Mississippi Community College Board (MCCB)

Imagine if a system of 15 colleges could save tens of thousands of dollars each year while also saving each teacher up to 35 hours of grading each semester. This dream is a reality in Mississippi.

The Mississippi Community College Board (MCCB) is the coordinating agency for 15 junior and community colleges throughout Mississippi that ensures its member institutions offer a wide variety of curriculum, trades and professional training opportunities and provide an excellent education at a low cost for hundreds of thousands of the state's citizens. MCCB colleges teach a wide spectrum of subject areas, including university-track academic classes, career and technical skills, workforce education directed toward specific jobs, as well as adult basic education and GED preparation. Much of this work is available via the Mississippi Virtual Community College, which offers more than 2,500 courses taught by approximately 1,330 instructors from the colleges.

By utilizing Blackboard Collaborate in conjunction with its course management system, Blackboard Learn, MCCB ensures that more than 30,000 students receive the most flexible – yet effective – education possible. Blackboard Collaborate enables hundreds of faculty across the system to offer highly engaging online courses in all subject matters. And it also means that students at one MCCB college can take classes at all member institutions. This flexibility enables students to take classes that best fit their educational goals, regardless of how far a given school's campus may be from that student's home or office.

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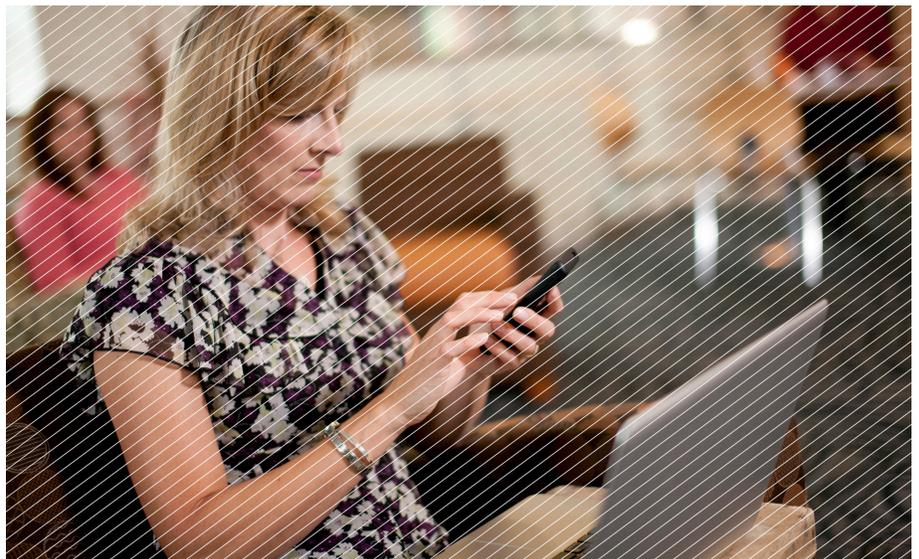> *Assistant Executive Director of eLearning MCCB.*
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For instance, in the Fall 2011 semester, Holmes Community College located in Goodman, MS, offered 1,200 classes to 7,600 students that were taught by 250 instructors. However, Holmes simultaneously offered a complete curriculum online to more than 2,100 students with courses ranging from Biology, Creative Writing, and Business Ethics, to Medical Terminology, Records Management, and Operating Platforms. But even though Holmes Community College is located in central Mississippi, of its 106 online instructors, many of them live throughout the country. These professors utilize the entire Blackboard Collaborate platform to engage their students.

"I live in Brooklyn, New York but my students live in various towns not only in Mississippi but throughout the entire South," says Matt Wasowski, an Adjunct Professor of Creative Writing who has taught remotely for Holmes Community College since 2009. "In addition to posting assignments and announcements in Blackboard Learn, I regularly engage my students via Blackboard Collaborate Voice Authoring and hold online office hours via Blackboard Enterprise Instant Messaging. I even record lectures and hold get-to-know-you seminars at the start of each semester in a live virtual classroom. Many of my students have said the constant interaction makes it feel as if we're meeting in the same room on-campus each week."

In fact, not only do Wasowski's students feel they perform better by having constant interaction, but he manages to save a tremendous amount of time each semester, thanks to Blackboard Collaborate.

"Because I teach Creative Writing, I constantly have to provide very thorough feedback to my students. I typically have about 15 students per class, they each turn in six four-to-seven-page papers each semester, and

it typically takes me about 45-60 minutes to read and then make comments on a single paper. This means that I have to spend 15-20 hours per week grading when I provide feedback in Word by using Track Changes and inserting textual comments," Wasowski says. "But I found that if I use Blackboard Collaborate's voice email capability that I can speak my responses much faster than I can type them. In fact, not only do my students get to hear my voice as I'm giving them feedback, but I save 25-35 hours each semester thanks to Collaborate."

Tish Stewart, Director of eLearning, and Jenny B. Jones, Instructional Design Coordinator, of Holmes's Instructional Technology/Media Services lead the community college's technology staff that trains both on-campus and online instructors. Like their college's teachers, they too utilize Blackboard Collaborate in conjunction with asynchronous course tools to get their faculty up to speed. They believe that collaboration technologies greatly enhance their efficiency and communication.

In addition to offering live online classes via Blackboard Collaborate, staff and faculty throughout the state participate in numerous live online meetings, professional development, and training sessions each year. By offering meetings live online as an alternative to requiring faculty and staff to drive upwards of four hours one-way to an on-site meeting location, the state realizes significant cost and time savings.

For example, during a given week, there could be meetings at different campuses about topics ranging from policy and budget meetings, to new faculty orientation and training teachers on new instructional technologies.

"We use Blackboard Collaborate administratively as a communication tool for meetings that prevents people from having to drive to 15 random meeting locations across the state to a central meeting area," says Dr. Christian Pruett, Assistant Executive Director of eLearning at MCCB. In this instance, Pruett is referring specifically to the state's eLearning Coordinators' Association – just one of the system's countless groups and committees.

"When you account for the mileage and the time away from the office, a meeting on average, if all 15 colleges are participating, can save anywhere from $1,500-$2,000 per meeting. So not only are we seeing an increase in retention and increased interaction in our online classes, but we're also seeing cost savings over the long run through the use of Blackboard Collaborate that we hadn't been able to recognize before," he adds.

Pruett says this one committee holds approximately 13 meetings annually, thereby saving this one, singular group $19,000-$26,000 each year.

According to Pruett, when MCCB was initially looking for a collaboration platform, the System had three strategic goals; to increase retention, to increase the interactivity amongst the students who felt "very isolated" when using only asynchronous course tools, and third, to find a way to invest in a platform that would ultimately invest back in Mississippi. He says that Blackboard Collaborate has allowed the System to realize costs savings while allowing its faculty to teach in a way online they could never teach before.

Pruett also notes that courses that use Blackboard Collaborate are perceived, by students and faculty, as being more engaging than the courses that don't.

Terry Pollard, eLearning Specialist, was one of the MCCB staff who brought Blackboard Collaborate to the state. He had the vision to understand how it could save the state time and money while simultaneously improving classroom communication and student outcomes. But his vision isn't complete.

"The new collaborative tools from Blackboard Collaborate will have us imagining anew: in what new ways can we learn?" says Pollard. "One day very soon, a student will enter a classroom, interact with the instructor, peers, and break out into small groups to complete a project. For that student, the experience will be like every learning experience before it in every respect but one. The student will be in an online classroom using Blackboard Collaborate."

Blackboard