Blackboard Ally: Promoting Quality Through Groundbreaking Technology at Albizu University

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ALBIZU UNIVERSITY

"Blackboard Ally allows the educator to open a range of possibillities to impact better and more efficiently the intelligences that human being can have, regardless of their ability."

Néstor del Valle
Educational Technology Manager at Albizu University

Albizu University, in Puerto Rico, implemented and adopted Blackboard Ally in 2018 to offer its students an inclusive learning experience primarily focused on Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. The theory suggests that there are approximately eight types of intelligences (Verbal/Linguistic, Logical/Mathematical, Visual/Spatial, Musical, Bodily/Kinesthetic, Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Naturalist,) and that each individual strengthens their abilities, capacities, and knowledge through one or more of those intelligences. This way, and considering that every human being learns differently, the University has committed to develop and bolster students' capacities according to their learning style.

At a Glance

Challenge: For Albizu University, the main challenge lied in establishing cultural and academic change. On the one hand, understanding that inclusive teaching and learning benefits all students—whether or not they have a disability—and, on the other hand, promoting a leap outside of their comfort zone by committing educators to create higher quality content that could be consumed in different formats, and as a result, lead to student success.

Solution: Despite having a student body with low disability rates, Albizu University bets on inclusive learning.

As part of one of their strategic decisions, the University decided to implement Blackboard Ally, (a revolutionary product that integrates seamlessly into the Learning Management System and focuses on making digital course content more accessible,) following the approach and belief that students should have greater access to resources and diversity when consuming academic and educational content. As a result, students are given diverse options to choose how to learn.

Results: With approximately 80% of teachers using Blackboard Ally and 2,600 students positively impacted, this cutting-edge technology has become a fundamental tool in teaching and learning at Albizu University. The entire educational process has become more efficient, as well as stakeholder best practices (teachers, faculty, administrative staff, students) and contents created by faculty, which have noticeably increased in quality due to Blackboard Ally Machine Learning Algorithms that provide detailed reports on accessibility issues and provides recommendations on alternative formats that can be used.

> *"Blackboard Ally encourages change in one's way of thinking. You don't need students with disabilities in order to make classrooms inclusive from a learning diversification perspective."*
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> **Néstor del Valle**
> Educational Technology Manager at Albizu University

Challenge: Cultural and Academic Change

At Albizu University, the goal is to teach efficiently in order to ensue student success, which is why the biggest challenge the institution faces is twofold: cultural and academic. While it's critical to understand that inclusive learning benefits all students, regardless of disability or not, this is something worth demystifying as there may be institutions that due to their low disabled student population decide that investing in accessible technology is not a priority.

Technologies such as Blackboard Ally are, on the contrary, success drivers, due to their versatility in providing multiple options of academic content formats. An interesting academic challenge arises as a result, as technology itself has managed to motivate faculty to increase their content quality, given the careful task it takes to upload content onto the platform, which has to pass through various filters that ensure it is accessible and can be consumed in different formats. The tool has encouraged faculty to step out of their comfort zone, and not to not only delve into and understand the power of Blackboard Ally, but also to use it effectively and efficiently.

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As cell phone use has become such a powerful learning tool, it reinforces the need for approaches that facilitate content format diversification. Considering the multiple intelligences theory and applying the principles of universal learning design offers an opportunity to students to have success-oriented learning experiences.

Solution: Blackboard Ally Diversifies Learning

Blackboard Ally helps institutions build a more inclusive learning environment and improve the student experience by helping them take clear control of course content with usability, accessibility and quality in mind.

Psychology students at the University, for instance, typically have a significant amount of readings to complete. With just one click, readings can become audio files that students can listen to while driving, at work, or when they have eyestrain and simply prefer to listen rather than read. There are even those students who try reading and listening simultaneously, in order to employ more than one of Gardner's intelligences. This way, they are increasing their knowledge uptake, which is activated in the brain in various ways all at once.

> *"Blackboard Ally has made studying on the fly much easier. I can convert the file, play the audio and listen to the lecture material while I drive or do other things." - Sean-Michael Suarez, PsyD Student and Student Council President.*

At Albizu University, Blackboard Ally has facilitated processes and doesn't require a third party to adapt content. The technology is easy to use and intuitive, which is why faculty use it to ensure their content is accessible. It has also promoted and increased collaborative work among them, and they are careful to follow the provided suggestions (in the form of reports) every time they upload content. "Everyone wants to avoid the red needle pointing out that something is inaccessible," says Del Valle.

The Educational Technology area at Albizu University provides faculty all the training and support they need in order to effectively adopt Blackboard Ally. Although there was initially some resistance to change, it has now become an organic practice, as faculty acknowledge the importance of distributing their content in different formats so students can learn effectively according to their own preferences.

Results: Blackboard Ally, Inclusive Learning Experiences Through Usability, Accessibility and Quality in Mind

After implementing Blackboard Ally, faculty members have been motivated to improve their contents, thanks to the reports generated by the tool. "The days of scanning a document and uploading it are behind us," says del Valle. Now, faculty worry about uploading content that is completely accessible and ready to be converted into alternate formats, which is a great added value that Blackboard Ally has provided for the University.

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Approximately 80% of professors at the University's three campuses (San Juan, Miami, Mayagüez) use Blackboard Ally, which translates into 2,600 positively impacted students. Course content consumption according to their needs and interests has become a standard within the university, which is also synonymous with flexibility, as today's students must be able to learn at their own time and pace.

The changes implemented at Albizu University brought on by the adoption of Blackboard Ally has led to motivated students, higher student retention rates, and peer recommendations. Student recommendations related to the University's unique services, personalized experience, and wide array of learning options has helped position Albizu University as a national benchmark in quality education.

> *"We have seen how professors go to the Educational Technology area to ask for support, and it is very gratifying to see how they now structure content and learned to describe images, all of which translates into a better audio experience for students."*

Néstor del Valle
Educational Technology Manager at Albizu University

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