

Improving Engagement and Retention Through Blackboard Assist

How El Paso Community College Provided Tailored Resources to Students Learning On Campus and Remotely



Background

With accolades such as “Top 10 Colleges in the Nation,” “National Award for Student Success,” and more, El Paso Community College (EPCC) has made student engagement and retention a cornerstone of its ethos since its inception in 1972. EPCC’s innovative approach to continuing education, Career and Technical Education (CTE), and workforce skills has positioned the institution as a national model. Their approach works to ensure diverse student bodies thrive on their pathway to graduation and beyond.

The stature of EPCC’s success in student outcomes is due, in part, to the college’s accessible resources that support students who need to attend class virtually or outside of traditional work hours. The framework for virtual learning was already tried-and-true when the pandemic required the campus to close, but EPCC leadership wanted to ensure that students would remain engaged in learning without the in-person element.

Expanding the Blackboard Role at EPCC

EPCC departments utilized Blackboard Learn to transition to an entirely remote learning experience, but leadership was seeking opportunities to continue to centralize resources for students. In the fall of 2020, Luz Cadena, EPCC’s Manager of Distance Learning Support Services, explored the addition of Blackboard Assist, a free Higher Education Learn tool that gives students access to online and on-campus assets all in one place. This allowed students easier access within the Blackboard hub – from attending virtual classes in Blackboard Collaborate to accessing critical information in Blackboard Assist, rather than navigating to the EPCC site to search for this information.

“There was a huge initiative at EPCC to keep students engaged with the college because of the lack of physical contact. Blackboard Assist fit in perfectly to meet the efforts that EPCC was launching to reach this goal,” said Cadena.

Cadena coordinated with Distance Learning Support Services department members to implement the rollout of Blackboard Assist. Working to populate all the departments’

information and logos in the platform from each college department, Cadena was able to introduce Blackboard Assist in a provisional state to the Vice President of Instruction and EPCC's academic deans. She gathered their feedback and then utilized their DLSS Technical Coordinator to transition all the content from staging to the production site. EPCC was able to roll out Blackboard Assist in time for the 2021 spring semester and provide resources and toolkits provided by Blackboard to faculty and staff for quick and easy adoption.

The Impact

According to Cadena, one of the best features about Blackboard Assist is the ability to prioritize top-level resources so that students can see pertinent information right away. For EPCC, these items include registration and a how-to handbook for online learning at EPCC. Removing these barriers to information has helped EPCC feel more confident about the resources that students need in order to stay enrolled and engaged.

“We have gotten some good feedback from faculty,” said Cadena. “They like that it puts everything at the students’ fingertips.”

Once the registration period passed, Cadena moved the bookstore to priority placement in Blackboard Assist. Later this year, tutoring will be added. As many students struggle with the social and financial implications of the pandemic, counseling appointments are just another resource that can be showcased within Blackboard Assist.

Blackboard Assist allows EPCC to stay nimble and continue to make simple adjustments that make the student experience more streamlined. As school requirements during the pandemic continue to evolve, these swift updates will be crucial for EPCC as more students return to campus.

What's Next

EPCC is gradually adding services to Blackboard Assist, ensuring students do not reach information overload and navigate out of the platform. Cadena and the Distance Learning Support Services department continue to coordinate with faculty and staff to ensure the Blackboard Assist platform is answering the most pertinent student questions and reducing their own internal workload and troubleshooting.

