

Working Together

The University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) may not have a football team, but when you have the most dominant force in college chess at a school that emphasizes “intellectual sports,” who needs one? As a six-time national champion in the event known as the “World Series of Chess,” the UMBC team is an international powerhouse. And in many ways, they’ve come to symbolize consistency at a university going through a sea of change.

Founded in 1966, UMBC quickly distinguished itself, culminating in a Carnegie classification as a “research extensive university.” In the past decade, however, UMBC has experienced an enormous environmental change. Once a primarily large commuter population, the number of students living on campus has increased ten fold, changing its very nature. While this evolution has been widespread, its impact with regard to technology has been particularly strong.

Today, UMBC leverages a comprehensive engagement and assessment solution from Blackboard that has grown with the university. But when John Fritz came to the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) fourteen years ago to work in their

PR department, that was far from the case. Now the Assistant Vice President for Instructional Technology, Fritz says Web technology was becoming more prevalent in his early years at UMBC, but “we had a long way to go before we could reach our core goal of delivering rich and effective learning experiences to a rapidly growing and changing student population.”

The Need for Standardization

This effort began in earnest in 1996 when UMBC deployed its first course management solution. Bob Armstrong, an Instructional Designer tasked with supporting Blackboard software at the university, remembers hearing of those early years. “It was a struggle,” he says. “We had an



Quick Facts

- + Blackboard client since 1999
- + Annual enrollment of approximately 11,800 students
- + Member of the University System of Maryland
- + Six-time National College Chess Champions
- + 1,100 courses and 400 communities on UMBC’s Blackboard system
- + 95% of students enrolled in at least one Blackboard course
- + 80% of faculty using Blackboard software to supplement lessons



inordinate amount of requests for boutique-type sites with their own unique passwords and we were trying to support a large pool of webmasters. It quickly became clear that we needed a standardized solution.”

UMBC first considered using a different course management system in 1999 through the recommendation of information technology and engineering Professor Roy Rada, who was familiar with the system, having used it at Pace University. But it became apparent that supporting two solutions did not make sense. “After reference checks with other schools, a product demonstration and our own pilot installation, it became clear that Blackboard was easier to use for most UMBC faculty,” says Fritz. As a result, UMBC switched exclusively over to the Blackboard system during the summer of 2001.

UMBC was also interested in Blackboard’s portal capabilities but Fritz knew that usage would only begin after adoption of the application took off. “We needed a couple years to get used to courses before we’d have a natural extension into communities,” he says. “Typically, communities are often derived by people already using courses, so we had a two to three year lag before our online communities really got started.” Armstrong remembers the need for communities becoming apparent on campus. “We had our own homegrown portal drive which we were using as the student election website,” he says, “But it was a stand-alone application that students only used once a year and were not familiar with.” Unsurprisingly, only 600-700 students (out of a student population of almost 12,000) were actually voting.

Building Community

UMBC purchased Blackboard’s community solution in tandem with its original Blackboard learning application, but as Fritz predicted, usage did not take off until

a few years later. But when it did, this Blackboard solution helped UMBC build vibrant online communities that people could easily maintain themselves, which helped IT staff make a dent in the other web content management needs besides courses.

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John Fritz
Assistant Vice President for Instructional Technology

Fritz and his team eventually found that going from courses to communities was a small leap for people to make. “The best thing we did (and still do) was to shine the spotlight on people who get the technology and use it well,” he says. “Faculty learn best from other faculty so we embraced the community teaching each other best practices and then promoting those best practices by highlighting the users.”

The results have been impressive. Today, communities throughout UMBC are using Blackboard technology for university placement exams, tenure evaluations, research sites, new student orientation and student elections. In fact, in stark contrast to the student elections of yesteryear, nearly every student at UMBC is now enrolled to vote, and the vast majority of them do so.

The faculty has also used its Blackboard system in research using community groups. This allows them to facilitate discussions with outside collaborators and share what progress they’ve made. As one example, Uri Tasch, a Mechanical Engineering Professor at UMBC, was working on a study to detect lame dairy cattle and formed a research community through the Blackboard system. “Uri collected the test results, published discussions, posted videos, photos and other multimedia files using a Blackboard community,” says Fritz. “Even non-UMBC members were able to get temporary accounts to see the progress he was making.” In similar efforts, Fritz and his team have given temporary accounts to government agencies such as the National Security Administration and NASA.

Blackboard's solution is also utilized by many more communities at UMBC including fraternities and sororities, student government groups, and summer high school teaching programs for everything from surveys and training to research and job searches — including UMBC's newly hired provost. Fritz says it's not hard to see why. "Blackboard allows our communities to connect and enables folks to get familiar with other people's work," he says. "By definition, that's a good thing at any university. Even with our most active Blackboard courses, you can see it. You can see what Blackboard courses are being touched the most and what interaction is taking place."

Tangible Results

Fritz says the overall impact of Blackboard technology on UMBC's campus has been profound and the numbers back him up. Today, 1,100 courses and 400 communities are running on UMBC's Blackboard system. That equates to nearly 70% of all the courses at the university. 95% of students are enrolled in at least one Blackboard course and a recent survey conducted by Fritz and his team found that 80 percent of faculty used Blackboard software as a supplement to lessons taught in class.

UMBC is also measuring Blackboard's success in a variety of other ways. A year ago, they began reporting on UMBC's "Most Active Blackboard Courses" based on a

simple "average hits per user" approach. While activity alone is not a measure of quality and the trend needs further study, initial findings suggest that students who earn higher grades tend to use the Blackboard system more than students earning lower grades. UMBC also provides a "check my activity" link to each course that allows students to compare their own activity against an anonymous summary of their peers.

Beyond the numbers, Fritz says Blackboard is improving processes across campus and gives the university placement test as one example. "When a new student is admitted to UMBC, they have to take a university placement test to determine their skill level in various subject areas," he says. "The problem was that students had to travel to campus twice - first for their placement exam and then again for orientation. It was a real burden for students and their families."

"The admissions office came to us with this problem and asked us what we could do," Fritz continues. "We devised a way, using Blackboard, for the students to take their placement tests and attend an orientation online. Now 100% of students successfully take their placement tests online and the amount of student participation in orientation has grown substantially."

UMBC is leveraging Blackboard's community engagement capabilities for:

- + University Placement Exams
- + Campus Wide Communication
- + Job Searches and Tenure Evaluations
- + Research Sites
- + Data Storage and Evaluation
- + Student Elections
- + New Student Orientation
- + Summer High School Teaching Programs
- + Graduate School Academic Integrity Program
- + Training
- + Faculty, Staff and Student Surveys

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Moving Forward

Last year, Fritz completed a strategic instructional technology plan for the university that speaks to winning the hearts and minds of faculty. “Faculty are curious, inquisitive communicators always looking for a better way to connect with their students,” he says. “The key is to assess and promote how technology adds richness to teaching and learning. If faculty are successful in their use of teaching, learning and technology, they may be willing to reach a wider audience. And if faculty can see for themselves that technology helps students learn effectively and efficiently in a traditional face-to-face course, they may be more willing to experiment with virtual teaching environments such as hybrid or online learning.”

“I don’t see UMBC going towards a completely online learning environment,” Fritz says. “Rather I see the general direction of the university focusing on hybrid and plenary learning, to supplement

our in-person coursework.” To that end, he feels that they need to more fully develop UMBC’s teaching and learning infrastructure. “Chasing the latest technical toy or fad without evaluating them against our pedagogical and institutional goals will doom us to dabbling,” he says. “Used thoughtfully, technology can be a catalyst for critical thinking and reflection about our teaching and learning goals. This is the transformation we should be pursuing.”

With this in mind, UMBC has plans to invest more fully in their Blackboard architecture and community of practice. The goal is to elevate existing faculty usage from simple user and document management to increased interactivity and online assessment that improves student engagement, retention and recruitment. “UMBC’s instructional technology strategy will be driven by the goals we have for teaching and learning generally,” say Fritz. “And we see Blackboard as the foundation for those goals.”

