

Blackboard Content System Expands Versatility of e-Learning Tools at Gallaudet University

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ABSTRACT: Gallaudet University expanded its set of e-learning tools to include the Blackboard Content System in September 2004. The Content System added much needed functionality and features including electronic portfolios, virtual hard drive, and WebDAV. Building on existing knowledge and experience with the Blackboard Learning and Community Systems, users were able to quickly assimilate and implement the new technology. It is anticipated that this addition will continue to increase the use of e-learning tools in teaching and learning.

SUMMARY: In September 2004, Gallaudet University expanded the use of Blackboard Learning and Community Portal systems by adding the Blackboard Content System with one terabyte of storage. Gallaudet University was an early adopter of a course management system in 1996 and has been using Blackboard tools since June 2001. As of 2004, 66% of courses offered utilize Blackboard to enhance teaching and learning.

Adding the Blackboard Content System to Gallaudet University's existing Learning and Community Systems accelerated the adoption and use of e-Learning tools and provided alternatives that satisfy a variety of academic and non-academic goals. With the Content System, we are able to provide our users with a virtual hard drive with ability to create electronic portfolios. Users have complete control of their own files and resources with the ability to share and delegate permissions (read, write, delete) to others.

Building on the existing experience and knowledge of the Blackboard tools among our faculty, staff, and students, their adoption of the Content System has been relatively painless. During the first year, use of the Blackboard Content System was introduced to pilot groups of students and faculty. Formal availability of the system for the entire Gallaudet community is planned for August 2005. During the Fall semester 2004 (August-December), an e-Portfolio pilot was launched in conjunction with the Education Department faculty and majors. Education majors are required to develop portfolios to meet accreditation standards. Also, in Spring 2005 (January-May), the First Year Seminar course, a required course taught by 16+ faculty from different academic departments across 30+ sections offered yearly, redesigned their courses in Blackboard to take advantage of the WebDAV (Distributed Authoring Versioning) capability to drastically reduce the tedious processes of updating and sharing files/content. Using the Content System helped to reduce the number of duplicate files on the system. In Summer 2005 (May-August), more than 50 faculty and staff received orientation to the Blackboard Content System through e-Curriculum workshops and demonstrations.

From the system administration point of view, the addition of the Blackboard Content System offers enhanced flexibility in maintaining disk space, decentralizing permissions management, and allowing users direct control of adding images and files for portal modules such as those created for newly admitted students.

Gallaudet University was an early adopter of a course management system in 1996 and has been using Blackboard tools since June 2001. Additional information on Gallaudet's e-learning initiatives can be found in a paper from the 2003 Instructional Technology and Education of the Deaf Symposium at <http://academictech.gallaudet.edu/events/2003/ntid>.

In September 2004, Gallaudet University expanded the use of Blackboard Learning and Community Portal systems by adding the Blackboard Content System with one terabyte of storage. As described on Blackboard's web site (<http://www.blackboard.com/products/academic/cs>), the Content System "includes capabilities in four key areas: Learning Content Management, e-Portfolio Management, Virtual Hard Drive Management and Library Digital Asset Management." During the first year of implementation, Gallaudet University focused on the e-Portfolios, Learning Content Management, and Virtual Hard Drive Management for portal module managers. Formal availability of the system for the entire Gallaudet community is planned for August 2005.

Academic Technology partnered with the Department of Education at Gallaudet University to conduct a pilot test of Blackboard e-Portfolios. The Department of Education had previously used LiveText, a system for education-specific e-Portfolios but had not been happy with that software. Pre-service student teachers were taught to create e-Portfolios using the Blackboard Content System. More than XX students created and added to their e-Portfolios during the 2004-2005 school year. Using the work flow functionality included with the Content System, students could send links to their e-Portfolios to faculty for feedback. When ready to share their e-Portfolios with potential employers, they could email an open or password-protected "pass" to the e-Portfolio, allowing users without Blackboard accounts to read their e-Portfolio. Upon completion, students could download a copy of their e-Portfolio onto a CD to keep as a permanent record of their work. Example screen shots from selected e-Portfolios are provided in the accompanying Powerpoint slide show (<http://academictech.gallaudet.edu/events/2005/NTIDsymposium/BbContentSystem-GU-NTID-2004.pps>) for this paper. The faculty and students participating in the pilot e-Portfolio project reported high levels of satisfaction with the project. Other departments will begin using the e-Portfolio tools in Fall 2005 (August-December).

In Spring 2005 (January-May), the First Year Seminar course, a required course taught by 16+ faculty from different academic departments across 30+ sections offered yearly, redesigned their courses in Blackboard to take advantage of the WebDAV (Distributed Authoring Versioning) capability to drastically reduce the tedious processes of updating and sharing files/content. Using the Content System helped to reduce the number of duplicate files on the system and made the process of collaborating much easier. Prior to availability of the Content System, the course content files had to be uploaded into each of the separate courses on the Blackboard system. If a change was needed in one of the files, it had to be updated in each of the 30+ sections for the course. With the Blackboard Content System, now each of the sections has a pointer to a single set of files on the Content System. When files are updated, that updated version is automatically available to all 30+sections. The versioning function in the Blackboard Content System allows faculty or teams of

faculty to keep a history of the changes they make to specific course content files. The Content System will also be useful for faculty teaching multiple sections of a single course. For such situations, the faculty will store their course files in their individual “my Content” areas and then link to those files from each of their Blackboard courses. For faculty teaching combined or linked courses, the faculty will store their course files in a special Courses folder under “Institutional Content.”

One of the impetuses for purchasing the Blackboard Content System was the need for a better method for portal module managers to add graphics and files. Starting in January 2004, a group of 15 offices across campus worked on creating a portal for admitted students, providing them with information on campus services and the Washington, DC area, along with opportunities for online discussions prior to their arriving on campus. A report on the Admitted Student Portal is available at <http://academictech.gallaudet.edu/events/2005/blackboard>. Because the Content System was not available at the time of portal module development, we had to create a process wherein images and files could be uploaded to a separate server and then linked to the portal modules at <http://my.gallaudet.edu>. When the portal modules were updated for Summer 2005, the Virtual Hard Drive component of the Blackboard Content System made the updates easier to accomplish and provided portal managers with independent and direct control of the images and files they wished to share with admitted students.

Academic Technology has provided the Gallaudet community with a virtual hard drive system since August 2002. That system, available at <http://myfiles.gallaudet.edu>, will be retired in October 2005. Members of the community will continue to have private space on a parallel system created by Information Technology Services (<http://storage.gallaudet.edu>) available to faculty since 2004 and to students starting in 2005. They also will have access to the Blackboard virtual hard drive system, which provides flexible options for sharing content and collaborating with users inside and outside the Gallaudet community. For example, faculty members collaborating with an external researcher can use the Blackboard Content System to share a file and allow the external researcher to upload a new version of the file. For collaborations among Gallaudet community members, additional workflow tools are available, allowing users to request that others perform specific actions (e.g., remind, review, approve, grade, complete) on selected files. Workflow activities can be sent to specific users or to the various lists of users within courses (e.g., all users, all instructors, all teaching assistants, all students). The presentation of this paper will include a live tour of the Blackboard Content System and selected screen shots are included in the accompanying Powerpoint slide show (<http://academictech.gallaudet.edu/events/2005/NTIDSymposium/BbContentSystem-GU-NTID-2005.pps>) for this paper.

In Summer 2005 (May-August), more than 50 faculty and staff received orientation to the Blackboard Content System through e-Curriculum workshops and demonstrations. The new tools have been received enthusiastically, with many original and exciting applications being proposed. Some academic departments will use the Content System for managing curriculum review and revision. Other groups of faculty are excited by the collaboration opportunities. One faculty member reports: “The Content System is a model of efficiency. Now, I can upload a large number of files all at one time, use them for different courses, and easily modify the files at any time. I have been waiting for a time-saving feature like this for years!”

In August 2005, the Blackboard Content System will be made available to the entire Gallaudet Community. During the Fall semester, the Library will also begin using the Blackboard Content System for e-Reserves. Reference librarians will be able to upload digital files of articles and other materials to e-Reserve folders for each course, making the materials available only to enrolled students and instructors for a specific course. The e-Reserves will complement the existing WRLC Linkmaker system (<http://bb-opensource.org/download/linkmaker.html>), which allows links to be embedded in Blackboard courses to electronic reference materials provided by the library.

The academic community at Gallaudet will also use the Blackboard Content System as an intranet for sharing content. For example, a video announcement from the Gallaudet President about strategic planning was posted at <http://my.gallaudet.edu> in May 2005. Similarly, a report of faculty evaluations of campus services was posted and made available only to members of the Gallaudet community. In addition, the Gallaudet community will use the Learning Object Catalog within the Blackboard Content System for sharing educational content and will also have access to the Merlot Learning Object Catalog (<http://www.merlot.org>) from within the Blackboard system.

During its first pilot year, the Blackboard Content System accelerated the adoption and use of e-Learning tools and provided alternatives that satisfy a variety of academic and non-academic goals. Those who have had access to the system report that it provides collaborative opportunities that enhance the educational process. In August 2005, the Content System will be available for all members of the Gallaudet community. Extensive orientations and training will be provided by the e-Learning Team in Academic Technology to help the community take advantages of the many features and functions.