

CASE STUDY

Northwood University Overcomes the Challenges of COVID 19 and a Massive Flood with Support from BlueJeans

Like many other college students across the United States, Northwood University students were in for a surprise when they went on spring break in early March 2020. By the end of their holiday, they found themselves unable to go back to their campus in Midland, Michigan. They couldn't even retrieve their belongings from their dorms.

Northwood had to shut down and switch to online classes to help slow the spread of COVID-19 and protect its students and staff. This left many students feeling physically isolated. Recognizing that this abrupt change wouldn't be easy for many students, Northwood quickly found ways to give them a sense of connection through an engaging and accommodating remote learning setup.

"Providing support during that time was a struggle," says Dr Jeanna Cronk, Co-Director of Northwood University's Center for Excellence. "So, if there was anything we could do to give them that connection, we tried."

Enabling a Smooth Shift Online

Northwood was already using the BlueJeans video conferencing platform for administrative purposes such as town hall meetings and for faculty training and webinars, as well as to connect employees across different locations. Besides its Michigan campus, the university has international program centers in several parts of the world including China and Switzerland, and education centers for its adult degree programs across the United States.



Industry: Higher Education

Challenges: When COVID-19 forced educational institutions to shut down, Northwood University needed to quickly switch to online classes while supporting and engaging students in new ways.

Solutions: The university relied on BlueJeans Meetings to deliver online classes and activities and to enable faculty members to connect with students and each other. It turned to BlueJeans Events for large gatherings.

Results: Northwood University was able to quickly move all its in-person classes online.

For the fall 2020 semester, it allowed students to choose their method of learning.

Students felt a sense of connection while studying remotely.

In 2020, the university held 40,292 meetings. In March alone, it recorded more than 3,000 meetings, an increase of 541% on the previous month.

“Integrating a real-time online (RTO) BlueJeans Meetings option into our fall in-person courses enabled our students to make a personal choice based on their comfort level, medical history, and family needs.”

– DR JEANNA CRONK, CO-DIRECTOR OF NORTHWOOD UNIVERSITY’S CENTER FOR EXCELLENCE

Once lecturers realized the possibilities of using BlueJeans, they started taking advantage of it as well, offering virtual office hours and meeting with students online. For larger events such as its annual Freedom Week, Northwood turned to BlueJeans Events to broadcast presentations and reach more students and members of the public.

This experience with BlueJeans — and knowing how reliable it is — helped Northwood to quickly move all in-person classes that spring semester to online formats. But instead of the usual real-time online (RTO) sessions, it offered asynchronous learning methods and optional BlueJeans meetings for students.

“When we switched to online classes, the university made the decision to not require live sessions for our students because we didn’t know what they were going home to,” says Cronk. “We had no idea what kind of internet connection they would have and the devices they’d be connecting from. So, we wanted to make our remote learning arrangement as accommodating as possible.”

Under the setup, lecturers would get students to watch short videos, answer quizzes, and respond to topics on a discussion board. Over time, they became more creative with their teaching formats and would make their own videos. Lecturers also offered live office hours on BlueJeans so students could connect with them.

“And if there was more than one student who joined at the same time, they felt like they were still part of a class and could talk to each other,” says Cronk. “It gave the students a kind of reassurance that they weren’t left alone, that they still had a support structure or connection with the university.” Northwood’s number of BlueJeans meetings shot up to 3,000 in March 2020, up 541% from the previous month. Altogether, it held 40,292 meetings in 2020.

Giving Students the Freedom to Choose

As uncertainty due to COVID-19 continued, the university planned for a very different fall semester: students could choose how they would attend their courses.

“If a student registered for an in-person class, they were given the option, on a day-by-day basis, to choose to attend in the classroom or via RTO through BlueJeans Meetings,” says Cronk.

For this setup, Northwood gave each lecturer a wireless headset and equipped most classrooms with 360-degree meeting space cameras, making sure in-person and RTO students could engage with each other. Faculty members then used BlueJeans to share videos, whiteboards, and online games — and hold breakout sessions and team presentations.

The platform also helped lecturers facilitate exams. For example, math lecturers would use breakout sessions to proctor tests. Students taking an exam would each be in a breakout session and share their screen, ensuring the process was smooth and transparent.

Ensuring Continuity in Learning

Giving students the option to attend classes through RTO sessions was critical to helping Northwood move forward during the pandemic, according to Cronk.

“Integrating an RTO BlueJeans Meetings option into our fall in-person courses enabled our students to make a personal choice based on their comfort level, medical history, and family needs,” she says. In fact, the RTO format was the only reason some students were able to continue their education during that semester.

“As an instructor, I had a student who was helping run her family’s grocery store in the Metro Detroit area,” shares Cronk. “It was one of the businesses that was critical to stay open, and they didn’t have the employees to come and help. Through RTO, she was able to stay home, keep their business running, and join all her classes.”

Importantly, students felt a sense of support and connection after being cut off from their usual activities and interactions. “BlueJeans provided us a great option to enable many of our students to continue with their studies,” says Cronk. With the success of its RTO setup, Northwood is planning to keep it as an option for students going forward.

Responding to a Massive Flood

COVID-19 wasn’t the only disruption Northwood had to deal with in 2020. In May, Midland experienced an historic flood that severely damaged some of the university’s buildings.

Unable to go to the campus during the flood, employees met multiple times via BlueJeans to discuss how to respond. This gave the university’s core crisis team the agility to adapt and quickly respond as the situation changed when nearby dams were breached.

“It was an encouraging situation where the faculty, the staff, the students, and the alumni especially were all working together. We had this huge all-hands-on-deck kind of experience this summer, where people were coming to our campus and helping clean up the mud and debris,” says Cronk. “There’s a huge sense of community on our campus right now, which is great.”

ABOUT NORTHWOOD UNIVERSITY

Northwood University is a private, non-profit educational institution based in Midland, Michigan. Founded in 1959, it has an undergraduate enrollment of around 1,200 students and offers adult degree programs in multiple states and online. The university specializes in managerial and entrepreneurial education — and has international program centers and partners around the world.