

Center for Advanced Legal Studies Delivers Access and Opportunity

BLACKBOARD™ LEARN HELPS PARALEGAL COLLEGE BROADEN REACH.

The Center for Advanced Legal Studies uses Blackboard Learn to connect to more students in more places, boost student and faculty engagement and increase access to educational offerings—allowing students with disabilities to better compete at school and beyond.

As a teenager, Chad Biery lost 60 percent of his vision, and for the next several years, every educational experience was a frustration. He would sit in a classroom, listening attentively, and then the instructor would write something on the chalkboard or put a slide on an overhead projector, and suddenly Biery would be lost.

After college, Biery's wariness of the traditional classroom environment outweighed his desire for legal training. Then, when Biery was 29, something wonderful happened: The professional legal education he was seeking at the Center for Advanced Legal Studies became available via the learning management system Blackboard Learn, which synchronizes with enhanced imaging and audio features that make coursework accessible to the visually impaired. For the first time since he was 14, Biery was able to learn without limits.

Biery, who is taking courses to become a paralegal professional, can use special tools to enlarge text and images posted by professors or other students. He can download audio files that allow him to listen to—rather than read—some of the assigned materials. He takes tests online, rather than on difficult-to-read paper. Biery can ask questions using real-time online discussion boards during

class and follow up with professors anytime via email within Blackboard Learn.

I can go at my own pace. I can enhance documents and other paperwork to fit my needs. I have one-on-one communication with professors. If I didn't have access to online courses through Blackboard Learn, I wouldn't be able to do it.

— Chad Biery
visually impaired student at the
Center for Advanced Legal Studies



Blackboard Learn boosts student engagement

The Blackboard technology that has opened new doors for Biery has enhanced the educational experience for Center for Advanced Legal Studies students across the board, said Larry King, who has taught corporate and criminal law courses at the Houston-based school for nine years.

“Teaching online requires you to be more creative, and the students benefit from that,” King said. “Through Blackboard Learn I can add interactivity—audio, video, online quizzes—and that keeps students engaged.

“I also have a lot more contact with students online than in a traditional classroom environment,” he said. “On the whole, students are more willing to come forward with their own views through the Blackboard Learn platform. We have discussions. We have conversations. We have debates. Any student who is more engaged is going to learn more.”

Plus, King said, the online environment just makes learning more fun. Students post emoticons indicating they are surprised by a legal principle, confused by a complex case or are just happy that they understand the material. “I get much more feedback than I do in a traditional classroom.”

BLACKBOARD BENEFITS

Student Accessibility

- ▶ Accessibility tools, such as navigation and form-control, help students with disabilities compete in school and beyond
- ▶ Functionality is developed to fit student needs; for example, Blackboard developed an accessible YouTube player in collaboration with users
- ▶ The National Federation of the Blind awarded Blackboard Learn™ its Nonvisual Accessibility Gold Certification, stating the software was the most accessible education application that NFB had tested—making it the first and only learning management system to achieve certification

Student & Faculty Engagement

- ▶ Fosters communication between students and faculty, a key component of student success
- ▶ Amps up learning environment with online tools that boost creativity of faculty and students

Institutional Growth

- ▶ Enables expansion of enrollment without expanding footprint by allowing professional colleges to reach students with disabilities or who live far from campus
- ▶ Reporting and monitoring tools track student success and provide data required by accrediting agencies and regulators
- ▶ Consulting expertise and technical services allow even small professional colleges to operate in a 24/7 online environment

Online courses expand college's options

Blackboard Learn functionality improves accessibility and student engagement. That drives student satisfaction, which in turn drives enrollment. But from a business perspective, offering online courses through Blackboard Learn has another benefit for the Center for Advanced Legal Studies: It expands the college's reach without expanding its physical footprint.

Leaders of the college, which was founded in 1987, debated for years whether to open another campus in Dallas or San Antonio, said Eric Happe, director of technology at the Center for Advanced Legal Studies. "We used to think in terms of how many students could fit on campus. Now we can add students anytime and from anywhere."

Once the Center for Advanced Legal Studies received approval and accrediting agencies' confirmation to offer online-only courses, the school was able to ramp up quickly by leveraging its relationship with Blackboard, whose technology it also employs in traditional courses. The college uses Blackboard Managed HostingSM, which Happe said allows the school to focus on its core mission: educating paralegal professionals.

"24/7 oversight in an online environment is important," Happe said. "Our experience with Blackboard's technical support and consulting services has been tremendous."

Learning online fits students' lives

Today, 40 percent of the college's students take most of their courses online. The number might be even higher, Happe said, if the Center for Advanced Legal Studies could offer all courses via the Internet. But oversight agencies, including the American Bar Association, require a portion of each student's coursework be conducted in a traditional classroom.

It's a tight regulatory environment, Happe said, and Blackboard Learn's reporting and student assessment tools help with that, too. "For example, we have to take attendance every hour to meet required standards. Blackboard's technology allows us to do that easily, no matter where our students are located."

And, increasingly, those students are logging in from places far from Houston. "We have students from California, New York, even Dubai. That's happened in two years of offering online-only courses, and that's without us doing extensive marketing," Happe said. "Students find us because we fit their schedules and their lives."

That certainly is true for Chad Biery, for whom success at the Center for Advanced Legal Studies has reawakened a longtime dream of going to law school. "Going through these courses is empowering," he said. "If it weren't for the technology I wouldn't be able to compete. And I need to compete."

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— Eric Happe,
director of technology,
Center for Advanced Legal Studies

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