

Online Conferences at Troy University and University System of Georgia

How can a university improve student retention in its online programs and save tens of thousands of dollars all at the same time? Just ask the Instructional Design team at Troy University in Southeastern Alabama.

Conferences incur a lot of costs. For a host, catering, audio/visual, staffing, and room fees all add up. And for conference attendees, it's no different, as an attendee must often spend money on transportation, meals, and lodging. In 2009, Troy University, which for years hosted on-campus faculty training conferences, found itself at a crossroads. TROY's online program was thriving and growing, and it needed to teach and train scores of online faculty who lived nowhere near Troy. It was expensive for the University to bring its online faculty to campus, so TROY turned to Blackboard Collaborate web conferencing (formerly 'Wimba Classroom') to accommodate its faculty training needs.

Instead of holding its annual three-day faculty colloquium on-site, the Instructional Design team at eTROY decided that its online instructors could be trained just as effectively via Blackboard Collaborate—thus creating its annual eColloquium. By logging in to a live virtual classroom, distance faculty could all communicate with one another while learning in real-time about the latest online best practices, technologies, policies, and procedures of the University—all from the comfort and convenience of their homes and offices throughout the world.

"Providing professional development and training for our global faculty has never been easier," says Gayle Nelson, director of Instructional Design at Troy University. "Whether our instructors are situated in Spain, Southeast Asia or the United States, Blackboard Collaborate allows TROY to reach out with top-notch professional development and the latest in training."

Nelson estimates that the University saves more than \$20,000 annually by bringing the colloquium into cyber space. Over three years, the savings have added up to more than \$60,000. But that's hardly the only benefit. eTROY is also able to reach more of its faculty. "By holding the eColloquium online, we increased total participation from 150 attendees to 506; and we increased per-session attendance of 25-to-50 participants to 130," Nelson says.

The University's eColloquium webpage, which was set up to promote the 2011 conference, noted that, "Faculty members are on the front lines when it comes to student retention at Troy University." Instructors were asked to, "Join us online April 12 to 14 for eCampus eColloquium 2011, as we explore online classroom strategies aimed at preventing students from dropping out. The theme of the three-day training event, which is open to all TROY faculty and staff, is "Retention - YOU Are the Key."

At the 2011 online conference, TROY's Instructional Design team shared numerous strategies to engage distance learners and keep them enrolled. "Not only did we successfully transition our annual conference online during a period of budget cuts, but we were also actually able to expedite the adoption of virtual classroom software by our worldwide faculty," Nelson adds. "By exposing our online faculty to live collaboration software during the conference, we subtly made our faculty want to use it in their own online courses."

According to Nelson, once instructors learn about Blackboard Collaborate, they are eager to experiment with all of the Blackboard Collaborate tools in their classroom. Nelson indicates that the feedback has been positive. Instructors tell her that Blackboard Collaborate provides an opportunity to enhance their classes. She says students also appreciate the technology that TROY offers with Blackboard Collaborate.

Across the state line, more than 30 universities throughout Georgia have had similar positive experiences by transitioning face-to-face conferences online via Blackboard Collaborate.

After having several in-state universities such as the University of Georgia report tangible cost savings by using Blackboard Collaborate for online meetings (while also increasing attendance), the University of System of Georgia (USG), facing budget restrictions, transitioned a conference that had been held on-site for 37 years to an online environment in 2010.

For nearly four decades, the annual USG Rock Eagle conference had been one of the system's calling cards. Hundreds of faculty and IT staff from 35 colleges and universities throughout Georgia made the annual trek to a campground in the northeastern part of the state every October to learn about the USG's newest educational goals and technologies. And it was an equally important event for socializing, as the multi-day event enabled peer staff and faculty to make valuable connections. However, despite the fact it was held at a campground, it still wasn't cheap to hold a multi-day event for nearly 500 attendees and event staff.

Around the same time that Troy University was facing budget cuts, the USG system found itself in a similar position. As it was tasked with tightening its belt, it realized it could save significant dollars by moving Rock Eagle online. And after holding this annual statewide educational technology conference every year, in 2010, USG held its annual conference virtually via Blackboard Collaborate.

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"Despite 37 years of tradition, it still made sense to make the conference virtual," says Dr. Jim Wolfgang of the Georgia Digital Innovations Group. "Online, we still had 500 attendees, 14 hours of sessions, four tracks, and more than 40 speakers and panelists."

Fortunately, many of the attendees were already familiar with Blackboard Collaborate, so the transition was smooth and well-received. In fact, USG was even able to offer virtual vendor booths for conference sponsors. The organizers found additional advantages as well.

"Our keynote speaker was from Missouri," Wolfgang says. "That saved a lot of time and travel. And overall, we still kept it an important social and networking event."

From cost and time savings to increasing student retention and conferencing attendance, holding conferences online via Blackboard Collaborate is a proven method of success.

Nelson sums up the advantages nicely.

"Without Blackboard Collaborate, we would probably be using [video conferencing hardware] to connect hundreds of instructors globally, and I don't think that would be very successful. Blackboard Collaborate allows us to reach more instructors than we did in the past. We are able to expose these instructors to the possibilities of Blackboard Collaborate, while also saving thousands of dollars. It even saves us time because we do not have to book hotels or arrange catering and entertainment," Nelson says.