Blackboard
& the University of Cincinnati

Blackboard
learn⁺

Changing the Way University Business Is Done

When Fred Siff thinks about when he began as CIO at the University of Cincinnati (UC) ten years ago, it really does feel like a different century. This is especially true when he considers Cincinnati's innovative use of Blackboard's full platform for engaging and assessing students both inside and outside courses. Leveraging the Blackboard solution set in this way has, in his words, "changed the way we do business here at the University."

UC has an annual enrollment of approximately 35,000 students, making it one of the 100 largest universities in the United States. But when Siff arrived in 1998, the university was still searching for a way to truly impact teaching and learning through technology. "When I began, IT was already making a difference in the 'back office' of the university," Siff says. "But we were only starting to consider the difference that IT could make in the classroom." At that point UC was using a homegrown course management system. "But even then, we knew this was not the way students wanted to learn and faculty wanted to teach," says Siff. "It became incumbent on our institution to offer an effective solution beyond traditional course management or risk offering the community a lesser form of education."

Making a Choice

Siff quickly formed a blue-ribbon faculty committee charged with making a recommendation on how UC could move from its homegrown course management system. After a year of evaluating options, the committee initially recommended nothing

be done. "I was really disappointed, so I asked them to review the decision again the following year," Siff says. "Thankfully, they found Blackboard."

Siff continues, "The reason I jumped on the Blackboard bandwagon many years ago, was we never had a tool that helped with teaching and learning. ERP systems and payroll systems had been around for 20-25 years, helping back office operations, but we never had a tool that could really impact the classroom. Suddenly, with Blackboard software, we did."

Siff's IT team initially rolled out the Blackboard system in an interesting way: they chose 50 faculty members to participate in a pilot program. By the time this test group of faculty users was expanded to 100 participants, the IT team had received three times as many applicants as there were slots available for participants. That initial group of users found a multi-featured way to communicate with students, both in and out of class.

UNIVERSITY OF Cincinnati

Quick Facts

+ Blackboard Client since 1999

+ Annual enrollment of approximately 35,000 students

+ One of the 100 largest universities in the United States

+ 85% of students with at least one Blackboard Course

+ Nearly 4,000 courses with Blackboard-hosted content per semester

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Blackboard

The Drive to Innovation

Siff explains the drive to innovation at UC was paved by increasing features and services. "As we increased the services that people wanted, we brought more users into the fold," he says. Paul Foster, UC's lead Blackboard systems administrator and manager of its Faculty Technology Resources Center concurs: "The best trick we found to encourage faculty members to use the system was to incorporate other tools. We wanted to make their courses more effective and their lives easier, not more difficult."

Along the way, the "UCit" team, as Siff and Foster's group is known, developed a number of Blackboard Building Blocks™ as a means of enhancing their system. "Building Blocks are a terrific vehicle for customization and giving our clients what they want," Siff explains. "As an example, we created a Building Block early on that ports student photos from the Student ID system into the Blackboard system." As a result, when instructors receive their class roster through the Blackboard system, they also receive a picture of each student. This feature alone brought many early adopters to Blackboard.

"The student photo roster encouraged faculty members to try out the system because it demonstrated inherent value in a new service," says Foster. "Along the way, we began hooking them. After all, they were already in the Blackboard system, and it was easy to use, so they became convinced that the system could increase their students' ability to learn." Another example: the Blackboard system was designed to grade tests and automatically insert the figures into an electronic grade book. Such administrative shortcuts make it possible for students to check their grades or class standing at any time. In the past, however, faculty members had to input their grades again, into a separate, end-of-term grading system. By building a link between the Blackboard system and the registrar's database, Siff and his team enabled instructors to simply upload the grades they had already input. "That's a terrific time saver for them," says Siff.

The Importance of Student Input

Siff says that while his group had done a good job of reaching out to faculty members, they needed to listen more closely to students. "For a long time we felt our primary Blackboard customers were faculty members," he says. "But, ultimately, the consumers of the system are the students." As a first step in reaching out to them, every recognized student organization (over 320 in all) received its own Blackboard organization site. "Suddenly every college within the university wanted its own site, and each department within the colleges followed," says Siff. "We had developed an environment that encompassed our university, but we wanted to take it a step further."

The university did so by handing ownership of the Blackboard portal to the student body government. "We told them the Blackboard portal was theirs, and we asked them what they wanted to do with it," says Siff. The result is an online community run for students by students and they've seized the opportunity to affect real change on campus through the system's online polling capabilities.

"The undergraduate student government has really begun to use Blackboard software to make sure we're as efficient as possible," says James Radley, the university's student body president. "The Blackboard polling option gives us an opportunity to poll students and receive immediate feedback on things we're working on. It also gives us some hard facts we can present to the administration."

Making a Difference Through Polling

In the first poll conducted by the UC student government, over 4,000 students identified tuition and public safety as the two most important issues faced by the university. Subsequent polls have led to other specific campus-wide initiatives such as the creation of a 100-station, 24-hour computer study space called UCit@Langsam. "We even narrowed the polling for feedback on the lab features students were looking for," says Radley. "They were telling us what they needed to succeed academically and we had specifics to share with the administration."

When the student government was also searching for ideas on making class registration a more concise and informed process for students, they again turned to the Blackboard polling option. As a result of this poll, the student government asked the UCit team to create a feature in the UC registration system that would enable students to review course syllabi when choosing their classes. The resulting Course Preview

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tool contains nine areas of course information, including course format, required texts, grading methods and other pertinent information. The course format contains information on whether the course is a lecture, experiential learning, discussion or lab, and whether grading methods include exams, quizzes, homework, papers or attendance.

In another interesting development, the UC student government leveraged the Blackboard system to promote overall Blackboard use by faculty members. A recent poll asked students to rate the importance of an instructor's Blackboard usage, and more than 90% of over 6,000 respondents identified this issue as either important or very important to them. Previously, the faculty senate had passed a resolution encouraging all faculty members to upload their course materials to the Blackboard system, and several editorials published in the university's student newspaper demanded Blackboard use in all courses.

Exponential Growth

The use of Blackboard software at UC now far exceeds national benchmarks. Paul Foster says, "We've seen the level of activity within courses skyrocket. 90 percent of the students and two-thirds of the faculty rely on our Blackboard system each quarter." Foster also says that the depth and richness of online course content is increasing as well. "We can monitor how many classes have content within the Blackboard system and how many times students are accessing that content," he says. "We've seen an exponential rise."

Mike Lieberman is both a Distinguished Teaching Professor in the university's College of Medicine and UC's Dean of Instructional and Research Computing. He says another way to measure the success of the Blackboard system at UC is by analyzing the questions he receives from faculty members. "Faculty are no longer asking how to post their syllabus. They are asking complex questions like how to create assessments that will compare different sections within their courses." Foster agrees, "At this point, we're somewhat beyond orienting faculty. We still offer new user training, but most of our training is centered on creating e-Portfolios using Blackboard or incorporating Web 2.0 applications."

So what about the cost? First, you have to understand Fred Siff's take on that question. "We've done economic analyses that show that the cost per student of delivering Blackboard software is a trivial expense," he says. "We serve more than 70,000 students during the course of an academic year. If you use that as the divisor going into the cost of maintaining the system, the resulting cost per student turns out to be in the single digits — less than one percent of the course tuition." Siff adds, "In terms of the value students perceive, and the value the faculty perceive, our Blackboard system is clearly a money-maker."

Continuing Innovation

The innovation continues today. Students and faculty alike are taking

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Faculty Technology Resources Center Manager University of Cincinnati

Services Integrated with Blackboard

- Bearcat Campus Card
- Web Grading
- Podcasting
- Syllabus & Course Preview Tools
- Mobile Messaging
- Student Photos
- E-reserves
- PRS
- Course Evals

advantage of a Podcasting Building Block that easily uploads recorded lectures to the Blackboard system with a user-friendly link. Students only have to click and drag an icon for the lecture they want into iTunes, and they're subscribed automatically to the podcast for that course. In the winter quarter of 2007/2008, more than 700 students received over 120 podcast lectures.

UC is also leveraging the ubiquity of the Blackboard system to deliver the university's new emergency notification system. UC is piloting a text messaging system that sends routine class announcements to the mobile phones of students who sign up for the service. Students choosing to opt in through the Blackboard system receive text messages any time something changes within a Blackboard course. Students with a Web-enabled cell phone plan can also receive a URL link embedded in the message and click to view the posted change through their mobile phones. Instructors can also opt in to choose what type of course information they want to send on a regular basis. An e-mail component also allows students to elect to have messages sent to their e-mail accounts as well. And while the system is designed for daily academic messages, it can also be used in an emergency. "

My mantra," Siff explains, "is that the business of our university is teaching, learning and research, and Blackboard is integral to it." He adds, "The trick is not to use it as a piece of software, but as a redefining tool that enables the creation of a very complex and rich environment."

The Future is Now

Wayne Hall is both an English Professor and the university's Vice Provost for Faculty Development. He says he has become very comfortable with the notion that he's a Blackboard advocate on campus. "Due to my own classroom experience," he explains, "I see Blackboard technology making the kind of positive difference in teaching and learning that I can clearly and specifically identify, and that I can explain in persuasive ways to our faculty."

Hall, Siff, Foster and Lieberman are also looking forward to the potential of Blackboard's assessment solution. Hall explains: "We see Blackboard's new assessment capabilities as a way to assess more broadly beyond the confines of a single course." He says, "It should enable us to pull assessment data from a variety of similar courses or multiple sections of the same course. As a result, we're looking forward to putting together more comprehensive, data-driven assessment reports than we've had in the past."

Looking ahead, the UCit team has plans to continue its innovative ways by adding differentiated and new services that do more than simply keep pace with technological improvements. "Student focus groups have told us that they want automatic notifications when something changes in their courses," says Siff. "They also want the student government portal to port to their mobility devices. Running the Blackboard system on integrated PDAs, cell phones, laptops and tablets is the future," Siff explains, "so we're starting now."