DESTINY One
at Virginia Cooperative Extension

Balancing Decentralized Offerings and Centralized Administration at a Cooperative Extension

DS DESTINY SOLUTIONS

How Virginia Cooperative Extension is leveraging Destiny One to get the best of both worlds

Cooperative Extensions have a critical role to play in educating America's rural populations, and have designed a model of educational delivery over the past century to achieve that end. Unfortunately, the decentralization critical to that model creates some significant obstacles when it comes to effective institutional management in the 21st Century.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) is responsible for bringing the resources of Virginia's land-grant universities, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) and Virginia State University, to the people across their state. Reaching millions of Virginians annually across VCE's 107 field offices, 11 agricultural research and extension centers, and six 4-H educational centers—distributed in every county and city across the state of Virginia—the extension plays a key role in supporting the state's economic growth and health.

This localized approach creates a level of decentralization that has become common practice for Cooperative Extensions across the United States, and that decentralization does have some significant benefits for VCE. Unfortunately, the decentralization also creates some fundamental challenges when it comes to serving students—especially when it comes to creating transparency around offerings—and managing the institution.

To overcome these challenges and improve the clientele experience, while at the same time protecting the program decentralization that supports the extension's capacity to address constituent needs, VCE turned to Destiny One—the customer lifecycle management (CLM) software platform by Destiny Solutions. The implementation of Destiny One has allowed VCE to better serve Virginia's citizens while also saving a huge amount of time and effort for internal staff.

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The Benefits of VCE's Decentralization

Neal Vines, the Director of Information Technology for VCE at Virginia Tech, helped to lead the implementation of Destiny Solutions' CLM platform Destiny One at VCE. He said the decentralized model allows VCE to be incredibly responsive to local challenges and concerns.

"The decentralized model allows us to really tailor our educational programming to the

Contextualizing Cooperative Extensions at Land-Grant Universities

Cooperative Extension divisions run out of land grant universities have a number of unique elements that make them stand apart from non-traditional divisions elsewhere in their own universities and across the postsecondary landscape.

Land grant universities were established in 1862 to expand access to higher education and offer programs critical to the changing American economy during the industrial revolution. In addition to the classical topics taught by the academy, land grant universities offered programming in agriculture, military science, engineering and more. These institutions built on this mission in 1914 through the introduction of Cooperative Extensions, which sent agents into rural areas to bring the results of agricultural research to end users who would not otherwise be able to access the university's main campus.

Cooperative Extensions remain in existence today, and continue to serve that mission of bringing the expertise and knowledge of the academy to people across the state. Of course, as these local-focused agents evolved over the past century into field offices distributed across each university's respective state, silos began to rise amongst the field offices and between field offices and the main campus. Today, there are 54 Cooperative Extensions across the United States supporting 2900 field offices, which represent almost every county in the country.

local communities we're responsible for," said Vines. "If a particular county or city has a unique educational need or issue that they're dealing with, the decentralized nature of the organization allows us to respond relatively quickly to those issues or those needs without a whole lot of administrative overhead."

"The real value to decentralization is that it makes us a much more agile and a much more responsive organization than if we were very top-heavy and very centralized."

Fundamental Challenges of Managing a Decentralized Cooperative Extension

Inaccessible Program Offerings

Decentralization does come with some significant challenges. For starters, across VCE's hundreds of educational centers, the focus on local concerns was overshadowing the potentially broader demand for courses and programs.

"A lot of the marketing efforts for programs tended to focus on the locality in which those programs were offered and sometimes we lost sight of the fact that, even though we might be offering a program in our home county, there may be other people in an adjoining county that might like to take advantage of that," said Vines.

Inconsistent Program Management

Additionally, as the regional offices carved deeper and deeper spaces for themselves, their relative autonomy started influencing the management of each office and its offerings. As a result, there was little consistency in the way programs, and VCE itself, were being presented to the community.

"We often lacked a standardized set of business practices," said Vines. "We didn't have a standard format for offering, advertising or pricing a program."

Sub-Optimal Client Experience

The roadblocks created by these inconsistencies did not simply impact the back-end staff. VCE's clients were negatively impacted as well.

"If I'm someone who has an interest in food safety, for example, it may not be easy for me to find where some of these programs are being offered," said Vines. "Our program advertisements were appearing on individual websites that the individual offices maintain. As a result, if I were looking for a food safety program to enroll in and didn't find one in my county, I would have had to visit a different website or a different location to see if the county next door is offering something of interest."

This lack of transparency created challenges around how effectively VCE was executing on its mission.

"We're trying to reach the maximum number of people with programs that provide solutions to local problems," said Vines. "If we're not successful in doing that, or if there are significant segments of the population that are either unaware of our programs or unable to subscribe to our programs, then we're not successful as an educational organization."

> " After bringing in several different vendors, we agreed that Destiny Solutions brought us the best mix of functionality, expandability and affordability of any of the products that we looked at. "

"Not being able to reach out to those audiences or to create an easy-to-navigate mechanism for them to get to our programs is a problem for us."

VCE knew they wanted to keep the decentralized and localized focus of the regional offices intact, but at the same time they wanted to create an infrastructure that made the VCE system easier to manage and provided clients with more access than they had in the previous model.

The Benefits of Partnering to Centralize Administrative Functions

Greater Transparency Around Offerings

VCE wanted to create an environment that was, effectively, the best of both worlds, where field offices would be able to create and offer programming that responded to local needs, but where those offerings would be accessible by a wider population.

"What we're trying to do is to essentially expand our market base so that we can reach more people," Vines said. "First we need more people to be aware of our programs and services. Then we'll be better able to encourage them to participate in our offerings."

Improved eCommerce Capabilities

In addition to creating easy ways for potential clients to find relevant offerings, VCE wanted to make registration and payment for programs as easy as possible.

"Traditionally, students had to go to a physical office, or mail in a filled-out registration form, and pay with cash or a cheque," said Vines. "We've never really had a good mechanism for people to be able to register for a program online and pay for it with their credit card."

Best-in-Class Technology Solutions

Rather than trying to build a software solution in-house, VCE's leadership team decided to see whether an outside company could provide the answer.

"There are certain kinds of applications that just don't make sense for us to develop on our own. We want commercially written, commercially supported and hosted applications," said Vines. "The other thing that we wanted in a system, and where we felt that Destiny Solutions best met our needs, was the ability to grow with us."

How Destiny One Balanced Decentralized Programming with Centralized Administration

VCE turned to Destiny One, Destiny Solutions' customer lifecycle management platform, to help balance the benefits of decentralized programming with the advantages of centralized administration.

"After bringing in several different vendors, we agreed that Destiny Solutions brought us the best mix of functionality, expandability and affordability of any of the products that we looked at," said Vines. "Going with a product like Destiny One gives us maximum flexibility and functionality, allowing our field offices to advertise their programs without having to fundamentally change the ways that they've been offering their programs."

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1 Flexibility in Program Offerings

By implementing Destiny One, VCE staff and faculty are able to get new offerings launched more quickly and easily than ever before.

For example, the automated workflows around curriculum creation take care of the repetitive aspects of building a new offering. Additionally, the approvals workflow ensures nothing falls through the cracks and that the right people are alerted at the right time when their input is required.

What's more, because Destiny One's approval process isn't tied to specific dates, VCE is able to get its new offerings to market at any time. This is particularity important for Cooperative Extensions, as these divisions do not serve traditional semester-based students, but instead serve a broad array of individuals across their local communities looking for just-in-time learning opportunities.

Finally, since numerous audiences often want access to similar course material, Destiny One makes it easy for VCE staff to repackage existing offerings to fit the needs of a wider array of potential clients. Rather than rebuilding each offering from scratch, VCE staff can simply replicate existing offerings and adjust aspects like cost, delivery modality, provisioning and prerequisites to ensure no demographic is left unserved.

2 Improved Marketing and Program Accessibility

Making offerings more visible to wider audiences was a major priority for VCE, and Destiny One simplifies this work enormously.

Once staff across VCE's many offices create offerings and get them to market quickly, they can publish those offerings not just on the specific center's website, but also on VCE's central site—allowing potential clients across the state to find courses and programs that might be of interest. The process of getting those courses published online and in print is automated and information is search-engine optimized, making offerings easier to find than ever before.

Additionally, a consistent look and feel shared by all VCE websites—one that conforms to the institutional color scheme and includes logos and other branding elements—helps reduce the confusion clients once experienced when visiting different field office sites.

Further, by taking advantage of the incredibly rich intelligence-gathering capacity of Destiny One, VCE staff have more insights into their clients than ever before. Going beyond simple line items like age and place of residence, Destiny One collects information like learner preferences, goals, interests, employer, prior registrations and more. This deep client intelligence can help inform programming decisions and can also allow VCE staff to engage in targeted communications when relevant offerings are launched—ensuring programs get in front of the people who would be most interested in registering.

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This accessibility, consistency and intelligence all work in harmony to improve the client experience while also driving registrations.

3 Secure Online Payments

Finally, Destiny One makes the process of registering and paying—which was once a manual and time-consuming process rife with potential pitfalls—easier and safer for both clients and VCE staff.

To start, the actual process of registering is simplified for everyone. Rather than having to come into the field office or filling out and faxing in a form, clients can perform all their necessary functions from the VCE website. Students simply add the offerings and products they want to their online shopping cart and, when they're done, they can go through a payment process reminiscent of online retailing giants like Amazon. Additionally, if a student fills their shopping cart but doesn't pay—perhaps their browser crashed or they decided to come back to it later—the system saves their shopping cart and automatically follows up with them to encourage them to finish their registration process.

Destiny One's world-class security protocols—including PCI PA-DSS v3.2 certification—ensure data remains safe and secure. This means rather than relying on cheques and cash, students can pay online using their credit card, which is an easier process for everyone involved with less chance of things being lost or misplaced.

Moving Cooperative Extensions into the Future

Cooperative Extensions—a critical part of the DNA of every land grant university across the United States—have an increasingly important role to play as technology continues to change every industry. Education has never been more important and Cooperative Extensions are central to ongoing education efforts in their respective states, bringing the research expertise of their universities to the distributed populations who rely on that information to maintain their livelihoods.

The decentralized and responsive culture of Cooperative Extensions isn't going anywhere. Their positioning on the ground is what makes the field offices able to create and deliver programming that actually addresses the needs of local populations. However, that decentralization does not need to come at the expense of the client experience.

By leveraging Destiny One—the customer lifecycle management platform by Destiny Solutions—Cooperative Extensions have the capacity to maintain that decentralized approach to programming while also delivering a seamless customer experience, a secure online payment process and greater collaboration across the system.

About Destiny One

Destiny One is customer lifecycle management software for higher education administrators serving non-traditional students. It integrates with main-campus systems, engages students with an Amazon-like experience, optimizes staff efficiency, and provides business intelligence, empowering data-driven decisions. Destiny One lets schools unite, understand and control all aspects of their business at once.

Destiny One manages the entire learner lifecycle:

Curriculum
Plans and manages courses, certificates and programs

Marketing
Targets marketing campaigns and defines consistent branding

Finance
Governs accounting transactions and manages financial information

Enrollment
Increases registrations by engaging learners and automating the enrollment process

Reporting
Leverages dashboards and reports to make business-intelligent decisions

System Administration
Configures workflows, staff roles and permissions, and business rules and fees

Want to learn more?

Contact us at info@destinysolutions.com

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