blackboard course room directly onto the home page of the Liferay portal.

They have also implemented group-functionality that allows administrators to create groups for the school. Some are topical, while others are based on programs and interest groups. In addition, Capella was able to leverage Liferay's dynamic drag-and-drop feature to create the Degree Completion Plan, an interactive online environment that allows academic advisors to customize each learner's course of study by dragging and dropping courses and other elements in a webpage; it gives students on-demand access to their academic progress. Interactive designers and content managers have also been working to create new expanded user profiles, which would give students and staff their own virtual identities.

Today, Capella delivers a full university experience via the web. Learners in every degree program in all five of Capella's schools are now using the Liferay-based version of iGuide, which equates to nearly 40,000 users plus faculty and staff. The new portal is helping users access resources more easily and supporting them in their academic growth. Capella has also seen over 100,000 friend-relationships develop among their users through the Liferay-based networking tools.

Students have voiced their preference of the new site—over 90 percent prefer the Liferay-based portal to the previous one. One student praised, "The brain trust responsible for coming up with this idea needs to be rewarded. Thanks for thinking of us! I just wish this was here when I was just starting out." Another lauded, "One word: Wow! I really enjoyed using this layout. It is much better than the older version in which everything was scattered about. Being new to online learning, I found this format to be much more user-friendly."

Looking ahead, Capella plans to implement additional features including faculty content and tools, more social media tools, built-in alerts and indicators, mobile versions of iGuide, enhanced tools and content for supporting learners, and enhanced partner pages (Capella's partners include large corporations for professional extension). As Capella continues to integrate and enhance web experiences for learners and faculty, Liferay will become even more integral to its systems. "Liferay was the right choice to meet our needs," said Jason Scherschligt, Manager of Online User Experience. "We needed a portal product that was reliable, scalable, very flexible, would deliver new features rapidly, and that included built-in CMS and social media tools. Liferay fit the bill with all of this."