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NEC

Leveled-Up Learning:

An Illinois University Updates its Educational Technology with NEC Projectors

Challenges:

• Replace and standardize classroom projectors with cost-efficient, low-maintenance laser models from new vendor

Solution:

• 57 NP-P451W & NP-P452W; 35 NP-P502WL & NP-P502WL-2; 1 NP-PA672W; 2 NP-PA550W; 2 NP-PA622U

Result:

• New displays for digital signage on campus and standardized classroom laser projectors that eliminate downtime and enhance learning.

From kindergarten classrooms to the highest halls of academia, it's unusual to find a school nowadays that lacks technology – yet administrators must remain conscious of fitting new product purchases into a budget.

So when an Illinois university began looking for a new vendor for its campus and classroom projector and display systems, the level of quality the IT services (ITS) department wanted seemed more wish list than checklist – but the university's AV integrator was ready with a solution.

The Challenge

Located across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) is a mid-sized university of about 14,000 students. The university has employed digital signage and projectors in classrooms to facilitate learning and engagement since the early 2000s, so ITS had a long-standing partnership with a particular projector vendor – but when that vendor stopped selling its projectors in the United States, ITS began searching for a new provider to replace all projectors.

"We didn't want a hodgepodge of different kinds of products from different vendors – we wanted consistency," said Mark Dorris, manager of ITS for the university.

The university turned to Schiller's, an AV integrator located in St. Louis that SIUE has trusted for decades. The company's Group Manager of the Technical Services Department, Matt Ursch – an SIUE alumnus – has sold AV equipment to the university since he started at Schiller's in 1987, and he helped design and engineer most of the campus-wide AV infrastructure.

"SIUE needed me to specify projectors for the bulk of its standard classrooms that would easily integrate with the existing room/screen parameters and the existing Crestron room control systems, as well as projectors for classrooms that have had no AV technology up to this point," Ursch said.

Dorris added that having projectors that would integrate with current classrooms was particularly important for them.

"Some of our older rooms had cabinets and piping in the way of where some projectors would have to go, so we needed a product that had different throw distances that worked for what we needed based on where we had to put it," he said. "I was hoping for something we could simply mount in the drop ceiling. We also wanted the ability to change out lenses."

SIUE looked into a few projector vendors and eventually chose two they wanted to field-test in classrooms.

The New Technology

In 2014, SIUE's ITS team tested two manufacturers side by side in classrooms for a semester before choosing the winner: NEC Display Solutions. The university was familiar with the company, having used NEC displays for its digital signage around campus for messaging, way-finding and campus safety.

"Once Schiller's was approved for our NEC dealership, we started moving the university in that direction because of the quality of the NEC product lineup," Ursch said. "I have been designing AV systems for the university for 22 years, and I will only recommend equipment that has the quality and longevity of the NEC product line."

Dorris added that a successful meeting with the NEC account rep at that time reaffirmed their selection from the procurement process.

"After the procurement process, [the rep] made me feel like he'd have our back on pricing, and especially support," he said. "Reliability is our main focus, because we don't want projectors cutting out mid-class, and we want to keep maintenance low."

The combination of reliability, warranty and price is what sealed the deal, Dorris said.

"NEC's projectors had the better warranty and were less expensive, and that made our decision," he added. "With our first batch of NEC projectors, we got a five-year warranty. Our previous vendor offered three years, which blew us away, so getting five was fantastic."

Another selling point was how easy the projectors would be to install.

"SIUE needed a projector with lens parameters that allowed them to replace the existing projectors into many existing drop ceiling classroom locations without the need to relocate the existing structural ceiling mounts, which is very time-consuming," Ursch said. "The ability to not to have to relocate the structural ceiling mounts would save hundreds of hours of labor costs."

SIUE originally used the NEC NP-P451W and NEC NP-P452 projectors (now discontinued) as their standard, which Dorris said they were pleased with. When it was time to replace them, however, the university decided on laser models, the NP502WL and NP502WL-2, to minimize downtime in the classrooms.

"We have about 150 classrooms that all use projectors, and we didn't want instructors to have to stop class and wait while we change a bulb," Dorris said. "The laser models are pretty much maintenance-free. There's no bulb to replace and no filter to clean; you basically turn it on and let it run till it dies, with nothing to worry about in between. But we also knew that moving to a laser projector meant once they go out, they're just done, so we had to have a great warranty, too, to make it cost-efficient."

Dorris added his team has been happy with NEC on the customer service side as well.

"In one instance, I said the NP-P502WL would have to support the power on function over HDBaseT for us to deploy them widely," he said. "Rather than [customer service] making some empty promise, within weeks, I had a firmware update that implemented the requested feature." After evaluating three P502WL units for a year, SIUE made it the new classroom standard.

The Results

NEC projectors are deployed across the university, in all sizes of learning spaces, including computer classrooms, labs, smart classrooms and active learning classrooms. Large auditorium classrooms also use projectors, Dorris said, "because of the size of image you get with a projector." Laser units are not yet in every classroom; they are being phased in over the next two to three years, he added. SIUE has 57 of the NEC NP-P451W and NEC NP-P452 projectors still in use, with 35 NP-P502WL & NP-P502WL-2 being phased in. A PA622u shows live HD video in SIUE's Nursing Simulation Lab for in-class students to observe.

Feedback on the new projectors from the university instructors has been positive, he added.

"I've gotten comments saying these are a lot brighter, sharper and more color accurate," Dorris said. "For example, our design faculty members show a lot of paintings for art history, and they said these are the most color-accurate units we've had so far."

Designing the system to make it simple to use is key, he added.

"We want to make it easy for the faculty, so they can just hit the 'on' button and it works, so we use a standardized touch-panel control system," Dorris said. "That way, there is no confusion from room to room or from projector to projector."

Dorris emphasized how pleased his team was with the overall reliability of the systems.

"The ITS department's No. 1 goal is to keep our classes running with no downtime, and I'm very happy that the NEC laser projectors can help accomplish that," he said. "It means a lot to us that we can count on them."