

Blackboard Learn™ Enhances Columbia Southern University's Student-Centered Focus

Growth at Columbia Southern University (CSU) has been remarkable. Enrollment at the Orange Beach, Ala.-based online university is increasing by about 25 percent a year — constantly expanding a student roster that already exceeds 25,000. It is a testament to the university's strong offerings for working students, as well as CSU's open-enrollment format, flexible course structure and maximum credit transfer policy. But university leaders say CSU's success also can be traced to the credo established by the university's founder in 1993: providing excellent student service.

It's here that CSU's growth presents a challenge. How can the university continue to provide its trademark top-notch student service while adding an average of 275 new students a week? A key part of the answer lies in CSU's partnership with Blackboard, whose software solutions drive the university's robust online learning environment and keep students connected to instructors, administrators and one another.

"We're very customer-service based," says Ken Styron, CSU Chief Information Officer. "A lot of what we do in information technology is done to improve the experience for the customer, which in our case is the student. Blackboard is a big part of that."

Students and Faculty Require Simple, Reliable Online Learning

Columbia Southern students need their interactions with the university to be hassle-free. Nearly half of CSU students are active-duty military whose time for completing course work is tightly scheduled. The average student has a family and is employed full time.

For example, Charlie Barr began taking occupational safety and health courses at CSU in January 2010. Barr's supervisors encouraged him to go back to college to complete the degree he began in the late 1970s. The degree will position him for advancement at the utility where he works as a science safety engineer.

Barr travels frequently between a power plant in West Virginia and locations in Tennessee, Texas and Florida, where he has his home office. "Online is an essential part of my education," he says. "I work 70 hours a week. I travel. I'm doing my class work on a plane." Blackboard's



intuitive tools help make Barr's demanding work-education-life combination more manageable, he says. "It's simple to use. It's easy to get around in."

That student-facing simplicity is crucial to CSU, which thrives on educational partnerships with hundreds of corporations, municipalities and police and fire departments. Students can choose from nearly 400 online courses — a number that is increasing.

400 Course Offerings and a 63 Percent Retention Rate

Instructor Tim Born says Blackboard Learn has been an essential part of keeping students engaged during CSU's recent years of record-breaking expansion. The growth can be distracting for instructors, and students are busier than ever, says Born, who has taught at CSU since the late 1990s.

"The demand on the individual is so much greater," he said. "But the tools are incredible. Blackboard helps me meet the need for efficiency."

Blackboard Learn enables Born to facilitate online classroom environments where students "bounce around" ideas with him and with one another. Blackboard's discussion board feature is one of Born's favorite tools for engaging students and monitoring their progress.

"I will feed information into the discussion board throughout the week for students to react to," he says. He gives students a grade for their discussion board participation, which he can track using a Blackboard reporting tool available to instructors. "If students aren't participating", Born says, "that's a good indication that he needs to reach out to them".

Styron said Blackboard's monitoring and evaluation tools have become an essential part of CSU's strategy for maintaining its traditional high level of student service as the university grows. The success of that strategy is reflected in CSU's 63 percent retention rate for new students. That rate is well above the 55 percent average retention rate for first-time students enrolled in the nation's 10 largest online

institutions, as reported by U.S. News and World Report in October 2010. The news outlet based its findings on analysis of U.S. Department of Education data.

"Students stay with us," Styron says, "because we give them the best service we can."

CSU Relies on Partnership with Blackboard

At CSU, Blackboard touches almost every aspect of the student experience. Blackboard Learn facilitates student enrollment, online learning and evaluation. It enables student purchases of textbooks and other course materials. What's more, expertise provided by Blackboard is helping CSU develop strategies and processes for curriculum development and automation. Blackboard consultants have helped the university map out a plan for managing future growth — expected to occur at an even faster rate in coming years.

Styron says Blackboard's reliability means his team can get away from the help desk and concentrate on IT-related growth management strategies, such as server virtualization. Blackboard's core solutions also can accommodate CSU's anticipated expansion, Styron says.

"We have been able to scale our system by working with Blackboard as a partner," he says. "We work together with Blackboard to find solutions. That's really turned it around for us."

QUICK FACTS



- Columbia Southern offers about 400 online courses
- Enrollment exceeds 25,000 and students come from around the world
- Annual enrollment growth is approximately 25 percent
- Nearly half of the student body is active-duty military
- On average, nearly 400 students graduate each month
- CSU began partnering with Blackboard in 2000

