Blackboard
& Central Texas College

Blackboard learn™

Blackboard Managed Hosting Services Enable an e-Learning Explosion

Central Texas College (CTC) is a community college that is defined by the students they serve rather than the geographic boundaries of a traditional college district. CTC's history and mission are inextricably bound with that of the U.S. military, as a majority of their students are active duty, former and retired military personnel or members of their families. To meet the educational needs of both the military and the local community, CTC expanded beyond Texas in the early 1970's; around the same time, the college became a founding member of eArmyU, a federal program designed to provide enlisted soldiers with access to a quality education.

Today, CTC offers instructional services around the world through both traditional and distance learning systems. U. S. News and World Report ranks CTC fifth in the nation in terms of the number of enrollments in degree-granting online programs. But, numbers aren't everything. CTC prides itself in offering a high-quality distance education program that serves their unique, global community needs.

Building On Past Success

CTC began their collaboration with Blackboard with the purchase of the company's industry-leading course management system. Since that time, they've continued to build on that success by deploying Blackboard's full platform for engaging and assessing students both inside and outside courses.With each installation, and throughout the ongoing growth of these tools, Blackboard has proven itself as a responsive, forward-thinking partner in the college's educational mission.

So when it came time to decide where to host the Blackboard application, CTC knew exactly where to turn. As Manager of Instructional Technologies, Yancey Lones puts it, "We knew that with Blackboard, things get handled. At CTC, they had earned a reputation for getting things solved." Over the course of several weeks, Lones convinced the rest of the decision-making committee that a Blackboard hosting solution was not only cost-effective, but would actually save the college money in the long term. By making the decision to upgrade to Blackboard Managed Hosting, CTC opted for a stable, secure and scalable solution that offered financial flexibility, operational freedom and reduced risk.

Some of CTC's developers wanted to stick with open source software, but Lones knew that the system they chose would have to be robust and flexible enough to endure staff turnover and adapt to future developments in education technology. Blackboard Managed Hosting provided some of that flexibility with database and application expertise that can often be more difficult to retain. In addition, those same CTC developers who had been concerned about moving to Blackboard's service have been unshackled from worries about back-end infrastructure, and have moved on to other critical projects. By reducing costly expenditures for additional equipment, staff and connectivity, Blackboard Managed Hosting reduced the bottom line of a complex organization.

Quick Facts

+ Blackboard Client since 2004

+ Blackboard Managed Hosting client since 2004.

+ Enrollment of more than 50,000 students at over 100 locations worldwide.

+ U. S. News and World Report ranks CTC fifth nationally in degree-granting online program enrollements.

+ Distance learning enroll-ment grew from 15,235 to 57,484 (277%) in first three years.

+ Current class enrollments (2008) are even higher, at over 92,000.

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Enabling an Explosion In e-Learning

The services provided by Blackboard's Managed Hosting are designed to ensure that the risk of system outages and poor performance is minimized. Reliability and high availability are the top priorities. Each datacenter connects to the Internet via multiple Service Providers, a redundant network infrastructure, and multiple levels of power backup. A dedicated security team regularly monitors the system for unauthorized activity, and periodic audits of the datacenter ensure that standard practices are in place. Three levels of data backups are performed and content is stored in multiple locations for up to thirty days to minimize data loss in the event that information gets deleted or the system goes down for any reason.

Blackboard Managed Hosting Support is also continuously available with technicians online every weekend, holiday and all hours of the night. This is important for CTC's Distance Learning technicians, who also maintain a 24/7 schedule throughout the year. Managed Hosting also employs a variety of software tools to monitor the servers, network, and the application itself. Notifications are immediately sent to on-call engineers on the Managed Hosting team to let them know of outages. Devices are also installed throughout the data center to maximize user performance by ensuring traffic is following the best path, checking response times of the application and testing traffic loads to see when a particular piece of equipment might be over utilized. Engineers focused on Managed Hosting clients are available to address any issues that arise at any time of day or night. Lones describes the breadth of Blackboard service this way: "Even on weekends, unresolved problems get escalated. If the issue is not immediately resolved, a course of action is established so the correct resources are brought to bear first thing Monday morning."

At CTC, distance learning has increased from 15,235 enrollments in the 2001-2002 academic year to 57,484 enrollments in 2005-2006. That's a stunning increase of 277% in just five years. While traditional enrollment figures during that time remained relatively stable, or even decreased, the number of distance learning enrollments exploded. That trend continues into 2008, with a current estimate of 92,000 enrollments in distance learning courses and the growth is not expected to stop any time soon. CTC is pleased with the fact that not only have the number of students taking distance learning courses increased, but the number of courses that each student takes has also increased. Today, the average CTC distance learning student is enrolled in almost four courses per academic year. This is largely attributed to the convenience and quality of education that students feel they receive. As Sharon Davis, Director of Distance Education and Education Technology puts it, "We have all kinds of students enrolled in courses at CTC. We have everyone from active duty soldiers serving in various places around the world to new students just starting their post-secondary education, to grandparents across town who want to stay active and continue to advance their knowledge and skills. Blackboard technology plays an instrumental in our ability to meet all of their needs."

With this type of growth, it is critical that the Blackboard environment is able to adapt and handle the influx of users accessing the application. While hosting the application in-house would require anticipating growth in order to meet budget deadlines, hosting with Blackboard Managed Hosting has allowed CTC to scale to the increase in users without any worries. When Managed Hosting engineers see that an environment is overextended, application servers can be added with minimal disruption. Additional bandwidth and storage can also be added on the fly to accommodate growing needs. It is particularly important that the Blackboard environment is stable for CTC since such a large proportion of their users are accessing the system remotely.

The kind of growth CTC has seen in the past few years has had a huge impact on CTC as an institution. In financial terms, distance learning is now an essential source of funding for the college. In February 2008, for example, distance learning accounted for 37% of their total revenues. Lones estimates that the loss of that revenue would result in "the total and complete failure of CTC within six months." In terms of the importance of Blackboard software to CTC's faculty and students, Lones is equally emphatic. "If the Blackboard systems were not stable, our faculty and students would regard it as the world falling apart."

Blackboard Managed Hosting Features At-a-Glance

+ 99.7% application availability guarantee
+ 24 x 7 x 365 Team of dedicated Managed Hosting Engineers
+ 7 Day Application Setup and Installation
+ Daily backups stored onsite and remotely
+ Multiple levels of physical, network and data security
+ Storage and bandwidth on demand
+ Redundant Tier-1 Internet connections
+ Six Enterprise-class datacenters worldwide
+ Business Continuity service (optional)
+ SSL and/or VPN encryption (optional)

"We considered several alternatives and decided that Blackboard suited us best. Both students and faculty felt Blackboard's products were easy to use and delivered the kind of flexibility and functionality that they've come to expect. Our decision to use Blackboard Managed Hosting from the very beginning was due to the fact that it offered a level of stability that we couldn't provide on our own."

Sharon Davis
Director,
Distance Education & Educational Technology, Central Texas College

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