



Blackboard

Stetson University advances educational excellence and innovation with the Ultra experience for Blackboard Learn™

Stetson University's rich tradition

Founded in 1883, Stetson University today boasts a current enrollment of 4,330 students and 265 full-time faculty. From their main campus in DeLand, Florida, located an hour northeast of Orlando, Stetson operates three outlying campuses in Central Florida.

Part of Stetson's mission "to provide an excellent education in a creative community" is an aspiration to become known for their "innovative approaches to tackling complex challenges." The challenges of the 21st century are complex, indeed, and Stetson is addressing them strategically and intelligently. One objective of Stetson's strategic plan— "to infuse technology into pedagogy to support high-impact learning"—has cast a sharp focus on innovation, leadership, and excellence in teaching and learning.

STETSON
UNIVERSITY

New strategies for new age

In 2015 a bold new Chief Information Officer, Jose Bernier, joined the Stetson team and developed an overarching vision of a single, stable, best-in-class digital learning environment across all schools, campuses and curriculums.

One of Bernier's key objectives was to establish the Office of Online Learning and Educational Technology (OOLET). Following an initiative from the Associate Vice Provost for Faculty Development, Rosalie Richards, as well as the Provost's Office, the concept of the OOLET was recommended by Patrick Guilbaud, a 2014-2015 Brown Visiting Teacher-Scholar Fellow in Learning Technology in his "Online/Hybrid Education Model Evaluation" report. Dr. Guilbaud had conducted a university-wide assessment of Stetson's status in online and hybrid learning.

To lead OOLET, the CIO hired an energetic Director, Lisa Sawtell. One of Sawtell's goals is for Stetson to become a recognized leader in applying innovative instructional technologies that empower educators and learners across all program and course delivery modalities—including traditional, hybrid, and fully online. Her supporting plan is well underway.

With several different learning management systems in use across their four campuses, as well as differing user perceptions and expectations, Stetson needed to standardize and advance their technology to offer the latest and best solutions to students, faculty, and staff. Market demand also dictated such innovation, with recent high-school graduates and young faculty both expecting high quality online tools and opportunities.

The team set out to find a learning management system that would enable the university to improve teaching and learning experiences, prepare for online growth, and become a leader in online learning innovation. Stetson identified Blackboard Learn as the right LMS, with the Ultra experience providing the modern, intuitive, mobile-friendly teaching and learning experience the university required. Bernier also viewed Blackboard as a vital, trusted partner in enabling the university's transformation, as did OOLET Director, Lisa Sawtell. "In alignment with our mission, we are dedicated to offering students and faculty an up-to-date, user-centric, mobile-friendly experience, and Learn with the Ultra experience met our needs well."



Creating a next generation learning environment

One of several learning management systems already in use at Stetson, Blackboard Learn with the Original experience was familiar to many students and faculty. A decision to move to the Ultra experience meant that Stetson could take a gradual approach to change management and proceed at their desired pace.

In late 2016, the university took the first step toward adopting the Ultra experience by moving from a Managed Hosting environment to the Software as a Service (SaaS) deployment of Learn. Every course that had been taught in the previous three years was migrated, and very large amounts of content were moved seamlessly.

Sawtell decided the smartest way for the university to transition to the new user experience was to adopt the Ultra Navigation first—while maintaining the Original Course View for all courses to reduce faculty apprehension. “The Original Course View would remain in place,” said Sawtell, “but students and faculty would now be able to use an elegant new interface to facilitate navigation.” As an aid to adoption, OOLET conducted numerous training sessions and webinars to describe the transition and review its primary steps, reasons for the changes, and expected benefits.

Beyond traditional teaching and learning, Stetson had also begun using Blackboard Learn for new employee orientation, faculty professional development, and required staff training for human resources, Title IX, and IT security. Blackboard Learn is at the core of all learning experiences for all stakeholders at the university—not just Stetson students.

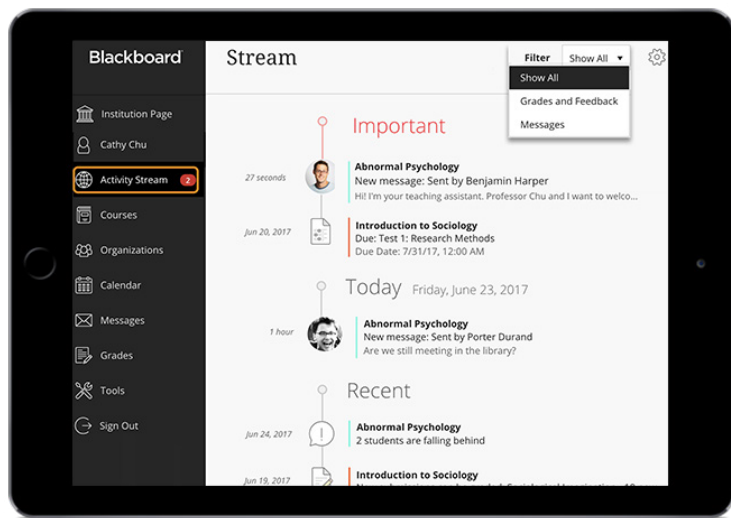
Another important element of the comprehensive digital learning environment at Stetson is the use of Blackboard Collaborate™ with the Ultra experience. Collaborate is seamlessly integrated with Learn, providing one-click access to a robust virtual classroom, which faculty are now using for their traditional, hybrid, and fully online classes. In addition, both Learn and Collaborate are being incorporated into Stetson’s Disaster Recovery Plan as a means of continuing classes in the event of campus closure due to hurricane, for example.



Benefits visible in first year for students, faculty, and staff

A year has passed since Stetson moved to SaaS deployment and introduced the Ultra experience. Benefits affecting not only the user experience, but also the university IT and OOLET teams, have already been realized.

Students and faculty alike have embraced the modern navigation and its benefits, ranging from a more intuitive user interface and streamlined workflows, to a mobile-first design and a personalized experience that brings aggregated, actionable information to each user's view.



OOLET is also reaping the benefits of SaaS deployment in terms of greater scalability and reliability as well as more frequent updates without downtime. “With SaaS deployment, our time investment in system administration tasks is dramatically reduced,” said Sawtell. “With this time back, our team can focus on building more online courses and increasing faculty adoption.”

In addition, the Stetson user community is enthusiastic, which is a significant win for the OOLET team. Students, faculty, and staff are excited

by a more engaging, efficient, and enjoyable online experience. As Associate Professor Rajni Shankar-Brown, the Jessie Ball duPont Chair for Social Justice Education, observed, “I found myself pleasantly surprised with the new Ultra user interface, and appreciate the cross-course perspective for faculty, which enables me to efficiently communicate with students and manage my content. I also find the new interface to be more learner-centric.”

“The Ultra interface brings Blackboard forward into the 21st century with trumpets blaring. It’s not only intuitive, but also pleasant to use. As a digital immigrant, I used to spend a great deal of time trying to sort out what to do—now I just do it. Excellent upgrade!”

Charles Rose

Director of the Center for Excellence in Advocacy and Professor of Excellence in Trial Advocacy



A future of promise

Moving forward, OOLET plans to assess the Ultra Course View to gauge how best to roll it out to their faculty and students, if appropriate. Their plans also include an improved student orientation and advisory initiative, using Learn, that will provide a positive first-time online experience for new students. Additionally, they plan to promote use of the Portfolio feature in Learn, which creates a portable, electronic portfolio of student work, resumes, and projects.

Bernier and Sawtell also recognize the importance of technical support with any extensive information technology program, especially one that is introducing change to the user environment. Stetson has been providing in-house tech support during business hours. In the summer of 2018, the university plans to add a 24/7 helpdesk, using Blackboard resources, so that students, faculty, and staff from all Stetson campuses may conveniently access support anytime, anywhere, from any device.

Adoption of the Ultra experience combined with a strong partnership with Blackboard to develop a next generation learning environment, has enabled Stetson University to continue their drive to enhance teaching and learning through online innovation.

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