Blackboard

Blackboard helped Southern Miss lead the state in online learning.

Blackboard and The University of Southern Mississippi: A Transformative New Process for Growing Online

The University of Southern Mississippi has a reputation for trailblazing. With campuses in Hattiesburg and Long Beach and five teaching and research sites along the Mississippi Gulf Coast and in Meridian, Southern Miss is the leading research university of the Gulf South, offering over 90 different academic programs for undergraduates and graduate students.

Like many institutions across the country, Southern Miss faced rising competition both regionally and online. The university sought to onboard students more effectively, preparing many for careers in a post-Katrina landscape, where the need for skilled professionals in health care, education, and other areas was rising.

In order to tackle these multifaceted challenges, Blackboard helped Southern Miss take a bold new approach to online learning—and transformed the way the institution reached and engaged online students. Today, Southern Miss leads the state in online learning.

New challenges

Southern Miss saw a need for several key skill sets in and around Mississippi. Recognizing an opportunity, the university set out to develop fully online programs in Construction Engineering Technology, Sport Coaching Education and Teacher Assistant Education.

First, the university faced some complicated challenges:

- **Demographics**
  Online courses would need to serve and appeal to students beyond the traditional 18 to 21-year-old demographic and in parts of the state not convenient to a Southern Miss campus.

- **Branding**
  For distance-learning students, the online classroom would be the face of the university, so its design and functionality would need to communicate the identity of Southern Miss clearly and consistently.

- **Faculty buy-in**
  The university's previous efforts to develop online programs had found limited faculty buy-in. New program development would have to be a closely collaborative process.

- **Financial context**
  Traditional departmental profit and loss statements made it difficult to understand how much revenue was generated by online learning overall.

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Online learning provider in Mississippi by enrollment according to SR Education

4,403

Online course enrollment in 2014

80%

Southern Miss students who will take an online course

1,261

Online-only enrollment in 2014

418

Online courses in spring 2014

Sheri Rawls, director of the university's Learning Enhancement Center, knew the initiative would require new pedagogical methods, a new approach to marketing, and updated online learning infrastructure. The university looked to Blackboard for insight on building and marketing its online courses.

"We saw an opportunity to partner with [Blackboard] in a different way," says Rawls, "more pedagogically than techno-logically. 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."

Blackboard created a statement of profit and loss for the existing online programs at Southern Miss, gathering data from across departments to assess the total profitability of online courses as they stood. The analysis revealed that online programs were already a significant source of revenue, a major insight for leadership that opened the door to investments in continued growth.

Collaboration across the board

The multifaceted requirements of an ambitious online learning system called for Blackboard to integrate closely with Southern Miss across many different departments and areas of responsibility.

Early in the process, Blackboard helped Southern Miss analyze the marketplace to better understand the university's core, secondary, and tertiary audiences throughout Mississippi. Blackboard helped the university to target each online program to specific audiences, and to tailor specific marketing materials to appeal to each segment. Furthermore, Blackboard helped the university to develop and sustain a pipeline of online programs for growth beyond the initial three by establishing both a set of services and incentives for participation by both departments and individual faculty, and a rigorous selection process for new online programs.

For each of the online learning program's initial courses, the Blackboard team met with departmental faculty and deans to better understand the aims and nuances of each program, as well as to help coordinate a consistent, university-wide approach to online learning that could be applied to new courses in the future. This would be no one-size-fits-all solution, but a scalable methodology for the university to develop new programs – with their own unique requirements and features – on their own.

"Before collaborating with Blackboard," says Rawls, "our online presence was viewed as an afterthought. Working with Blackboard changed that perception for a lot of faculty, including faculty who might never have thought about teaching online.

A marketing platform for steady growth

Blackboard helped Southern Miss shape a segmented audience plan, laying out the most effective ways to communicate with and onboard prospective students. To that end, Blackboard designed and developed a marketing website that allowed visitors to self-identify in a particular market segment, which in turn allowed Southern Miss to provide the most relevant content for both students and leads. Blackboard further assisted the university in catering to its audiences' specific needs with coordinated landing pages and customized websites. Blackboard and Southern Miss also worked together to develop brand strategies for target audiences, such as teaching assistants who sought a new role on campus.

With a sturdy and strategic foundation in place, Blackboard built the university's new online learning system from the ground up, combining a Web framework, visuals, and copy to create a seamless and consistently branded experience. Today, the system is known as Online @ Southern Miss.

Online enrollment is growing steadily, with 34% of the university's total summer credit hours coming from online programs in 2014. Sheri Rawls finds that the university's new approach to online education has been transformative. **"The perspective has totally shifted -- now faculty and students alike ask why we don't have a given course online.** We've really helped faculty integrate online teaching into the academic culture of the university." The university is expanding its online offerings steadily, developing new online programs and courses on its own. In spring 2014, Southern Miss offered more than 25 online degree programs, having started with only a few in 2009.

For Southern Miss, creating an online learning system improved much more than the online classroom experience. It was the impetus for a powerful and comprehensive new communication architecture, encompassing everything from the university's marketing to online pedagogy and the onboarding process for students. After five years of working with Blackboard, these changes have made Southern Miss the leader in online learning among its competitors, with the top online enrollment in the state according to SR Education. *The Hattiesburg American* describes Southern Miss as "the most popular online college in the state."

"Through the work we did with Blackboard," says Rawls, "the university realized this was an investment we needed to make. We were able to add additional resources to help us grow in a way we hadn't done before. The process worked. The conversations worked."