Following in the footsteps of its sister colleges in the Associated Colleges of the South, BSC standardizes on Lifesize video technology to extend enriching educational opportunities to students.

**ORGANIZATION**

**Birmingham-Southern College (BSC), Birmingham, Alabama, USA**

Birmingham-Southern College, also known as BSC, is a four-year, private liberal arts institution founded in 1856. Sitting approximately three miles from downtown Birmingham on 192 acres, BSC educates about 1,300 students from all over the world, including 33 states and 19 countries. Boasting small class sizes (average of 16 students) with a low student to faculty ratio of 13:1, BSC provides students with a focused, attentive classroom setting and encourages each student to pursue their dreams in a supportive educational environment.

BSC offers more than 50 courses of study, with a focus on hands-on experiences and pre-professional preparation. One cornerstone of the BSC curriculum is its January Exploration Term, which encourages students to travel to another country or to complete a research paper or independent creative project. Many students use this time to take internships at prestigious for-profit and not-for-profit organizations, while others travel the country or around the world to gain insightful, hands-on learning experiences under the guidance of faculty members.

Students from across the globe travel to Birmingham-Southern College to explore their passions, gain hands-on experience as they learn, and excel upon graduation.
Challenge

BSC is member of the Associated Colleges of the South, a consortium of sixteen liberal arts colleges and universities, all of whom are in close communication with one another about how to expand educational opportunities for their collective student populations. One aspect of this collaboration involves educational technology and the opportunities therein.

In late 2012, BSC’s provost received an email from an ACS colleague inquiring about the school’s use of video collaboration technology in the classroom. At the time, BSC had not invested in video technology and had no immediate plans to do so. But this communication sparked a new idea and a new course of action. In order to stay competitive, the school would have to consider this technology and brainstorm ways it could be used in the classroom—and it would have to do so immediately.

“The college needed a classroom that could connect to our ACS partners, as well as resources across the globe. We wanted to build a new kind of teaching environment, one that would use cutting-edge technology to give our faculty and students a broader learning experience,” said Jesse McKneely, assistant vice president for information technology at BSC. “In order to best implement this type of learning environment, we needed a video collaboration technology that would provide the most interactive, engaging experiences possible.”

McKneely and BSC project manager, Megan O’Leary were charged with bringing video collaboration to the campus, and after months of discussion and planning, the two were ready to move forward and begin evaluating various video vendors.
Solution

Knowing that higher education is rapidly moving towards the “connected classroom” model, McKneely and O’Leary began inviting video conferencing vendors to campus for demonstrations. It quickly became apparent that the evaluation process was basically a “three man race between Cisco, Polycom and Lifesize,” said McKneely. “We spoke to other schools in our consortium, and we read articles in magazines and on the Internet. We knew we had to do our research.”

Because of the school’s strict budget and rigid timeline, the Polycom and Cisco solutions were out of the running almost immediately. The amount of investment and time required for deployment were deal breakers, the team explained.

“On top of everything, it really seemed like Polycom and Cisco both make their money off of support on the back end. We wanted to buy an endpoint that performed so well that we wanted to invest in more. We didn’t want to have to spend all of our money building a network to support the video systems and dealing with constant up-selling,” said McKneely. “Simply put, we wanted to invest in technology that could work in any environment without having to redesign our entire network. Lifesize suited those needs perfectly.”

Ultimately, the final decision to purchase Lifesize was not based on information that the team had read in magazines or online; it was the product demonstration that solidified their choice.

“When Lifesize came in for the product demo, they were able to get everything up and running in less than five minutes. It was absolutely astounding; we were shocked that it was that easy to install. It just worked,” said McKneely. “At that moment, we knew we didn’t need to see any other vendors. We knew, without a doubt, that Lifesize was the right choice for our college.”

On top of the IT benefits that Lifesize afforded BSC, the team knew that the system’s ease of use would benefit faculty members and students, as well.

“The IT department should not have to intervene every time a professor wants to make a video call,” said O’Leary. “Lifesize was simple enough to use that it doesn’t require any substantial user training or support. The UI is intuitive, so anyone can make a call with ease.”
“Having video technology in the classroom is a big deal for our small liberal arts college. We now have the ability to take our classes on trips around the world and offer experiences that they would have never been able to take part in otherwise.”

Results

Since Lifesize has been deployed on campus, its popularity has soared. The school has already hosted a number of virtual events via video technology, including inviting a remote environmental expert to speak to one of its science classes and linking classrooms across the ACS consortium. In the future, the school plans to extend the technology to even more disciplines and experiment with new learning techniques such as “flipping the classroom” and incorporating streaming and recording.

McKneely and O’Leary have taken their video conferencing investment one step further and integrated it with a Mondopad by InFocus that supports data sharing from a Windows 7 computer. In this configuration, students can see the professor and his or her presentation, even if they are hundreds of miles away in another lecture hall.

“With our set-up, it’s not like there’s a ghost talking behind a PowerPoint presentation. Remote participants can see both sides of the lesson: the speaker and the computer. It’s a much more lifelike scenario than the alternative,” said O’Leary.

The BSC IT team is convinced their new that video technology will fit perfectly with the college’s Exploration Term and other off-campus learning. “As students travel around the world, they can use Lifesize UVC ClearSea on their laptops or mobile devices and call into their class in real-time to share experiences. Why read a research report about someone’s travels when you can see it in crystal-clear HD?” said McKneely.

Though the program is in its infancy, BSC has already recognized the significant impact it is having on the college and the strong potential for the future. After their initial success, plans are being drawn up for building an additional four Blended Learning Classrooms across campus.

“Having video technology in the classroom is a big deal for our small liberal arts college,” said McKneely. “We now have the ability to take our classes on trips around the world and offer experiences that they would have never been able to take part in otherwise. We’ve never seen a set up like ours done in another institution, so we truly believe we are pioneers in this space. It’s a really exciting time for BSC and we’re looking forward to growing with Lifesize in the coming years.”

Learn More

Make sure to check out our other case studies at www.lifesize.com/en/case-studies to learn more about how Lifesize is transforming business communication.