

University of West Alabama

Changing the Way Testing is Done

Innovation in higher education is nothing new to the University of West Alabama (UWA). Since its founding 175 years ago, the Livingston, Alabama, institution has been a leader, first in women's education, then as a highly-regarded teacher's college. Today, UWA is an academically diverse institution with an enrollment of over 5,000 students pursuing more than 60 undergraduate and 10 graduate programs through its seven colleges and divisions.



Recognizing the need for more flexible alternatives in higher education, UWA established an online learning division in 2002. It now serves nearly 3,000 students, not only in Alabama, but across the nation and around the world. The program has been so successful that in 2009, UWA's online enrollment exceeded its on-campus population for the first time.

THE BUSINESS CHALLENGE

UWA has made online education an increasingly significant and vital component of its offerings, with two undergraduate degree programs, as well as 17 graduate programs, including 12 master's degrees. As enrollment in the online division grew, UWA administrators and faculty found it increasingly difficult to manage the process of proctoring those students who could not come to the university or a testing center to take tests.

"The students would send us the name of a potential proctor, and we would have to check the credentials of that person," said Dr. Wayne Bedford, Associate Dean of the School of Business. "There were a number of ways we could do it, but it was always a hassle to find a person, email them the test, and go through all of the things we'd need to go through."

Around the same time, the federal government was making changes to the Higher Education Act that would require accreditors to monitor the steps that colleges take to ensure that enrolled students are actually doing the work required for their classes.

CHOOSING AN INNOVATIVE SOLUTION

Securexam® Remote Proctor combines patented Securexam software with a small USB device that authenticates the identity of the test taker and monitors the exam environment via audio and video to ensure integrity. During testing, Securexam Browser locks down online quizzing and testing tools within each institution's Learning Management System (e.g., Blackboard, Angel, Moodle, WebCT), while Securexam Student locks down a stand-alone word processor and spreadsheet test engine.

Together, these actions prevent test takers from accessing any other websites or applications during testing. Audio and video of each user's test taking is captured to thwart cheating. With Securexam Remote

Proctor, institutions and students have a complete, convenient solution to ensure the integrity of distance learning tests. Based on Software Secure's presentation, UWA officials decided to investigate further.

"There was an expressed interest from the Deans' Council and the online program administration, so I set up a pilot study over the summer with five Remote Proctor units in our computer lab," said Dr. Bedford. He had 30 students install Remote Proctors on PCs, then log in, take a brief sample test, and explore the ability of the Remote Proctor's camera to capture sounds and movements.

Following the successful pilot, Dr. Bedford made the session videotapes available to faculty members to gauge their opinions and had students complete a questionnaire about their experiences. Dr. Bedford's primary concern was ease of use. "You don't want to have a technology out there that's difficult to use, from either the student's standpoint or the instructor's standpoint," he said. On that score, Securexam Remote Proctor passed the test.

With that vote of confidence, Dr. Bedford and his colleagues approached Michael Pratt, UWA's Director of Information Systems, about deploying the solution. Pratt evaluated Securexam Remote Proctor and was satisfied with the solution's technology, functionality, and security provisions. With that, the university made the formal commitment to invest in Securexam Remote Proctor for its online division.

"My main concern was what the support requirements were for my department," said Pratt, who heads a team of 14 IT staff members. "The university decided to mandate use of the Remote Proctor for all online courses starting in the spring of 2009, which meant our first deployment would involve about 2,300 students all coming onto the Remote Proctor at one time."

The university prepared for the deployment by communicating extensively with students via email and the online division website, although no detailed pre-training was provided. A support number was made available for students to call if they had any questions or problems.

"There were a small percentage of students who did have issues with the installation," said Michael Pratt. "However, it was average for an installation of this kind -- nothing out of the ordinary." Most of the issues resulted from students not following the proper installation sequence, and these were quickly resolved. UWA worked with a Software Secure partner to handle support issues, but all support is now provided by UWA's in-house IT staff.

THE RESULTS

Within weeks, over 1,500 UWA online students had purchased Remote Proctor, downloaded the software, installed and enrolled the devices, and taken an exam. By the end of the semester, they had taken nearly 7,000 tests with Securexam Remote Proctor. In the summer term, those numbers rose to nearly 2,500 students successfully taking more than 11,000 exams.

**"Virtually all of the students found Remote Proctor easy to install and easy to use."
A majority of faculty members agreed and stated that they thought Securexam Remote Proctor would discourage cheating.**

**Dr. Wayne Bedford
Associate Dean – School of Business
University of West Alabama**

Dr. Bedford and his faculty colleagues were pleased with the results. He noted, "It was easy to set up the test and get it deployed, and it was easy to go back and look at the videos that were recorded." "It makes us more effective," he continued. "We can make these truly online programs, rather than requiring students to come in for testing." Both Dr. Bedford and Michael Pratt believe the impact of Securexam Remote Proctor extends beyond its effectiveness as a testing tool.

"I like the product - it's a great idea. It's extremely convenient for the students and instructors. It's very easy to operate. We have some instructors who choose to use it every week. It's definitely being used and definitely working."

Michael Pratt
Director of Information Systems
University of West Alabama

"Distance learning is extremely important to UWA," said Pratt. "Our online program has been essential to increasing enrollment." Securexam Remote Proctor is key to that effort because it makes it easier for the university to serve students far from Alabama. "We have students all over the United States and in several foreign countries." said Pratt. "The majority of our students are from the South, but we are building a strong presence in other states such as Texas, Ohio, and Virginia."

Having Securexam Remote Proctor also serves as a marketing tool when companies are contemplating hiring UWA online graduates, according to Michael Pratt. "We can say for sure that we know this student did the work and did not cheat on exams, and that makes a UWA degree more valuable for our students and their future employers," he said.

For his part, Dr. Bedford has become an advocate for remote proctoring based on his experience with Securexam. "We've presented our Remote Proctor research at two or three different conferences," said Dr. Bedford. "There is a wide interest in this product."

ABOUT SOFTWARE SECURE

Software Secure is a pioneer and market leader in secure, computer-based testing solutions. With an unrivaled commitment to supporting its customers, Software Secure provides proven, patented solutions for traditional and distance learning environments, as well as professional certification organizations. Academic institutions, as well as organizations overseeing mid and high-stakes testing environments, rely on Software Secure's expertise for testing solutions that exceed regional and national accreditation standards as well as federal regulation requirements, and facilitate the responsible use of technology in education.



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