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South Florida startup Honorlock provides solution as universities scramble to go remote

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It was 10 weeks into the spring semester when the University of Florida was faced with migrating 5,000 courses online.

Without much notice, UF accomplished the feat March 23, transitioning classes as large as 1,200 students to remote learning as universities nationwide halted in-person instruction to slow the spread of the new coronavirus.

But in the six weeks to follow, the university would be met with another unprecedented undertaking: administering spring midterms and exams to more than 63,000 enrolled students.

"As challenging as the remote learning situation has been for the university, there have been many silver linings for us," UF Director of Distance Learning & Continuing Education Brian Marchman said.

A partnership with Honorlock, a Boca Raton-based remote test proctoring company, has been one of them, he said.

The technology helped the Gainesville-based university administer 154,282 exams during the spring semester.

"We don't just say we're proctoring exams, we mean it. We don't just give it lip service and partial effort. We want students to know their stuff and be able to prove it," Marchman said. "Honorlock has been able to help us make that a reality."

With universities across Florida and beyond in a similar pinch, Honorlock quickly onboarded 200 new higher education institutions and expanded its agreements with schools such as UF, Florida International University and the University of North Florida. It has partnerships with more than 30 Florida schools, including Broward College, Florida Atlantic University and Florida State University.

The South Florida startup, founded in 2015, is rapidly scaling as a result. It raised \$11.5 million in Series A funding, even as many venture capital funds slowed their investments in response to Covid-19's sudden effect on the economy.

The late March funding deal, coupled with an

influx of new business, has fueled Honorlock's growth faster than expected. The company hired 20 full-time employees between January and April, and it currently has 60 employees, including 50 based in Florida. It plans to hire more, Honorlock CEO Michael Hemlepp said.

"We are more than doubling the company in size this year and in 2021," he said.

Honorlock succeeded in accommodating the large influx of students who needed the system because it doesn't require live proctors to watch each person taking an exam, which eased scheduling challenges for faculty and students.

Instead, the technology employs artificial intelligence to monitor factors such as eye and head movement, and whether there are voices other than the student's in the room. If the system detects possible cheating based on a score of said factors, it will alert a live proctor who will interact with the student to ensure the integrity of the exam.

Students install the program via a Google Chrome browser extension before taking their exams and can access Honorlock through their university's learning management system (LMS).

"It's a bit less daunting to set up than a full installation would be," University of North Florida Assistant VP of Digital Learning and Innovation Deb Miller said.

UNF, in Jacksonville, made Honorlock available to students and faculty in April through the university's Canvas LMS. It was especially useful for programs that prepared students to test for licenses and certifications, such as accounting and nursing courses, Miller said.

"We certainly had challenges with students initially who didn't sign up for the class expecting this," she said. "There were concerns about data and privacy, but Honorlock has good language and documentation on all that."

Many of Florida's public colleges and universities had already tapped Honorlock's technology for some courses after the startup won a contract last year to provide its services to state schools.

Florida International University in Miami had been working with Honorlock for the past four



years, primarily with its online-only students.

As more than 5,600 of its classes went completely remote by mid-March, FIU sought to train faculty and students on effectively using Honorlock and Zoom – the primary tools for its technology transition – over several weeks.

"Some instructors were hesitant about teaching online, but I've heard great feedback from them in how successful they've been in delivering their lectures and courses remotely," FIU Director of Technology Services Robert Parhizgari said. "I think, going forward, students and instructors will be more open to going fully online in the future."

Even as their agreements expanded with Honorlock, the universities the Business Journal spoke to declined to pass the costs on to students. For UF, the costs would typically be covered through a distance learning fee, or subsidized through state funding.

"We had not planned in our budget for any way to pay for this, so we had to find the funds and not put it on the backs of students, and they were able to make it work for us," UF's Marchman said of the university's agreement with Honorlock. "We were over a barrel, and they didn't take advantage of that."