



CUSTOMER SUCCESS STORY

Shared Intelligence: The Virginia Consortium of Engineering and Science Universities

The single fastest growing segment of the videoconferencing market is undoubtedly distance learning. IP-based videoconferencing has effectively demolished all geographical barriers in global education. From virtual classrooms in Rwanda to guest lectures beamed all over the world, distance learning via videoconference has become a powerful force in education. The ability to share information in real time regardless of location will enable education of the masses in the coming times.

The Virginia Consortium of Engineering and Science Universities (VCES) has been a distance learning trailblazer since 1994, when it first installed videoconferencing technology. Old Dominion University, University of Virginia, Virginia Polytechnic and State University, and the College of William & Mary, established the consortium in 1993. Together, the four universities offer nationally and internationally recognized doctoral-level programs in engineering, materials science, atmospheric science, surface science, accelerator science, computer science and engineering, and non-destructive testing.

The consortium serves full and part time students. Courses are offered by all the participating schools, as well as out-of-state schools that participate in the National Institute of Aerospace. Those out-of-state schools include Georgia Tech, North Carolina A&T University, North Carolina State University, and The University of Maryland. VCES currently provides the distance learning infrastructure for the National Institute of Aerospace (NIA) in Hampton, VA.

The NIA shares 5 videoconferencing classrooms with VCES, where they offer 25 graduate courses via videoconference per semester. "We have many students who work nearby at NASA who don't have the time or resources to leave work to study at the home campuses. Our facility provides a means for them to continue their education and earn a graduate degree." said Dr. Elizabeth Ward, Director of VCES. In addition, VCES offers students a variety of courses from multiple institutions. This kind of intellectual exposure could not be possible without videoconferencing.

VCES is a "two-way" videoconference facility, meaning courses are broadcast both from the home institutions and from the VCES center in Hampton, Virginia. Instructors from each of the participating schools transmit to and from VCES classrooms via IP connections. The NIA has also instituted "team teaching," in which an instructor from the Hampton location can teach a course together with a faculty member from a home campus. Both instructors and students benefit from this type of collaboration.

VCES currently employs two Vega Star Silver units from Aethra, one a split system and one a set-top system. "We like Aethra for its ease of use, its quality, and it's affordability," said Ward. "We have other brands of video teleconferencing units in some of our classrooms, especially on the home campuses. The Vega Star Aethra units work flawlessly in conjunction with the other brands." The Vega Star systems are so easy to use, all they really require is to be plugged in and minimally programmed with the appropriate IP information.

Cameron Grainger, of Communications Specialists of Virginia Inc. had his own reasons for choosing Aethra. As the salesperson for the Aethra product in the VCES area, Grainger needed a system that could be at VCES and ready to use within two days. When Grainger contacted his distributor, VSIG, they assured him they would do everything in their power to make it happen. Two days later the system was delivered to VCES. “Both purchases were done on a short time frame, and Aethra was the only company that could be on site within two days, up and operational,” said Grainger. The Aethra systems require no technical support; they are as easy to set up as a personal computer.

In addition to using videoconferencing for distance learning, VCES and the NIA also use videoconferencing technology for faculty meetings, and business meetings. Since the “faculty” is spread throughout the region, across several states, in-person meetings are impractical due to long drive times or the need to use air transportation. “For instance,” said VCES Director Dr. Elizabeth Ward, “Virginia Tech is about a five hour drive from our facility. By using videoconferencing, we save travel time and travel dollars.”

VCES serves as a prime example of the practical application of videoconferencing technology in distance learning. Rapid technology advancements in videoconferencing are opening educational doors we never thought possible.

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