Twenty-four/seven service is expected at any large and first-class institution,” said Abrash Khanmalek, associate director of client services in information technology at Pepperdine. “But operating a 24/7 call center is just not cost effective.”

Pepperdine University serves approximately 7,700 students across more than five campuses in California, as well as in Washington, DC, Latin America, Asia, and Europe. For nearly two decades, the university managed all the IT help desk needs of its students, faculty, and staff through walk-in and call-in IT support centers on each campus.

Over time, the complexity of IT problems evolved along with new technology and new systems to support—from students accessing university systems on the latest smartphones to technical issues with new IT investments in application development, network security, and campus Wi-Fi. The volume of support requests across campuses taxed IT resources, and plans for innovative IT service projects were postponed due to limited resources.

In 2008, Pepperdine began a partnership with Ellucian Help Desk Services, to operate a 24/7/365 help desk call center. The new partners worked to implement the service,
scheduling bi-weekly meetings to ensure call center service levels were consistent with those that students receive on campus.

And the results are clear from students who use the service: “The help desk is a lifesaver,” said Gentle So, class of 2020. “Their prompt help with tech issues allows me to finish my projects.”

First-class IT service at a first-class institution

Today’s help desk requests range from simple requests for things like email setup on a new iPhone or accessing grades, to service-intensive needs, such as consulting with a natural sciences student on the need for a 64-bit operating system in order to use visual studio software.

“If students are spending less time trying to configure a device or getting the internet to work, they can spend more time learning,” said Khanmalek. “The faster we can resolve those technical issues, with administrative tasks fading into the background, the better for students.”

That doesn’t mean students want a completely remote IT service experience. Pepperdine provides a hybrid approach—face-to-face, online, and over-the-phone—because students, faculty, and staff expect it.

“You need to have the 24/7 footprint, and you need to have that in-person availability,” said Khanmalek. “I don’t think one works without the other. Students expect that level of service.”

Since implementation of the service, Pepperdine experienced a decrease in face-to-face help desk visits, and a much-improved overall close rate. However, Khanmalek noted that some students prefer to start with a phone call and then bring in their equipment for a face-to-face follow-up.

“The student expectation of first-class institutions is akin to customer expectations from leading, world-class technology companies, like Apple,” said Khanmalek. “They want excellent in-person, over-the-phone, and online service, for everything they need.”

Freeing up resources, enabling IT innovation

“With Ellucian running the call center, the hybrid approach creates more opportunities for IT to innovate,” said Khanmalek. “And that reliability frees up students to continue to learn and grow in their fields of study.”

In 2017, Pepperdine and Ellucian collaborated to integrate their help desk ticketing systems, enabling instant data sharing and easier-to-run analytics.

“This way, we’re able to analyze and react to the data much more quickly by delivering products that address issues,” said Khanmalek. “The metrics we’ll get from the integration between our two ticketing systems will have a huge impact: it will help us innovate for what we call next-generation support.”

The efficiencies gained from outsourcing have allowed Pepperdine’s IT department to move forward on a spectrum of new IT projects and innovations, including:

- Integration of a new content management system
- Multi-factor authentication for network infrastructure
- Upgrading university Wi-Fi
- Creating an Applications Management team to assist in backend application administration
- Piloting a robotics program

“A lot of these initiatives are possible because of the resources liberated by our partnership with Ellucian,” said Khanmalek. “I now see resources going into innovation.”

Providing help desk support shouldn’t keep institutions from establishing newer technologies, it’s all about a school positioning itself to provide the best IT service and experience to students.

“That’s the expectation from any large and first-class institution,” said Khanmalek. “Students expect a first-class service, and I feel that we’re providing that with our partnership with Ellucian.”