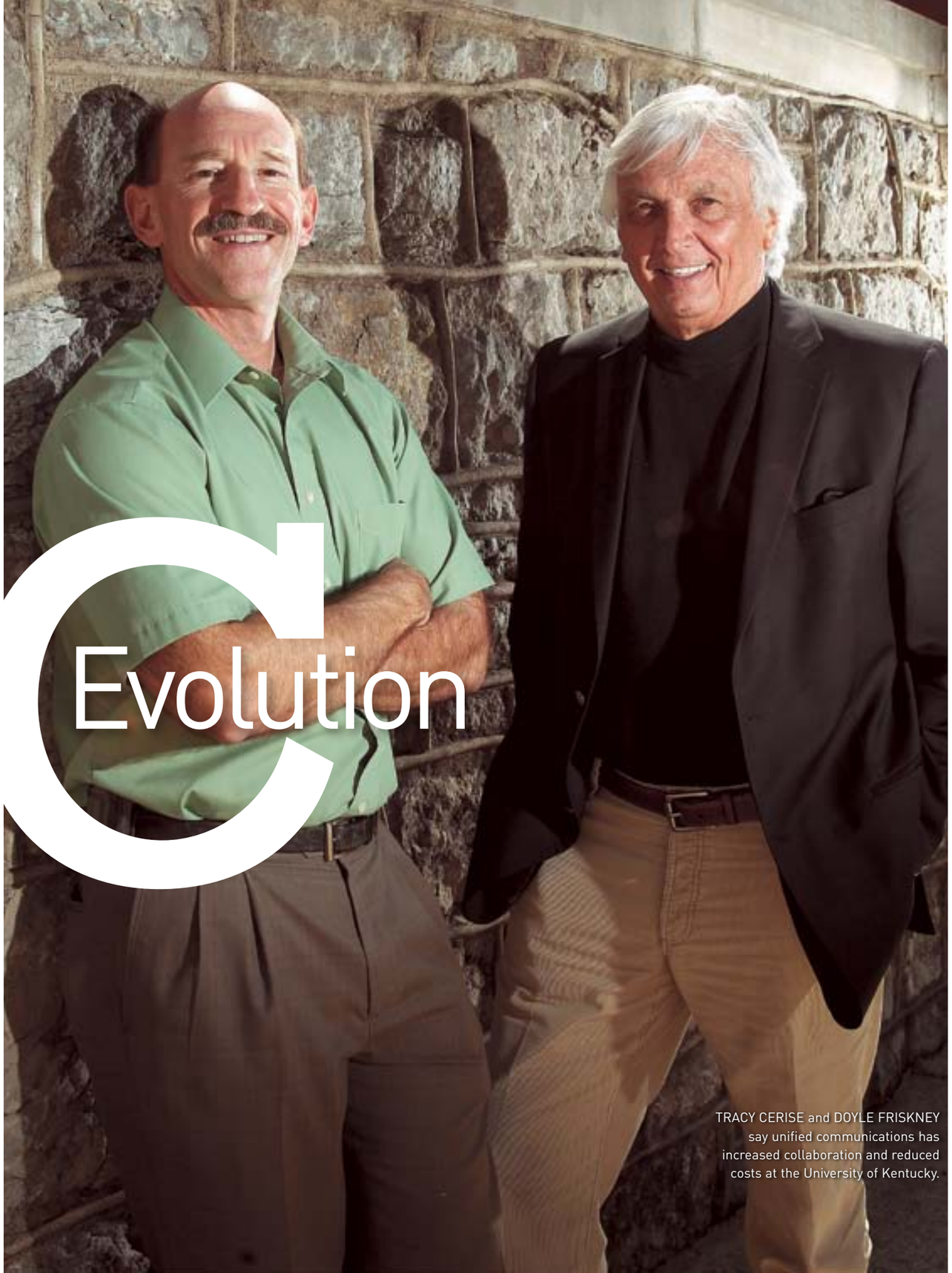
By Vicki Hodder

Colleges have started implementing unified communications on the administrative side and plan to gradually deploy the technology in the classroom.

THE UC Evolution



TRACY CERISE and DOYLE FRISKNEY say unified communications has increased collaboration and reduced costs at the University of Kentucky.

MARK CORNELISON

Unified communications is clearly making life easier at the University of Kentucky. Collaboration is up and travel costs are down.

Since UK adopted Office Communications Server (OCS) from Microsoft in 2007, employees at the university work together and share desktops right from their offices, which lets them solve problems more efficiently than having to talk them through over the phone. Faculty and staff can also get together via web conference, negating the need to travel or schedule scarce meeting rooms, says Tracy Cerise, UK's programmer systems lead.

"We have found collaboration for meetings, especially recurring meetings for staff on both the campus and healthcare sides of campus, to be almost invaluable," says Cerise.

UK's rollout of UC has been gradual. Initially, campus faculty and staff used UC largely for instant messaging, says Chief Technology Officer Doyle Friskney. Over time, UK integrated and linked the OCS to its telephone service for some users, and a university upgrade to OCS 2007 R2 in early 2009 gave web conferencing some traction on campus.

Now the university has integrated Microsoft's latest UC solution — Lync 2010 — with its campus telephony infrastructure, Friskney says. With lower installation costs and no licensing fees, Lync's Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) service costs less than the university's CallManager from Cisco Systems to connect per user, he notes. "I'm not going to have to do it in IT," explains Friskney. "I can let someone else do that."

40%

The predicted annual growth in student use of web-based courses over the next five years

SOURCE: Enterprise Strategy Group

UC in the Classroom

Steve Duplessie, Enterprise Strategy Group founder and senior analyst, says phased implementations reflect a general consensus among higher education leaders that UC adds value. Duplessie believes that remote classrooms supported by UC are the future of higher education. It's a trend already favored by some IT administrators in higher education that Duplessie says will accelerate.

"While I am a fan of physical interaction, there is a huge percentage of learning that can occur via remote methods that enable people to be far more flexible," Duplessie notes. "Plus, it lets the university attract a much larger potential audience."

That's what's happened at California Baptist University in Riverside, Calif. More than 35 percent of CBU's 5,500 students take online courses — increasing from about 500 students to nearly 2,000 students in less than two years.

Why the increase? The private Christian university launched an Online and Professional Studies Division in summer 2010 to accommodate a growing demand among students and installed a suite of Cisco UC tools to support it. Cisco's WebEx technology plays a central role, delivering high-quality video that lets professors remotely teach and interact with students online as they normally would in person, says Tran Hong, CBU's

associate vice president of technology. Hong says online learning quickly took off, giving CBU the tools it needs to accommodate high demand and growth on a limited budget.

"Education isn't about a physical classroom anymore," Hong says. "This UC allows us to reach out to our students anywhere in the world."

Although CBU uses several WebEx suite solutions for academics and orientation — primarily Meeting Center and Training Center — the university uses Cisco's IP telephony and TelePresence to run the campus.

TelePresence already lets CBU administrators easily meet with service providers and staff members even when they're on the road, and professors can connect with students one on one or in small groups from anywhere.

In the fall, CBU will start using TelePresence to connect the main campus in Riverside to three new remote locations in the California communities of Clovis, Santa Clara and Temecula.

"An instructor on the Riverside campus can actually teach a class on several different campuses," Hong says.

The online division's UC success has prompted the university to start upgrading its entire campus technology network. Last fall, CBU began building a new converged network infrastructure with a 10 Gigabit Ethernet fiber backbone that will support VoIP, high-definition video conferencing and campuswide wireless.

CBU is not alone in its plans to pave the way for UC technology on campus. Some 44 percent of 16 higher education respondents in a recent ESG survey say they intend to invest in network upgrades or improvements during the next 12 to 18 months, creating infrastructures that would be better able to support UC technology.

Adding Applications

The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater first started with UC for its VoIP capabilities, using Cisco Unified Communications Manager to ensure university leaders could reliably communicate with up to 60 facility workers and other first responders in case of campus emergencies. Within three years, the university expanded that group to include faculty members from the college of business and economics. It now plans to completely replace its Centrex system on campus with the IP telephony system, says Elena Pokot, the university's CIO and assistant vice chancellor for instructional, communication and information technology.

WebEx and TelePresence use has followed a similar pattern — starting small and broadening over time. Pokot says the reason for the gradual rollout is because it takes time for people to adapt UC to their tasks and goals. Getting people comfortable with UC requires a one-on-one process, she says, in which the IT staff works closely with faculty members to determine how they can best capitalize on WebEx and TelePresence. Then it's a matter of allowing people to creatively adapt to it. "I don't know how you can not implement it gradually," Pokot says.

So at UW-Whitewater, university leaders first used WebEx largely for athletic press conferences, meetings and job interviews. It took about two or three years for WebEx to make its way into the classroom, with no marked transition, she says. Now, professors use WebEx to enhance distance learning classes and TelePresence for long-distance academic collaboration.

"It's enabled us to do things we could not do without it," Pokot says. "It really is the ability to overcome the issue of distance." ET

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UC'S BROAD APPEAL

Colleges find that unified communications keeps them competitive. Higher education leaders say progressive UC technology appeals to top-notch students. UC also helps attract high-quality faculty members eager to work in real time with distant colleagues, says Elena Pokot, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater CIO and assistant vice chancellor for instructional, communication and information technology.

UC extends higher education's reach to engage more students more effectively and more often, says Steve Duplessie, founder and senior analyst at the Enterprise Strategy Group. UC also offers analytics for evaluating and improving curriculum.

"In short, if you aren't using UC, you aren't going to be able to compete in the future," Duplessie adds. "I don't see how you have a choice."