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Dr. Praneeth Machettira, Online Technical Director, Suffolk University Business School

Business Profile

Company Name:
Suffolk University

Headquarters:
Boston, Massachusetts

Industry:
Higher Education

Founded:
1906

Business Environment:

- Highly respected law and graduate school based in Boston.
- Hosts an extensive catalog of online learning and MBA programs.
- Maintains brick and mortar locations worldwide.
- It's online presence warrants 24x7 server availability.

Vision Solutions Product:
Double-Take® Availability™

Implementation Partner:
Vision Solutions

Critical issue

Prior to offering courses and degrees online, Suffolk did not need DR capabilities beyond those which were offered by tape backup. With thousands of students using their new, online courses, availability became essential. A server failure would potentially force a shut-down of their entire online operation.

Results

- Implemented Double-Take Availability on all mission critical servers in just two weeks.
- Fully supports both physical and virtual server environments.
- If a primary server goes down in Boston, they are able to minimize the disruption to seconds.
- Server failures are transparent to the students and faculty who use our online platform.
- Manages backup and continuity operations for the entire enterprise from a centralized management console.

Technologies

- Double-Take Availability
- Microsoft Windows
- Blackboard
- VMware ESX Server

Business Challenge

Suffolk University is a comprehensive private university located on Boston's historic Beacon Hill. This global university offers a wide range of undergraduate and graduate degrees in over 70 areas of study, including one of the best accredited online graduate business programs, the Suffolk MBA Online program.

The online MBA program is designed to embrace evolving business practices, including the remote learning model where faculty and students from all around the globe are able to bring a unique perspective to the virtual classroom.

Additionally, Suffolk relies heavily on Blackboard, an online educational platform that enables universities to offer online courses and degree programs. Blackboard also enables students and teachers to communicate and exchange materials effectively online. Online learning is a very important, global business venture for Suffolk. For this program to work smoothly students must have consistent access to course lectures, homework assignments, reading materials, chat capabilities and grades; otherwise the learning process breaks down.

To offer a successful, global campus via the Internet, Suffolk University Business School had the following challenges to face: 24/7 access to critical data and online learning applications, a customized IT environment, and a small IT staff and budget. Many other types of organizations face these challenges as well, but Suffolk's high standards of excellence demanded the strongest solution available.



Prior to establishing their online learning presence, Suffolk did not have the need for data protection beyond the tape backup they had in place. With thousands of students using their new, online services model each day, however, data protection and application availability became essential. In the event of a system failure that prohibited access to online data and services, Suffolk would not be able to provide their online offerings to any of their students from around the globe. This would constitute a shut-down of operations for the online courses.

“For us, protecting Blackboard is like a financial institution doing the same with their data from transactions that occur online. In offering degrees online, we needed reliability and redundancy to make sure that students and faculty have access to their courses, day and night. If a server goes down, our small IT staff does not have the luxury to spend days bringing it back up,” said Dr. Praneeth Machettira, Online Technical Director for Suffolk University Business School.

Suffolk needed a solution that offered the following:

- Continuous, flexible data protection
- Affordability
- Ease of use for their small IT staff

First and foremost, Suffolk was looking for a data protection solution that supported Blackboard. In addition, this solution would need to support VMware ESX servers. Developed by VMware, server virtualization allows one physical platform to run multiple virtual machines simultaneously. These virtual servers were ideal for Suffolk’s IT environment as they provided significant space and cost savings, while maximizing their existing server investment. Leveraging virtual machines on top of their physical servers enabled Suffolk to consolidate their infrastructure and make the most of their hardware investment. If the memory is adequate, a standard server can host up to 10 virtual servers.

Solution

Initially, Suffolk considered Computer Associates’ BrightStor and XOssoft’s WANSync offerings. Neither of these solutions, however, addressed all their specific challenges. BrightStor neither offered the flexibility for making the key Blackboard application available to users, nor the reputation as a complete solution. XOssoft, while touting experience with common applications, did not have the feature-set, easy configuration options, or reputation for reliability as Vision Solutions’ Double-Take® Availability offering. Beyond the technical aspects, it was Vision Solutions’ vast presence in the education sector, the VMware and Double-Take Availability collaborative solution and their successful history that made it an easy choice.

Suffolk tested Double-Take Availability and found what they needed. While being hardware agnostic and providing flexible continuous data protection and application availability, Double-Take Availability enabled complete protection for the Blackboard and other applications, within a VMware ESX infrastructure. With Double-Take Availability in place, Suffolk could minimize the effects of any disruption to the online learning infrastructure, enabling students and faculty to continue working in the event of a system failure or site disaster.

In only two weeks, Suffolk’s small IT staff implemented Double-Take Availability across SQL servers, the Blackboard application platform and four virtual machines – for a cost that was well within their budget. And, requiring very little manual intervention, Double-Take Availability was functioning flawlessly on its own, continuously replicating and protecting data from their entire, global campus. The ROI of the solution is reflected not only in the ensured up time of the online learning system, but also in ensuring that Suffolk’s online reputation is held in as high esteem as the Boston institution itself.





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Considering this success, Suffolk is looking to grow their data protection into a full-fledged disaster recovery program stretching across more areas of the school and more of their 20 servers. The next phase will include establishing a disaster recovery center—placing servers outside of the organization in an alternate remote location. As there is an initiative within their organization to use even more virtual machines, these secondary servers will be a combination of conventional and virtual platforms.



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◆ High Availability ◆ Disaster Recovery ◆ Systems and Data Management ◆