

Blackboard Learn™ Helps Capella Create the Ultimate Online Student Experience

As a fully-online institution of higher learning, Minneapolis-based Capella University has no campus and no student union. But what it does have is more than 28,000 students from all 50 states and 45 countries earning degrees in a rich, online learning environment. Blackboard Learn has been a partner in Capella's success.

In addition to its 100 percent online presence, Capella differs from other universities by focusing on the needs of working adults who have been underserved by traditional institutions. As part of this mission, the school places great emphasis on learning outcomes that develop



practical, profession-based skills and subject mastery geared toward both successful completion of degree programs as well as fulfilling professional requirements. It is also leading "Transparency by Design," a pioneering accountability initiative in higher education.

This focus has produced great results for Capella, which has experienced impressive annual enrollment growth of 20 percent over the last three years. To address the needs of its growing student body, the university pairs academic specialists with web design professionals, who effectively leverage the Blackboard platform for course development.

QUICK FACTS

- ▶ Capella offers more than 1,050 online courses and 23 undergraduate and graduate programs in 114 specialized areas of study
- ▶ More than 28,000 full- and part-time learners enrolled
- ▶ Students from all 50 states and 45 countries
- ▶ 20 percent annual enrollment growth rate
- ▶ Partnering with Blackboard since November 2003

Capella Growth and Design Innovations

The number of Capella courses offered has nearly doubled over the last 5 years. Approximately one-third of all enrolled students log on simultaneously on Sunday evenings, and the university continues to develop innovative, proprietary applications that are implemented within the Blackboard system. “In the face of this ever-increasing volume and demand for functionality, we’ve been able to create a breadth of programs with many different types of requirements and learning events,” says Keith Koch, Capella’s VP of Next Generation Learning. Two examples of this successful combination of scalability and design innovation are the school’s scoring rubrics (clickable grading guides) and multi-media instructional tools.

- ▶ **Rubrics:** As part of its emphasis on transparency and accountability, the school has developed scoring rubrics that appear as part of the workflow when an instructor reviews submissions to the assignment drop box, providing a standardized set of assessment criteria. When grading is completed, the assignment is automatically routed back to the learner, who is able to see exactly how their work compared to the scoring guide. In addition to making the grading process simpler for instructors and more transparent for learners, it eliminates grading “on a curve” since standards have been predetermined. The results are grades that more accurately reflect learners’ accomplishments and subject mastery.

Although developed internally, Capella relies on Blackboard staff to handle implementation and maintenance of the rubrics feature. With this arrangement, Blackboard Consulting supports the rubrics components and any refinements Capella may make to them in the future.

- ▶ **Multimedia:** Capella combines both established and innovative educational principles with emerging best practices in web design and development when designing courses and instructional tools. The Blackboard Learn™ platform enables Capella courses to include three dimensional presentations with audio, video and dynamically changing maps and graphics to make courses more effective.

Continuous Improvement of the Learner Experience

Ongoing assessment of learner, instructor, course and program performance is an important part of Capella’s dedication to educational accountability and students’ learning experience.

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Kim Pearce, Capella’s Director of Assessment and Institutional Research, says that information such as level of student participation in discussion boards and frequency of instructor postings make Blackboard Learn an invaluable tool to better understand the learner experience and track compliance with accreditation requirements.

For example, if a student has low or average “relative discussion time,” the university can intervene. “We help direct their behavior by pointing out that discussions are an important element of the course and by providing resources to help improve participation and engagement,” Pearce says.

Student Progress and Achievement

The latest update to Capella’s system has been the addition of Blackboard e-Portfolios™. Learners post learning artifacts such as assignments and projects to their portfolio to show progress. This is a great way for them to demonstrate skill mastery to prospective employers and licensing boards.

Capella developed customized templates for each school within the university. Blackboard e-Portfolios suggests which assignments should be added, although learners retain ultimate control over what is included.

Capella is able to use the same tool to demonstrate compliance with accreditation requirements. Pearce explains, “Specialized accreditation demands specific competencies and examples of detailed work. Blackboard e-Portfolios catalogues material so accreditors can easily find the documentation they need.”

The customization of e-Portfolios is an example of the strong relationship between Capella and Blackboard. According to Matthew Roscoe, Capella’s Project Manager for IT Learning Systems, “Capella and Blackboard worked together to modify the tool to meet our technical and business needs.”

