

Coppin State University



When Coppin State University needed to improve one-on-one communication between students and faculty—without handing out personal contact information—they turned to the Blackboard Connect™ and Connect for Learn™ services to deliver multimodal academic, enrollment management, and emergency notifications. According to Coppin State's Dionne Curbeam, "With Blackboard Connect, we can quickly send thousands of targeted messages via a variety of channels. And the integration was easy and seamless. It really was a no brainer."

CHALLENGE

Located in Baltimore, Maryland, Coppin State University is a historically black university with approximately 4,000 full-time undergraduate and graduate students. The university offers 53 majors and nine graduate degree programs. Main areas of study include nursing, social work, and education, and the university serves many academically promising but financially challenged students. According to Dionne Curbeam, Ed.D., director of instructional technology, "We have a high rate of students on financial aid and many are first-generation college students."

Staying connected with students is challenging for any university. For Coppin State, reaching out to students on a regular basis was critical to improving faculty-student communication, addressing retention, managing enrollment and ensuring timely emergency notification. Connecting via email, however, hadn't stimulated sufficient student response. "Our main challenge in communicating was that students weren't reading their emails," said Dr. Curbeam. "We knew they were more likely to respond to text messages, yet our faculty—understandably—didn't want to send texts from their personal phones."

The university had researched third party software solutions that facilitated text messaging but was dismayed by the frequent find of advertising-based systems. "We suspected these vendors might have sold our phone numbers or spammed our contact list, which we certainly didn't want," said Curbeam. Relying on the university's existing emergency outreach software wasn't an option either, as the current platform didn't allow groupings, targeted messages, or phone calls.

QUICK FACTS

- ▶ **Urban campus located in Baltimore, Maryland**
- ▶ **Enrollment: 4,000**
- ▶ **Needed a way to connect with students without sharing personal faculty contact information**
- ▶ **Relies on Blackboard Connect and Connect for Learn to connect with students one on one regarding financial aid, events, tuition nonpayment, academic issues, and emergency notifications**

SOLUTION

To better address these and other communication challenges, the university turned to Blackboard Connect in January 2011. “We wanted to be able to facilitate text messages in a secure environment where students wouldn’t have to give their number to a third party. And without students and faculty having to directly exchange phone numbers,” said Curbeam. “With Blackboard Connect, we can quickly send thousands of targeted messages via a variety of channels. And the integration was easy and seamless. It really was a no brainer.”

The university simultaneously implemented Blackboard’s Connect for Learn service to facilitate seamless student-instructor communication. The service was an instant hit. “We didn’t do any promotion of the system to faculty and students. They stumbled on it and it just took off. It became this great thing on its own. Everyone really likes and appreciates it.” The university was planning to use the solution for high level challenges like retention and student engagement. According to Dr. Ahmed El-Haggan, CIO and VP of IT, “The vision is to use Blackboard Connect to increase student engagement and retention by tailoring solutions to the new communication attitudes of students—such as text messaging and social media.” The Connect for Learn service now helps keep students on track with their coursework through automated notifications when exams or assignments are due. In addition, students can receive direct phone messages, emails and texts from professors with information on anything from office hours to tutoring.

RESULTS

Blackboard Connect has rapidly become a key tool in managing a wide variety of Coppin State’s enrollment management communication. The university relies regularly on the service to remind students of financial aid deadlines, upcoming retention-driven events, and tuition nonpayment. “With Blackboard Connect we can send targeted reminders and connect with students one-on-one regarding enrollment management issues,” said Curbeam. “We’ve had great success using it to remind students of late tuition payments. It’s worked so well the bursar’s office was flooded with students ready to pay tuition after they received text messages stating they would be dropped for nonpayment.”

The service also allows the university to rapidly reach the entire campus via text, email, and phone - even social media - for both

emergencies and regular updates. For example, when Hurricane Irene threatened the region, campus public safety relied on Blackboard Connect to remind students that the campus would remain open. “Fortunately, the university was not affected by Irene, but people assumed we would be closed,” said Curbeam. “We sent a text notification informing everyone we had power and classes would be held as scheduled. We also used Bb Connect to cross-post the hurricane message to Facebook, and we found that that the conversational nature of social media brought a new level of engagement with students.”

The Connect for Learn service has also been instrumental in keeping students on track academically and creating stronger relationships between faculty and students. “It’s made a difference in the academic lives of students,” said Curbeam. “In the past, some students would forget to complete their weekly quizzes. Now we just send a weekly notification via Connect for Learn and quizzes are completed on time.”

Recently, Connect for Learn was a critical factor in keeping nursing students on target for timely graduation. “A few hours before our nursing students were to take a high stakes test, the room location and required materials suddenly changed,” said Curbeam. “We were able to put the new information out in minutes, and students made it to the right room. Connect for Learn saved the day.”

Connect for Learn also allows Coppin’s faculty and staff to spend less time managing messaging—and more time helping students. “With Connect for Learn, our educators don’t have to waste time doing all these senseless, time-consuming reminders. They’re not duplicating efforts. They save time and can instead focus on developing lessons,” said Curbeam.

Response from the campus community regarding the use of Blackboard Connect and Connect for Learn has been overwhelmingly positive. According to Curbeam, “Our graduate school dean absolutely loves the services and has found them very useful for getting targeted information to different types of students. I’ve also heard from our vice president for enrollment management, who uses Connect for Learn to encourage students to register. Our chief of police was impressed with how Blackboard Connect allowed us to instantly connect with thousands of students during Hurricane Irene. And I’ve been so pleased with client care. They’ve been completely phenomenal.”

