

Algoma University's Rapid and Successful Pivot to Online Learning in Record Time

Spring/Summer and Fall 2020

In Partnership with Contact North | Contact Nord

A SNAPSHOT

ALGOMA UNIVERSITY SPRING/SUMMER AND FALL 2020 SEMESTERS

Semester	Courses Moved Online	FTE Students	Registrations	Faculty Involved
Spring/Summer	54	300	1,754	77
Fall	192		5,364	103

Algoma University's faculty, with very little experience teaching outside the traditional classroom, successfully moved 54 Spring/Summer courses and 192 Fall courses from face-to-face to online over a 12-week period.

With support from Contact North | Contact Nord, the university succeeded not only in meeting students' needs in the short term, but also in laying the foundation for long-term success in online learning.

A. WHAT ALGOMA UNIVERSITY ACCOMPLISHED

Building on a strong commitment to engaged face-to-face teaching, a special commitment to Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, and creative engagement of students, Algoma University pivoted quickly to respond to the COVID-19 challenges in March 2020:

1. Transitioned from a predominantly face-to-face teaching model to a wholly online-delivery model with 246 courses online for Spring/Summer and Fall 2020 semesters.
2. Provided technical support through both Zoom and Moodle for 7,118 course registrants.
3. Moved from an internally hosted Moodle learning management system (LMS) to a cloud-hosted Moodle with no loss of service.
4. Provided professional development and training related to teaching, learning, assessment, student support, and the use of Moodle and Zoom to all faculty.
5. Strengthened its internal capacity to support online and flexible learning, and instructional design.
6. Intensified collaboration and co-operation across the university amongst leadership, faculty and support staff.
7. Raised the level of engagement with partners in the community.
8. Maintained its position and momentum as a responsive, innovative, small university that makes a difference for its students.

B. WHAT CONTACT NORTH | CONTACT NORD CONTRIBUTED

Building on its shared service offerings for colleges and universities in support of online learning, Contact North | Contact Nord:

1. Worked one-on-one with faculty — by phone and via Zoom — during both semesters to redesign on-campus courses for online delivery.
2. Provided pedagogical coaches who hosted multiple sessions throughout the design process.
3. Delivered more than 15 webinars to help faculty design online courses, consider new methods of assessment, deliver courses using Moodle and live platforms such as Adobe Connect and Zoom, and provide effective student supports.
4. Provided instructional design expertise to create new online courses in the Moodle LMS.
5. Provided a cloud-hosted version of Moodle for students to access their courses, with full technical support for both students and faculty.
6. Provided Adobe Connect and Zoom platforms for students to participate in live components of their classes, with full technical support.
7. Helped Algoma University experiment with new approaches to assessment, making more extensive use of quizzes in Moodle and case-based approaches to learning and assessment.
8. Coached Algoma University to build internal capacity to design and build online courses on its own.

C. HOW ALGOMA UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND FACULTY BENEFITED

Despite the many challenges inherent in the switch to 100% online delivery, Algoma University and Contact North | Contact Nord uncovered many ways students and faculty benefited from a renewed focus on quality teaching and learning:

1. Faculty found new ways to strengthen inclusion and ensure a level playing field for all students and to be flexible while respecting university policies.
2. As the semesters progressed, each course found its own “rhythm” and way of working that was effective.
3. Students found sharing online in the LMS easier and “safer” than sharing on Zoom or Adobe Connect.
4. Students engaging in active learning, especially in science, technology, mathematics and fine arts, benefited from “work-arounds,” including virtual labs, case studies, Zoom music rehearsals, and challenge-based learning.

5. When technology proved a challenge, peer-to-peer assistance was a major source of support.
6. Although some faculty members relied heavily on synchronous learning — making minimal use of the LMS to share materials and resources — others used the LMS extensively and saw the synchronous sessions as opportunities for student sharing, student presentations, and group work rather than an opportunity to present and “lecture”; this model, “the flipped classroom,” is one that has proven highly effective to student engagement and meaningful learning.
7. In a recent high-level descriptive comparison of student performance, indicated in the table below, between the past two spring semesters and the 2020 spring semester, it was noted that students did as well in the first full semester delivered online as under regular conditions in previous years. Noting this consistent student performance and success has highlighted for the AU community the importance of the partnership with Contact North | Contact North.

TERM	FAILURE RATE	CUMULATIVE AVERAGE
20SP	8.30%	76.40
19SP	10.40%	72.40
18SP	7.13%	74.64

8. Algoma University’s Student Success team implemented a comprehensive strategy that included assessment on each student’s mental health and wellness. Overwhelmingly, students reported an overall positive well-being and, during the mid-term checks, shared with the Student Success team the increased awareness to access additional support services.
9. Students are continuing their studies at Algoma University at higher rates than in previous years. About 64% of students enrolled in Spring 2020 courses were students continuing in their program. This is an increase from about 55% in Spring 2019. Students were evidently excited about the online platform, and the quality of online delivery that was offered, with the essential support of Contact North | Contact North.

QUOTES FROM ALGOMA UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE WITH CONTACT NORTH | CONTACT NORD:

“I am new to online teaching and was nervous about making sure my courses would be engaging to my students. The training provided by Contact North | Contact Nord over the spring and summer gave me skills and confidence and was instrumental to the success of my fall courses. In addition, the way my course page was set up helped organize my course effectively and made the transition seamless.”

– *Dr. Jennifer Foote, Associate Professor, School of Life Sciences and the Environment*

“Contact North | Contact Nord support has been extremely responsive, timely and clear in their approach to helping me deliver my courses on Moodle. “The training provided by Contact North | Contact Nord examines a holistic approach to online pedagogy that includes: philosophy, techniques/ approaches, classroom management, course organization, engaging students, examining various methodologies, and troubleshooting.”

– *Dr. Jody-Lynn Rebek, Assistant Professor, School of Business and Economics*

D. FIVE LESSONS FROM ALGOMA UNIVERSITY’S SUCCESSFUL PIVOT

1. Professional learning is an investment in the future.

Ongoing professional learning is the key investment that needs to be made for faculty to benefit from the work they’ve already put in. Webinars, one-on-one coaching, small-group work, and studying sample courses helped Algoma University faculty understand and explore just what they needed and wanted to do online.

Design templates, coaching on the use of the LMS, and direct support for moving their course outlines into the LMS (“we will do this for you”) helped. The creation of a master template for the LMS, which could be quickly adjusted to meet specific needs, also helped considerably, especially for large-scale conversions in the fall semester. All of these activities strengthened student engagement

The partnership between Contact North | Contact Nord and Algoma University will continue to positively impact the AU community for years to come, aligning with its strategic priority of developing e-learning programs and certificates. The training opportunities given to faculty members will be invaluable to future e-learning courses; Contact North | Contact Nord has foundationally assisted Algoma University in developing a valuable skill set for our faculty, staff and administrators that will help us to meet strategic priorities with experience and insight.

2. Management and professors can work together to solve problems and celebrate success.

The leadership team at Algoma University worked closely with faculty to problem solve. Financial incentives for their investment in professional learning were provided, work schedule adjustments made, and new supports for faculty provided. Issues of quality, academic freedom and workload were addressed, and specific personal circumstances taken into account in workload allocations. There were challenges and tensions, but the Algoma University community responded to these together. Leadership demonstrated its ability to pivot alongside faculty.

Management and faculty also celebrated some notable successes, taking examples of excellent work to the wider Algoma University community. For example, a course on COVID-19 was showcased, with instructors looking at each week of the course from a different “angle” — economics, psychology, biology and other disciplines — to better understand the pandemic’s effects. Another course on land use and Indigenous peoples was also widely seen as an example of success.

3. Assessment is not what it used to be.

Before the pandemic hit, many courses featured a mid-term and end-of-term examination as the basis for assessment. While technology for remote proctoring exists, Algoma University agreed this was an opportunity to rethink and re-examine how learning could be assessed in more authentic and meaningful ways.

Experimenting with traditional assessment helps. Peer assessment and project-based assessments work, allowing students to reflect and consider a response to a reading, case or challenging question rather than having a “one shot at an answer” type of assessment.

4. Students and staff members’ creative use of technology makes a difference.

Although many students made use of IT technical support services provided by Contact North | Contact Nord and Algoma University, others were able to solve some of their own technology challenges. For example, students in Fine Arts Drawing classes shared their work with each other and for assessment using smartphones and a Google drive file.

Even when a specific LMS and synchronous platform are recommended and installed, other resources and technologies can be quickly deployed for certain aspects of a course. In some courses, alternative technologies such as Google Classrooms were introduced for video streaming, and some students and staff made use of open educational resources (OER) to supplement course texts.

5. Subjects often taught solely in class (e.g. music, drawing) can be taught online.

Algoma University demonstrated its ability to innovate and change quickly. This produced some creative designs, imaginative approaches to teaching subjects often taught solely in class (e.g. music, drawing) and some project-based courses.

E. WHAT'S NEXT FOR ALGOMA UNIVERSITY

Algoma University successfully overcame most of the challenges it faced in rapidly moving all its courses online for Spring/Summer and Fall 2020 semesters.

Algoma has since strengthened its internal capacity and is developing a centre for teaching and learning so it is better able to respond to fast-changing demands for learning, whether for degree programs or short courses and skills development. Its capabilities are evolving, as faculty and students navigate a new reality.

Contact North | Contact Nord's direct pedagogical and instructional design supports end in December 2020, but it will continue to provide shared services for the Zoom, Adobe Connect and Moodle platforms, as it does for public colleges and universities in Ontario.

In the Winter 2021 semester, although aspects of some courses (lab work, library work, studio work) may be possible on campus on a restricted basis, online will have been the delivery mode for Algoma University courses for a full cycle of semesters.