

Upgrading to Blackboard® Learn Ultra Improves Student Satisfaction, Success, and Retention

Learn Ultra offers the course design students want and need for successful grades



Founded in 1962, Greenville Technical College (GTC) is the second largest technical school in South Carolina. Approximately 13,500 students are enrolled at the college, with 59% enrolled part time. Forty percent of those enrolled are 25 to 39 years old. In 2023, Greenville Technical College was named one of Newsweek's Top 100 Online Colleges. GTC has been a Blackboard® Learn institution since 2009.

INSTITUTION TYPE: 2-YEAR PUBLIC

LOCATION: GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA

STUDENTS: 13,500

FACULTY: 300 FULL TIME, 440 ADJUNCT

ANTHOLOGY PRODUCTS:

 Blackboard LEARN

 Anthology Student

We had some massive increases in student success this summer compared with the previous two summers. For example, English 102 had 33.7% and Math 110 27.2% better success rates in comparison with the two previous summers.



Lee McMinn

LMS Administrator and Instructional Designer, Greenville Technical College



The Challenges

In the fall of 2021, GTC conducted an online student survey, and an overwhelming number of respondents indicated the need for more consistency in course design. GTC saw this as an opportunity to address this issue on a campus-wide basis using Blackboard Learn Ultra. In addition to meeting students' requests for improved course design, GTC had a goal of improving student success rates.



The Solutions

"If we were really going to address the issue of students needing more consistency in their courses, what better time to do that than as we're moving to the new version of the LMS," said Lee McMinn, LMS administrator and instructional designer at GTC. Blackboard Learn Ultra features and capabilities, including a clean layout, frequent product updates, an accessible design, mobile-friendly functionality, and multiple course conversion options, appealed to GTC and prompted them to work with instructional designers to rethink, redevelop, and transition their courses to the LMS.

The decision to adopt Learn Ultra was made through GTC's center for instructional support staff, their online advisory committee, and instructional technology coaches.

"Our online advisory committee has representatives from all of our schools across campus. There are faculty members that volunteer on this committee. They were able to test it, look at it, and try it out, try some playground courses, and they fell in love with it," said McMinn. GTC instructional technology coaches, and faculty members who are super users of Blackboard Learn and are embedded in all of their schools, reviewed it next. After this core group of faculty and staff bought into it, it was taken to the faculty senate and then moved through their faculty process as they progressed towards the adoption.

GTC identified 40 high-volume classes that have traditionally had lower success rates than desired, including English 101 and 102 and Introduction to Math. "We really wanted to focus this time on not only the transition to Ultra but also reworking some of those courses to make them make sense to the students ... ultimately, we had 22 courses that ran in Learn Ultra in spring of 2022. That equates to about 300 sections and a little over 2,000 student enrollments," said McMinn.



These may seem like small things, but when you add this up over 1,100 courses, even little changes can make a big difference in how much time it was going to take us collectively as a school to make this change.

Lee McMinn

To move the upgrade forward, Greenville Tech considered three different course conversion options, including redesigning courses in Learn Ultra, a Blackboard Learn native conversion tool, and working in partnership with K16 Solutions. To help faculty focus on teaching and to save them time, GTC chose the K16 Solutions option. K16 provided a customized algorithm so the system could convert courses automatically. This automated course conversion process freed up time for busy instructors to focus on what they do best, teach. In addition, it allowed GTC to successfully migrate and embed files and videos that were attached in Blackboard Learn Original so that students would have the option to view them inline or download them. Greenville Tech also discovered that they could delete orphaned files that were not linked in the actual course shell itself. This freed up significant server space.

With built-in course content, GTC encouraged faculty members to move to the module format in Blackboard Learn Ultra. “They were able to actually take our top-level folders in the course content and make them into modules automatically. That doesn’t sound like a big deal, but when you talk about dragging and dropping things out of folders into modules, it gets to be a tedious task. And so, for K16 to be able to do that automatically for us was fantastic,” said McMinn. For consistency, GTC was able to create a start-here module for faculty members, which includes a place for their syllabus and their introductions, and add it to every conversion.

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GTC proceeded with the conversion of the courses and rolled them out to faculty members in Blackboard Learn Ultra. “The majority of the courses came over fantastic, and faculty members were making small adjustments, but it’s far, far, far less than what they would have going with any of the other two options,” said McMinn.





Insights Delivered

GTC ran two test pilot semesters of courses comparing the success of courses that ran in Blackboard Learn Ultra to the previous LMS. They implemented a methodology to calculate the percentage of successful grades (students that passed the course) in courses compared to their historical average (two years). The results indicated that Religion 201 experienced a 35.1% increase in success rates, while English 102 increased by 33.7%, and Math 110 increased by 27.2%. “These were some pretty astonishing numbers for us as far as students being more successful in the Ultra versions of these classes ... This helped with our student retention, our student success and ... satisfaction with our program altogether because now they’re saying that they can be successful in their classes. So, this was a fantastic result for us,” said McMinn. In the summer of 2022, GTC upgraded all 1,100 courses to Blackboard Learn Ultra — one semester ahead of schedule. Positive feedback from faculty demonstrates their satisfaction with the tool and its engaging course design. “My students caught on quickly, with no issue ... I had more interaction with my students this semester than I have in all five years of teaching combined,” said Dr. Lauren Davis, psychology professor, Greenville Technical College.



Epilogue

GTC plans to transition to the Anthology suite of products, including the SIS, to manage Blackboard Learn data and student data and to better understand their students through the whole student journey. The college is committed to continuing to explore more efficient ways to gather assessment data, especially for the purpose of sharing with accrediting agencies.

For institutions considering upgrading to Blackboard Learn Ultra, GTC advises strong communication and sharing transition information, including timelines and expectations. Obtaining as much faculty buy-in as possible from the start of the process is key. GTC suggests that institutions know their limitations and remain adaptable, keeping staff workloads in mind when proceeding with the implementation, and reaching out for help as needed. “The thing I’ve learned about Blackboard Learn clients is they are really willing to help each other out. If there’s a user group in your state, if there’s a user group in your area, reach out to them,” said McMinn.

Products highlighted in this success story:

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