

# Blackboard Collaborate Spurs Growth at University of Findlay

As most technologists know, often the most difficult part of implementing any instructional technology is getting the faculty on-board. Because most faculty are primarily concerned with conducting research, getting their work published, creating lesson plans, and teaching, learning new software or hardware often falls to the bottom of their lists. This can create a problem for an instructional technology team when it purchases new tools that will help faculty teach, as faculty don't always attend trainings or read emails about how to use these new tools.

So just how does a school successfully implement new teaching products such as Blackboard Collaborate? One need not look any further than The University of Findlay.

Located in northwestern Ohio, The University of Findlay is a relatively small private university that has relied on Blackboard Collaborate since 2007 to be the foundation of its most engaging online courses, training sessions, and meetings. Though the University's Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) team initially purchased Blackboard Collaborate thinking that it would be used primarily by its most forward-thinking instructors, within 12 months Blackboard Collaborate was made available to every course. So just how did Blackboard Collaborate spread like wildfire? That's a testament to the novel implementation ideas of the CTE team.

Until 2003, the university's MBA and Master's degree in Environmental Management programs were the only two programs offering online courses via Blackboard Learn. However,

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Director of the Center for Teaching  
Excellence, The University of Findlay

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the instructors in these programs had expectations that an online course was synchronous. So when these instructors began using the limited synchronous virtual classroom within Blackboard Learn they found that it simply didn't work very well.

"By 2006 we had had enough of the lack of development in the Blackboard chat and virtual classroom," says Scott Trimmer, Academic Technology Specialist at the University of Findlay. "It wasn't in any way comparable to a face-to-face class. Without that audio component, you miss so much of class."

His colleague, Academic Technology Specialist Mike Shaffer, who was then a student, added, "As a student, it didn't have the personal feel like it did in a face to face class. Within Blackboard's virtual classroom, you simply typed in 'yes' every now and then and that was it."

It was clear that a limited virtual classroom wasn't the answer. After sitting in on a webinar about post-Hurricane Katrina Recovery that was conducted via Blackboard Collaborate, the CTE team knew it needed to add Blackboard Collaborate into its online courseware portfolio.

But instead of starting small and only offering Blackboard Collaborate to early adopting faculty like most schools do, the CTE team wanted to make it available across the entire university. This proved to be an important - and positive - decision.

"We sold Blackboard Collaborate to the faculty not just as a synchronous tool but also as a replacement of our lecture capture tool which they had been using for several years," says Dr. Ray McCandless, Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at The University of Findlay. "We had a policy that faculty had to attend training before they used the lecture capture tool, but with Blackboard Collaborate there was 24/7 help and as long as we trained faculty to use a few key buttons, we felt confident we could instantly open it up to all faculty. And it worked out. No one broke it."

"One reason why Blackboard Collaborate has been so great is because everyone has it," adds Trimmer. "The fact that it's just there within every Blackboard course has been a tremendous boom for us."

To get the word out about trainings, the CTE team used email blasts to faculty, brochures, social networking, and a lot of one-on-one too, according to Shaffer. They also created a suite of five-minute training videos. In less than a month, countless faculty were offering classes, office hours, and student group sessions live online.

"Very quickly I had instructors tell me, 'My students are demanding that I use Blackboard Collaborate,'" recalls Shaffer. "If faculty were using Blackboard chat, students started telling them they have to use Blackboard Collaborate instead. That really says a lot about how Blackboard Collaborate caught on with our student body because they really enjoy the interaction."

"Adoption comes from student pressure," adds McCandless. As faculty and students instantly grew fond of online courses that had the personal, human element they previously lacked, the CTE team also found that Blackboard Collaborate was saving users time and money.

For instance, during one semester McCandless had to travel to Pennsylvania to present a paper at a Holocaust conference. But instead of making his students miss class time and/or have to make up the class later in the semester, he connected via Blackboard Collaborate to his students in Findlay. "I didn't lose a three-hour class period," says McCandless.

In Summer 2009 as gas prices soared while the U.S. economy struggled, Findlay's College of Education made a big push to allow students to take classes online - as an option - just so they didn't have to drive to class to save gas money. Though most of their courses were still asynchronous, the students heavily relied on archived lectures recorded in Blackboard Collaborate.

Shaffer and McCandless even presented Blackboard Collaborate as 'A Swiss Army Knife' at a state conference because it's so flexible, as Findlay uses it for a myriad of online purposes such as meetings and training sessions in addition to live instruction and office hours.

For example, Trimmer and McCandless put together a training contingency plan about how to quickly get up-and-running in the event of an H1N1 outbreak or other school closing.

"We have more and more staff members interested in using Blackboard Collaborate for meetings. Our Graduate and Professional Studies group uses Blackboard Collaborate to reach out to its graduate distance students for advising and counseling. We even use Blackboard Collaborate for support, particularly for adjunct faculty, using application sharing for technology support," Trimmer adds.

They've also trained their international admissions officers so they can reach out to attract students overseas, streamed keynote presentations from face-to-face conferences, and had numerous guest lecturers present virtually to Findlay from as far away as Japan. Even Findlay's CIO gave his MIS students a tour of the school's server environment by walking his laptop around the school and giving audio narration while the video streamed through Blackboard Collaborate.

The University of Findlay quickly adopted Blackboard Collaborate across the entire school. So what?

Improved outcomes, accommodating more students, and satisfied faculty. That's what.

McCandless teaches a course each semester and offers live online office hours every Friday. He has noticed that the students who take advantage of this extra help often perform better than their classmates who don't.

But McCandless really sees the advantages of Blackboard Collaborate when it comes to helping his team help the university work toward achieving its strategic goals.

"We're trying to increase enrollments in our College of Education. We have recently moved the entire Master's in Education program online and Blackboard Collaborate is a big part of that," says McCandless. "We're also at 85 Criminal Justice majors but want to see that grow to 125 or 135. We're just starting to get more criminal justice courses online and are hoping to get the bachelor's program online. We'd like to see increased enrollment and a lot of that will be through online programs -and Blackboard Collaborate will be an essential part of that. I see Blackboard Collaborate as an integral part of our growth. If we didn't have Blackboard Collaborate, as a department chair I don't see how the program could grow."



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Mike Shaffer  
Academic Technology Specialist  
The University of Findlay



In 2009, the CTE team developed a survey made available to 200 instructors across the university asking them their opinions about the effectiveness of Blackboard Collaborate. 84 responded with wonderful replies:

- ▶ **78.8% of faculty says Blackboard Collaborate improved learning in their courses**
- ▶ **91.3% of faculty agreed Blackboard Collaborate is easy to use**
- ▶ **91.3% of faculty agreed Blackboard Collaborate is easy for students to learn**
- ▶ **93.5% of faculty would recommend Blackboard Collaborate to other faculty**

All because the University's CTE team wasn't afraid to unleash Blackboard Collaborate to its entire faculty population. All because Blackboard Collaborate helps schools save time, grow enrollment and revenue, and improve student outcomes.

