



Centralized Higher Education Event Technology

# 5 Reasons Why It's a Must-Have for Extension Programs and Continuing Ed

Over the past few years, colleges and universities have been waking up to the fact that event technology is a gamechanger: streamlining processes, reducing time and resource expenditures, preventing duplicate work or personnel, and gathering data for improved marketing and engagement. While event technology has been mostly leveraged by advancement, alumni, and central conference and events offices, other business units are starting to take notice.



From managing engagement activities across a state to enabling revenue growth, in this e-book we'll explore five reasons why centralized event technology is critical for continuing education and extension programs, using examples from the University of Missouri's Extension and Engagement organization and the MU Conference Office, whose experts recently rebuilt their event-tech infrastructure to scale the reach and impact of their programs, courses, and events for citizens across the state of Missouri.

# #1

## Ad Hoc Solutions Are Expensive and Less User-Friendly

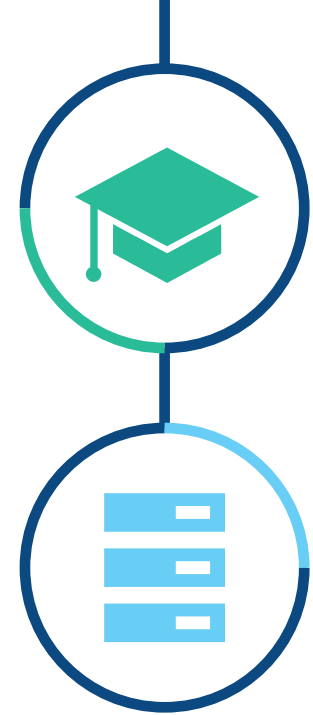
The University of Missouri's conference office (MUCO) was established in 1963 with a mission to deliver non-credit learning and other continuing education and cooperative extension programs to adult audiences. Beyond traditional MU departments, "we also support state and federal agencies, public and private organizations and youth programs," says MUCO Director Jewel Coffman. "We run the gamut of helping any group that would like to support an educational opportunity."

Of course, the methods for reaching potential students and participants have changed markedly over the years, in response to changing expectations and technologies.

**As the conference office adapted to the age of data-rich, digital experiences, they had slowly adopted disparate, ad hoc solutions for managing events. The end result? When they stepped back and audited their overall event production strategy, they realized they had a patchwork quilt of solutions—some homegrown, others purchased by individual offices to solve individual needs, and others just antiquated.**

The problem with this approach over time, says Kyle Flinn, MU Extension's director of enterprise program management, is that it "results in very differing customer experiences and, frankly, it can be extremely confusing because none of the systems talk to each other." Instead, Flinn says, the goal of an educational technology platform should be "to bring everything together so learners have a single place to start their journey and find all the programming, events, courses, or whatever it is they're looking for—and to make it convenient."

For MU Extension, shifting from ad hoc tech solutions to one, centralized platform was transformative—and hugely cost effective. "To move from individual and siloed data to a centralized database can take some difficult internal conversations," offers Flinn. "People get comfortable with their ways of doing things. But at the same time, it's easy to justify economically because the siloed individuals and units are still paying staff or paying for solutions to handle data—only less efficiently."



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# #2

## Centralized Event Tech Prioritizes the Participant and Attendee Experience


Not so long ago, continuing ed and extension programs were solely face-to-face events.

**With the evolution of online learning, changing needs, and the demographics of learners, MU Extension knew they could significantly expand the reach and impact of their programs and courses with technology. A core tenet of their centralized event technology strategy was the integration of online and hybrid programs and courses.**

“We will always have face-to-face learning somewhere in our state or on a campus,” says Flinn. But MU Extension’s technology solutions now give their audience extensive, flexible, and convenient online learning opportunities. “We also have blended capability, where we can offer an online course that also has a face-to-face component,” he says. “This blending brings together two things we talk about a great deal: high tech and high touch. There’s a lot of value in that to learners. Having the right strategy and the right tools really lets you serve everyone and helps everyone—MU and our various audiences—get the most out of our learning events.”

"Today," says Flinn, "a centralized event technology platform that integrates face-to-face, online, and hybrid learning opportunities is essential to providing individuals educational opportunities at a time and place that best meets their needs."

MU Extension has also utilized mobile event apps, developed with the help of their event tech provider, to help attendees navigate events and create better, more holistic experiences. A large, campus-wide open house that attracted over 3,000 participants, for example, was made easier to manage with the help of an event-unique mobile app. "The younger the group, the more they expect to do everything on a hand-held screen," says Flinn. "Mobile capability really caters to that group. It also saved us tens of thousands of dollars in print costs."



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# #3

## Revenue is Boosted Through Centralized Event Tech

“Much of our division’s revenue potential is generated through events,” says Flinn. But an effective approach goes well beyond simply charging fees for attendance, and fees are not appropriate for every event or program. “You have to think carefully about pricing strategies,” he says. “As you think about what you charge for events, you also have to think about the events that need to be subsidized—where the audience needs to be served at no cost, whatever the reason.”

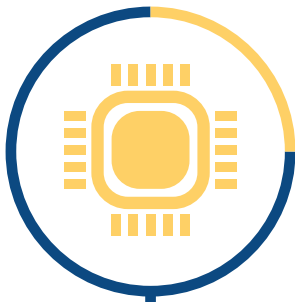
**This isn’t to say that free events are a loss. In fact, just the opposite, says Flinn. “I would argue that regardless of whether an event is offered for free or for fee, it can be about generating revenue.”**

For example, “recruitment and advancement [offices] aren’t going to charge parents or alumni to come to campus. Regardless, they need a best-in-class tool to manage those registrations—including databases to market to those individuals following the event. This is where you can boost recruiting to generate revenue or turn alumni into donors.”

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In other words, by increasing engagement, creating a more seamless and enjoyable experience for attendees, and gathering data to improve communication and outreach, these “free” events turn attendees into donors and students. Also, Extension subsidizes free events for underserved or targeted audiences through events where you can charge registration fees.

Flinn credits MU Extension’s event technology platform for the division’s ability to piece together the complex puzzle of what to charge and when to make the most of resources. “Technology makes the accounting and financial part of everything we do work,” he says. “Without it, we wouldn’t be able to manage the monies, track everything, and show the ROI of what we’re doing.”





## #4 Data Can Be Collected to Improve Future Events and Outreach

Data can be transformative for continuing education and extension programs, but only if there is a way to capture and use that data efficiently, in a way that controls costs. This requires technology that is intelligent and capable of becoming even more so. “You really need machine learning, and a system that can self-teach and continually change its own algorithms based on audience searches and behaviors,” says Flinn. “We have a platform that allows users to go in and opt into areas of interest and select their preferences.” This has saved MU Extension from having to hire staff to “study data day in and day out and try to change algorithms.”

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Data that's stuck in silos doesn't paint a complete picture. Instead, institutions need holistic solutions. The comprehensive, division-wide nature of MU Extension's event technology platform now helps them plan everything from targeted marketing to program planning.

"We've gone from overreliance on manual, time-consuming processes to a centralized system," Flinn says. "This enables you to make data-driven financial decisions. Where attendance is light, you can make an informed decision. Should you continue to invest? Or, where interest is very heavy, do you invest more resources? With a centralized database, you're no longer trying to piece together all of this information across divergent spreadsheets, Word documents, or other systems. That makes a huge difference."

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# #5 Centralized Event Tech Allows for Operational Excellence and Expanded Capacity at Scale

Centralizing event technology has also allowed the conference office to position itself as a center of event-planning expertise for MU, a “one-stop shop designation for comprehensive event management” says Coffman.

**“This is an important piece for us because the University of Missouri is a decentralized campus,” she notes. “Our team of experts connect directly to the campus business units providing event facilities and services.”**

“We’ve been putting together centers of excellence – web development, integration of systems, etc. And MUCO is the center of excellence for event management,” Flinn adds. “People are understanding, more and more, that units only have part-time event planners. They were decentralized, and doing too many different functions. And it was inefficient.”

A centralized event platform provides the technology backbone that allowed Coffman's office to reposition itself as the center of event management. With the new platform, Coffman has been able to "consolidate several different components of the processing and the expertise within our office." The end result? The ability to help more units and programs to reach even more prospective students or clients. "It's allowing us to scale our personnel and create capacity for others on or off campus," says Coffman, "and it will help us reach across the state of Missouri for MU extension in 114 counties delivering programs."



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# Increased Revenue and Better Outreach

Now three years into their centralized, technology-powered program, the payoff for MU Extension has been many fold; growth in revenue—not to mention the significant cost reductions, standardization of processes and more accurate reporting through more efficient operations overall.

With extension and continuing ed programs facing shrinking budgets and increasing participant and attendee expectations and needs, Flinn's advice to his peers is simply that they can no longer afford not to invest in technology.

"The final thing I'll say is that we chose all of these tools because they're scalable to let us handle 250,000 registrations across hundreds of events per year," he says. "But this isn't unique to us; having best-in-class technology is table stakes to staying relevant to the diverse populations that MU Extension and any university serves—and the only way to scale efficiently to meet demand."