

# Blackboard & the University of South Carolina

## COMMUNITY BUILDING AND COLLABORATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Beginning with a single building in 1805, the University of South Carolina (USC) now has more than 200 years of history and tradition. USC serves the state of South Carolina from its flagship Columbia campus, three senior campuses, and four regional campuses. Unlike other state systems where there's a strong system office, USC's system is more akin to a federation that features a high degree of independence amongst the institutions.

This unique configuration has led to some specific challenges, especially when addressing information technology issues. USC is in the midst of a plan to judiciously invest some \$75 million over the next five years in new technology, facilities, infrastructure, services, software and people. With this plan comes a stated goal of leveraging technology to provide students, faculty and staff with access to the tools they need regardless of their location.

Fortunately, USC's long relationship with Blackboard gives them the strong foundation needed to meet their ambitious plan. Beginning in 1998 with its implementation of the Blackboard Learning System™, the university system has come to rely on Blackboard as far more than a course management system. Today, USC is leveraging the breadth of the entire Blackboard Academic Suite™ to provide an integrated user experience for all campus stakeholders – across courses, organizations, communities, departments and campuses.

### ADDRESSING UNIQUE NEEDS ACROSS A STATEWIDE SYSTEM

With more than 40,000 students across the University of South Carolina's eight campuses, quickly adjusting to a new living and academic community often seems daunting for students. With this in mind, Dr. Gene Luna, AVP for Housing and Student Affairs asked himself, "How do we take a large research university and break it down into small communities?" Noticing trends where geographic communities gave way to online communities, Dr. Luna saw the Blackboard Community System™ as the first tool to apply social community building where students could be in constant communication.

Under the leadership of Dr. Luna, the University Housing department pioneered the rollout of co-curricular communities at USC in order to improve student life on campus. To do this, USC set up databases in each residence hall which automatically affiliate students with corresponding e-communities. Now housing 45% of the full-time undergraduates on the main Columbia



- Blackboard client since 1998
- Founded in 1801
- Eight campuses
- 14 degree-granting colleges and schools
- 350+ degree programs
- 40,000+ students (across all eight campuses)
- 1,950+ full-time faculty (across all eight campuses)
- 675 Blackboard-backed courses in winter term 2006-07
- 7,800 students are actively enrolled in Blackboard courses

Blackboard  
Academic Suite™

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campus, these e-communities support new connections between incoming students with affiliations built through residence halls.

Residence Advisors now regularly use the Blackboard Community System to communicate with residents in their corresponding halls, bridging dialogue across an already familiar communication venue. From a Student Affairs perspective, USC has also successfully tailored the Blackboard Community System to facilitate community building and communication across diverse and interrelated co-curricular groups.

"At the University of South Carolina, the Blackboard Community System provides a venue where students can gather and feel connected across a common ground – intellectually, culturally and socially," says Bill Hogue, USC's CIO. "With these connections, there is a mutual benefit that goes beyond purely social and cultural contexts. Students are now engaged in the class and outside the classroom, creating a feedback loop for the university."

### SIMPLIFYING ACADEMIC COLLABORATION

In the fall of 2005 USC expanded its deployment of the full Blackboard Academic Suite with the rollout of the Blackboard Content System™, first in limited release, then extending its use across all eight campuses in 2007. USC's pedagogical leader in Education Technology, Chris Brown, had been staying in tune with growing faculty e-Learning needs through regular trainings she conducted with the Center for Teaching Excellence. In 2003 and 2004, Brown started to hear more consistent faculty requests for specific technologies including e-Portfolios to demonstrate that students have met specific competencies, e-Reserves for digital versions of copyright-cleared readings and an overall need to improve collaboration across departments and disciplines.

In response to these requests, USC began evaluating different content management solutions using specific criteria including large file storage, ease of use, central repositories and an integrated information security system. Brown says that as USC evaluated different solutions to address these diverse campus content management needs, "it made sense to use something that worked in conjunction with Blackboard." With the Blackboard

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*Bill Hogue, CIO  
University of South Carolina*

Community System already in place, the Blackboard Content System specifically addressed these challenges with the added value of a familiar and integrated learning environment.

The overall connectedness of the Blackboard Academic Suite enabled the unique creation of collaborative faculty organizations in the Blackboard Community System with corresponding folders to manage their organization content in the Blackboard Content System. With the institution-wide rollout, USC now reaps the benefits associated with the flexibility to preserve the unique identity of each campus; the ability to preserve and manage institutional content across

all eight campuses through one central institutional knowledge base; and a shared content management repository.

### SUPPORTING LIFELONG LEARNING

As USC continues to expand the offerings of the Blackboard Academic Suite to campus constituents, students are discovering mutual benefits that go beyond purely social and cultural contexts. Dr. Luna observes, "In addition to the active participation across a vast array of e-communities, student organizations have started to use Blackboard as their own intranet for communicating, storing and collaborating."

Bill Hogue says that a large number of students transfer across the university's eight schools so continuity with look, feel and type of information exchanged is very important. "USC has benefited from the Blackboard Community System's Branding and Domain Management features across all eight campuses," says Hogue. "This allows customization and tailoring so specific populations can meet their objectives."

Intuitively and anecdotally, USC believes that the Blackboard Academic Suite has fostered student engagement on a student's time frame. Supporting this concept, Dr. Mark Becker, Provost at USC, says Blackboard software is critical, even beyond enabling more effective teaching and learning. "Our primary aim is to deliver the best possible education for students and support them in lifelong learning," states Dr. Becker. "The Blackboard Academic Suite serves as a seamless and powerful tool for instruction today while facilitating development later in life."



[www.blackboard.com](http://www.blackboard.com)  
Worldwide Headquarters  
1899 L Street, NW 11th Floor  
Washington, DC 20036  
1-800-424-9299, ext. 4