Blackboard & The University of Southern Mississippi

Blackboard learn+™

A Programmatic Approach to Online Learning at The University of Southern Mississippi

The point where technology and pedagogy intersect is familiar to students and faculty at The University of Southern Mississippi. After all, at Southern Miss, the college experience is much more than just going to class and earning a degree. It's about top-flight educational experiences for ambitious students and exceptional faculty.

At Southern Miss, the premier research university of the Gulf South, students choose from more than 90 different academic programs with opportunities for both undergraduate and graduate degrees, including nationally recognized programs in polymer science and engineering, education and the arts. Its beautiful Hattiesburg campus is home to over 16,000 students, and with its Gulf Park campus in Long Beach and its large commuter student base, Southern Miss counts approximately 800 faculty serving students as part of their community.

Southern Miss is the premier higher education institution in the southern part of the state and is a dual campus university with five teaching and research sites on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and Meridian. As a result, the university draws students not only from the Gulf Coast, but Louisiana and Alabama as well. But even with all of its inherent advantages, Southern Miss is not immune to the challenges facing many educational institutions in today's competitive and resource-limited market.

The Challenge: Competition from Online

It wasn't long ago that online education offered little competition to traditional education, but today, virtual schools and universities are competing on nearly every level. Compounding matters, online schools continue to grow their offerings and quality, while many traditional institutions have struggled to introduce an online component that compares favorably, especially from a cost perspective.

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

Quick Facts

+ Blackboard client since 2004
+ Founded in 1910
+ Premier research university of Gulf South
+ 17,000 total enrollment

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Dr. Martha Saunders, president of The University of Southern Mississippi is convinced that online learning adds a new dimension to learning. "We are very keen on a climate for academic success here, which, in a nutshell, means graduating," she says. "So we constantly look for ways that will help our students be successful – by making their course schedules more convenient, or by putting course content in a way that they can respond to it better. Online learning can do that for many, many students."

Saunders also says that online learning improves access, and ultimately, helps retain students. "We're here to educate people, and online offerings create an enrollment opportunity," she says. "The student of today cannot always come to class on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 2:45. They have a lot of commitments, and online learning gives them the flexibility to continue their education while still meeting them. "

Taking Inventory

In the past, the online learning curriculum at Southern Miss had been ad hoc and uncoordinated with individual departments leading individual efforts, resulting in a lack of understanding regarding both costs and revenue.

As the director of the Learning Enhancement Center at Southern Miss, Sheri Rawls heads a staff of

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instructional designers, multimedia developers and trainers who assist faculty in determining the best use of academic and instructional technology resources. She says their online program lacked focus in the past. "We'd never really taken a focused approach to making our online program better or thought pragmatically about how to grow it to provide quality service to our students," she says. "We were making a lot of assumptions about how things should be done, but we discovered that some of the processes we thought were helping actually hindered us to some degree."

Dr. Robert D. Lyman, provost, also concurs that previous efforts were unproductive. "I think several things went wrong with past attempts," he says. "One – it was more of a top-down effort and we really didn't have engagement on the part of the faculty. Secondly, we didn't clearly identify the revenue stream that came from online learning, and therefore we were reluctant to invest monies that we had not identified as coming from this effort. "

Challenges Become Opportunities

Dr. Martha Saunders does not feel that Southern Miss was unique in this regard. "I think universities have done a lot of trial and error when it comes to online learning," she says. "We learned very quickly that it is very labor-intensive and there really is a cap to the optimal number of students per faculty member.

There were a lot of concerns about pedagogical quality and people asking 'How can you possibly learn anything if you're not sitting in the room with the professor?'"

Mary Dayne Gregg, the assistant to the president for articulation and planning at Southern Miss, communicates the challenge another way. "We wanted our enrollment to grow, but we kept going back out to the same population. We were only addressing the typical 18-21 year old who wanted to come to our campus, live in our dormitories, and eat in our food halls. I kept envisioning that there was a real opportunity that we were missing."

Gregg also felt they were missing a branding opportunity with previous ad hoc online efforts. "We didn't have one look and feel," she says. "As a result, we had allowed our online offerings to become very organic in their origin. One course looked like one template, and another course looked another way. There was no standard, and yet, for our online students, that was all they saw of our university."

Furthermore, there were similar concerns with the quality of education and experience realized by students among these varied initiatives. Without central oversight by the provost, individual online efforts were not held to a consistent standard.

Partnering with Blackboard Consulting
After some internal efforts to understand what was happening in a comprehensive way, Southern Miss turned its attention to identifying an external partner that could help them navigate through what they knew would be a complex process. The university had an idea of where they wanted to be, but felt that an expert external resource was needed to help them get there. The university had previously worked with another consulting group, but with little success, so Dr. Lyman says the decision to work with Blackboard was not a difficult one. "We were already using Blackboard (software) to enhance our face-to-face teaching, and we saw a natural outgrowth from technology we already knew to fully online learning," he says. "We could maintain a consistent look and feel to our product and blur the line between face-to-face and online."

"We'd been a Blackboard school for several years, and it just seemed like a natural fit," says Rawls. "We saw an opportunity to partner with them in a different way – more pedagogically than technologically. They understood the technology we were using and how we could leverage it to increase our enrollment, improve our retention rates, and graduate more students. We didn't have to explain the technology to a third party."

Dr. Saunders says the decision helped crystallize their overall vision. "When we entered into the contract with Blackboard and set some standards, we began to realize that we could have a virtual campus on par with our physical locations," she says. "It had the power to represent and market our university, while giving us the brand of a high, top-quality producer of online education at the same time."

Establishing a Vision
Blackboard and Southern Miss agreed that the first step in working together was defining an online vision and an approach for realizing it. The partners recognized that an institution-wide effort was necessary and that enrollment, retention and graduation were the priorities. "The first thing we talked about was providing access to education for our students regardless of where they reside," says Rawls. "We also wanted to take a look at improving retention. That's a huge initiative here at the university, and our president wanted to know specifically how our online programs could help attract more students, increase our retention rates, and then graduate those students down the road."

Provost Lyman was on board with a cross-institutional approach. "Very importantly, we decided on a programmatic, rather than an individual course, approach," he says. "We decided to develop online programs for place-bound individuals who could not access it otherwise and concentrate on that element – rather than a course here and a course there." He also feels faculty buy-in was key. "We engaged a broader base of faculty at an earlier stage in the process so it wasn't a question of coercing anybody. We also took a hard look at finances and saw how much the program could benefit the bottom line," Lyman continues. "That made our financial people more willing to invest."

Rawls noted the Blackboard team was instrumental in helping them get there. "Blackboard did not come in here with its own goals in mind," she says. "Their goal was to make us successful. But in order for us to succeed, they had to meet with many department chairs, deans and a variety of other people on campus – and they did." The key to a centralized university program was indeed faculty engagement as well as faculty development since, ultimately, it is the faculty that will be the face and depth of the teaching product delivered to online students.

That open-arms approach to concept creation and support building with faculty paid dividends in the form of defined institutional goals for the project:

- Improving the coordination of Web-based program development campus-wide

- Ensuring consistency in the e-Learning course environment as experienced by students

- Maintaining a consistent high quality of educational experience in online courses and programs

- Developing complete, marketable programs for online delivery

- Attracting new students to the university and increasing retention of students currently enrolled

- Creating a sustainable financial and academic model

Armed with a clear vision, the team worked to define top priorities, decision criteria, measurements for success, and a well-defined plan for moving forward. They worked together to ensure strong support at the highest levels with intense input and involvement from throughout the university – all with a steady eye on fiscal implications.

More specifically, Blackboard Consulting delivered a Capabilities Analysis – an end-to-end assessment to help Southern Miss leaders develop a vision and plan for managing change, improvement and growth. This comprehensive report focused on eight major processes critical to the effectiveness of the Southern Miss online learning programs. From there, the team focused their efforts around six main work streams:

1. Faculty development and course redesign to improve course consistency, academic quality and student experience

2. Marketing and recruiting strategy to generate leads and applications while converting leads to enrollments

3. Business process improvement to develop improved course scheduling processes and support retention

4. Change management to support executive leadership, faculty and staff buy-in

5. Financial modeling to identify true costs and revenue flows

6. Organizational development to recommend staffing/organization to support online learning

Less Talking, More Listening

Blackboard Consulting began with a goal of doing a lot more listening, and a lot less talking. "We wanted to truly listen and determine what Southern Miss' needs were," says Scott Ready, project manager with Blackboard Consulting. "We didn't come in with a one-size-fits-all prescription approach – we tailored solutions to fit into the environment and culture at Southern Miss." Sheri Rawls agrees. "Blackboard Consulting made us feel like we were running the show," she says. "They came in and said, 'Tell us what we can do to help. What do we need to do to assist you? Where do you want to be?' Everything was a two-way conversation because they didn't make decisions – we made the decisions, and they supported us with the information we needed to make those decisions."

"I think one benefit of working with Blackboard was they could look at us from the outside," says Rawls. "All of us are very close to our own business processes, and it's hard sometimes to give those up, especially when they've been bought into heavily. When Blackboard came in, they were able to really look at them and say, 'You've done a really good job, but here are some recommendations that will make it easier for you.'"

Rawls says one clear example of what the Blackboard team brought to the table involved the first work stream – Faculty Development and Course Redesign. "Blackboard helped our faculty understand the critical nature of proper training for online course delivery," she says. "It's not a matter of taking your course materials, dumping them online, and hoping the students can figure out what they need to do. It's not just training on how to use the LMS – it's how you become a successful online instructor."

In terms of course quality, Blackboard helped Southern Miss take a long, hard look at existing courses throughout the engagement. "We worked together

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with individual faculty to identify their teaching styles, how they liked to communicate with their students, and what could be translated from their face-to-face classes to the online environment," says Rawls. "By doing that, we were able to take a deep dive into their courses – not in terms of content, but from an instructional standpoint." As a result, instructors could leverage core elements of the courses they had worked so hard to develop and easily migrate them into an online environment that was easy for the students to use and understand.

Rawls says the team has been able to devise a solution that has streamlined the quality of education at Southern Miss.

Expanding Its Footprint

No one is more concerned about gauging success for the online learning initiative than the president of Southern Miss, Dr. Martha Saunders. She says the university looks at it from a number of perspectives. "We have ways of gauging, pre-test and post-test, what that student has learned. We also get feedback from the students," she says. "We conduct surveys of our graduates frequently, so we can do some

comparisons." She says the response often manifests itself in other ways. "People are asking me a lot of questions when I'm around the other presidents. That tells me they're hearing about it and that their campuses are urging them to do some of the same things," she says. "We're also getting strong, positive response from our board of trustees – they're very keen on us finding ways to produce more quality graduates for the state, and these tools help us do that."

As provost, Dr. Robert Lyman defines success in other ways. "In one sense, any student who's able to gain a level of education that they would not have been able to attain otherwise – I think that's a success," he says. "I think in these very difficult economic times, enabling a university to develop a model that will help them remain fiscally viable and help them to reach out to serve more students is very important." This sentiment clearly resonates with hard-working students that have to seek employment while in school to pay for tuition or other expenses, or want to work in their field to gain experience prior to graduation. This is also a welcome change for students who have other obligations or priorities that mean being in a classroom six hours a day isn't feasible for them.

In terms of geographic footprint, Southern Miss' Eagle Online program can now serve more students than before. "We're a dual-campus university [with Hattiesburg and Gulf Park campuses], but through this online initiative, we're really moving beyond those two campuses to the point where individuals within Mississippi and outside the state are able to take a realistic look at getting involved in our programs," says Lyman.

> ## "I know it sounds odd when you're talking about consultants, but it really has been an amazing experience."
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Mary Dayne Gregg agrees. "I think the online learning initiative makes our campus a more comprehensive university," she says. "I feel like this facet of our university enables us to reach a much wider range of people, and to service not only our state, but our region." President Saunders feels the same. "We can reach students across town, and we can get students across the country or the world with this kind of learning," she says.

Additionally, development of the Eagle Learning Online program allows Southern Miss to expand beyond the physical barriers of buildings and lecture space. With Eagle Learning Online, Southern Miss can now expand to meet demand of overly enrolled courses more seamlessly than before.

Pedagogy Meets Technology

Sheri Rawls says the course design and course quality piece of the project is bearing fruit as well. "My staff and I have learned from the Blackboard team how to work more closely with faculty to make them successful," she says. "We're reaching a success level where they're engaged in the conversation and interested in learning more about succeeding online – both with technology and pedagogy." She's also seeing more interaction between faculty and students. "We found that students are more likely to interact with a faculty member because they're not in fear of asking questions. Students who would never ask a question in class are more than willing to submit them online."

"The teaching and learning process has changed in some ways," says Lyman. "Through the use of

technology, we're now seeing ways we can go beyond traditional models. Students appreciate the flexibility that online courses and programs give them. It's opening doors that otherwise would not open. Faculty appreciates the same things – the time flexibility and the ability to reach an audience that they couldn't reach in the past. "

Rawls also says the financial piece of the initiative has been an eye-opener for the entire university. "Blackboard came in with an objective perspective, and what we got back from the process was a very clear revenue picture – from the actual numbers to what should be reinvested back into the program. It's given us the leverage we need to continue our online development and growth." She says this ties in with the overall goal of increasing enrollment, strengthening retention and improving graduation rates. "We are admitting more students into our online programs, graduating more students from them, and bringing more revenue into the university at a time of real financial need."

Moving Forward

Moving forward, Saunders sees a future where Southern Miss establishes programs that provide access to students who would not ordinarily have it. "I would also like to see us move in a direction where students have more choices, and where they can expedite their education by having both online and on-ground choices," she says. Some of those opportunities may arrive as early as the fall semester. Southern Miss has one of the highest-ranked polymer science programs in the world, and it's moving online in the fall. "I think polymer science will draw students, not just

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from the coastal region in Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama, but from around the world," says Rawls. "It's another example of our expanded ability to reach a market of students that we otherwise would not have drawn to the university."

The online team realizes there's much work still to be done. "We still have a ways to go," says Rawls. "We need to improve on our marketing and our recruitment of online students, but these things are step-by-step as we grow a foundation that has such potential." For his part, Dr. Lyman foresees a future where areas of study can grow because they're no longer confined to the university's resident population. "We want to look and see the entire United States and beyond as a potential pool of students. That will enable us to think about specialized programs that, for the first time, could generate the kind of numbers to make them viable."

Both Lyman and Rawls say Blackboard Consulting has given them the tools they need to reach their lofty goals. Lyman says, "Blackboard Consulting has not only come in and allowed us to do some things that we could not do otherwise, but they've taught us how to do those things for ourselves in the future." Rawls says, "Blackboard has helped us get to a point where now, internally, we can start devising solutions on our own. They're always there when I need them. Even if they're not on campus, I'm able to get in touch with them very easily. I ask the questions I need to ask, and always get a response immediately." She says working with the consultants at Blackboard has "really been an amazing experience."

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