



Penn State's top-rated online programs aim to stay on top

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Rick Shearer

Director of World Campus Learning Design

In 1892, Penn State became one of the nation's first universities to offer correspondence courses. Fast forward to 1998, and the school became one of the first major universities to provide education online. Today, more than 12,000 students from around the globe attend classes via Penn State World Campus. In January 2016, US News and World Report rated Penn State Number One for the best online bachelor's degree programs for the second straight year. Additionally, the University's online graduate programs in business, IT, education and engineering all placed in the publication's Top Ten for the second year in a row. The University has a strong commitment to providing courses aimed at adult learners, fully online, the academic equal to those offered on campus, and interactive and dynamic. Blackboard Collaborate is helping Penn State World Campus stay on top.

Getting and staying on top with Blackboard Collaborate

To provide the flexible learning opportunities that a worldwide student body—many with full-time work and family commitments—needs, the 1,000 plus courses offered through World Campus are fully asynchronous, but that doesn't mean that the courses don't need to be lively and engaging. As Rick Shearer, Director of World Campus Learning Design recalls, “Penn State began using Blackboard Collaborate technology in the early 2000's. When we first adopted it, our online MBA program was looking for a way its students could work collaboratively on projects.” Penn State based its decision on the product's ability to work seamlessly across different platforms and browsers, the smooth learning experience it offered, and its proprietary audio technology, which enabled the University to support learners who were using dial-up for access.

“Enabling our students to work together through various channels provides a deeper level of engagement in the learning process, and provides them with experiences similar to those that our on-campus students have,” Shearer added. “The ability to offer students a synchronous collaborative learning environment option has helped enhance the Penn State World Campus learning experience.”



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Collaboration and beyond with Blackboard Collaborate

During the last three semesters, World Campus courses have incorporated more than 2,000 Blackboard Collaborate sessions, and there has been a steady increase in usage as the World Campus has grown. While collaboration on projects is the primary way in which Blackboard Collaborate is used, instructors are also using Blackboard Collaborate to record classes for students to watch, to conduct office hours, and for optional discussion sessions.

There are several capabilities that Penn State finds especially valuable. “Collaborate’s ability to scale for video and audio are among its best features,” says Shearer. “I also want to note that our accessibility team thinks very highly of Collaborate’s capabilities in this area. Being able to transcribe a conversation while it’s underway is one that’s particularly well-regarded.” Other highly-valued features include the whiteboard, polling, and application sharing.

Blackboard Collaborate’s stability and reliability mean one less thing to worry about

Shearer prizes Blackboard Collaborate’s stability and reliability. “Frankly, Collaborate is one of those products that we just take for granted,” he says. “Collaborate has been very stable. The sessions always work. The recordings always work. Its reliability means that I don’t have to spend a lot of time thinking about it, which isn’t always true for technology. And when we do have issues or requests, Blackboard has been exceptionally responsive.”

As Penn State World Campus has grown into the top online learning program it is today, Shearer can look back on how the university has relied on Blackboard web conferencing technology for so many years. “Our decision has certainly held up,” he reports. “After all these years, this has been a remarkably stable, reliable, and useful product for our instructors and students.”

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