Rutgers Maximizes Online Enrollment and ROI in Move from OPM to Blackboard's Online Program Experience (OPX) Solutions

New Jersey's flagship public university sees strong results in switch to Blackboard's flexible alternative to the traditional online program management model

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, is among the oldest, highest-ranked, and most diverse public research universities in the country. Broadening access to Rutgers' high-quality academics beyond its three regional campuses, the university offers a robust portfolio of fully online degrees (marketed as Rutgers Online). Programs include degrees in nursing, business, social work, and other areas at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Outgrowing the OPM

During the early years of Rutgers Online, the university had an agreement with a leading online program management (OPM) provider to oversee many aspects of Rutgers Online in exchange for a share of program revenue, as is custom with the OPM model. However, by the time the seven-year contract was winding down (lengthy contracts are common with OPMs), the higher education landscape had evolved. Competition was fiercer than ever, and several Rutgers Online programs were struggling with enrollment as a result.

Looking to the future, university leaders recognized that for Rutgers to retain its status as a leader in online education and to maximize return on investment, they needed more visibility into—and ultimately more control over—key elements of online program development and delivery than the traditional OPM model allows.

Among their main requirements, Rutgers was in search of a partner with a strong track record in marketing and enrollment coaching services to higher education institutions along with the proven ability to deliver customized, unbundled solutions. Given their limited funds available, they also needed that bridge solution to be cost-effective.

After considering several different options, Rutgers leaders identified Blackboard as the perfect fit to help transition off revenue-share arrangement to a more flexible, transparent, and strategic approach to managing online programs. Working together, the Rutgers and Blackboard teams planned for the next chapter of Rutgers Online, where the university would take some critical services back in house.

These functions included:

* Instructional Design
* Digital Services
* Technology (LMS)
* IT/Help Desk Support Services
* State Authorization

For areas outside of the university's scope, such as market research and marketing, enrollment coaching, and retention coaching, Rutgers would rely on Blackboard's best-in-category Online Program Experience ("OPX") solutions on a fee-for-service basis. This unbundled approach would provide Rutgers with more flexibility over its online program strategy.

Research Builds Strong Foundation for Post-OPM Success

Under the OPM model, Rutgers leaders had limited visibility into how its marketing and enrollment dollars were being used and how campaigns were performing. So, though Rutgers had been marketing online programs for some time, the team lacked a clear understanding of the market landscape, historical conversion data, the types of students to target (and how best to reach them), and other important insights.

To shed more light on the market and Rutgers' place in it, Blackboard conducted a program-by-program analysis of Rutgers Online degrees and enrollment trends, tuition and start dates, marketing spend, and more. A comprehensive market landscape analysis provided a fuller understanding of student and workforce demand for online programs, the types of students most likely to be interested in Rutgers Online programs, and the competitive landscape in order to identify key differentiators to help Rutgers stand out.

Equipped with a more transparent view of the market, Rutgers can now set informed expectations for program sustainability and growth while being more strategic about its portfolio of online degrees.

Data Drives Effective Marketing and Nurture Strategy

Drawing on market research and industry best practices, the Blackboard team developed target segments, personas, leading benefits, program-specific messaging, and geo-targeting recommendations. With this foundation in place, Blackboard designed a detailed digital marketing plan focused on conversions.

Key campaign elements included:

★ Custom creative with messaging focused on Rutgers Online target audiences
★ Active bid management and media flighting with a strategic channel mix, including paid search (SEM), display, and social media advertising.
★ A program-specific microsite designed to optimize conversions
★ Measurement of down-funnel performance by program

To engage prospective students at each stage of the decision cycle—from initial interest, through application, and beyond—and help convert them into matriculated students, Blackboard developed and executed on a customized communications plan consisting of emails and phone outreach by dedicated enrollment coaches trained in Rutgers Online programs, processes, and policies.

The digital focus allows for a level of data transparency that had been lacking during the OPM years—Blackboard tracks KPIs such as lead volume and conversion rate, and optimizes ad spend in real time to help ensure marketing dollars are used as efficiently as possible.

Exceeding Expectations

In the year since the Blackboard campaign launched, Rutgers Online has not only quickly reversed the enrollment decline that institutions typically face when transitioning off an OPM relationship but has also met or exceeded projected goals for prospective students ("leads") expressing interest, submitted applications, and enrollment.

Results to date include:

★ 24.8 million+ impressions
★ 6,000 prospective students contacted by Blackboard enrollment coaches
★ Conversion rates that exceeded industry benchmarks
★ Cost-per-lead nearly 50% lower than projected

Moreover, by moving on from a revenue-share agreement, Rutgers has realized significant cost savings and a higher yield on its investment in online programs. Based on media spend and enrollments generated since launch, the Blackboard campaign has generated a **4.8x return on investment**. Blackboard is continuously identifying opportunities to build and improve processes from campaign learnings.

Summary

Working with Blackboard and its best-in-category OPX solutions, Rutgers transitioned the development and management of its online program portfolio from a leading OPM provider (and its costly revenue-share model) to a more balanced mix of in-house capabilities and outsourced services. In the 1.5 years since the partnership launch, Rutgers has not only reversed declining enrollment and realized a 4.8x return on its investment, but has also gained full access to data and analytics at all stages, which will allow the university to continue to optimize its online efforts well into the future.

About Blackboard's Online Program Experience (OPX) Solutions

Blackboard's Online Program Experience (OPX) solutions offer a flexible and transparent alternative to the traditional OPM model. This unbundled, fee-for-service approach allows your institution to keep in house the elements of online program development and delivery where you excel and lean on the best-in-category services of an outsourced partner to provide guidance where you need it.

Blackboard OPX solutions are tech agnostic and offer support in the following areas to enable you to make ongoing strategic decisions—all with flexible financing options and short contract terms.

Unbundled Solutions for Online Program Development:

- ✸ Course Development and Instructional Design
- ✸ Faculty Training
- ✸ Market Research and Strategic Planning
- ✸ Marketing & Media
- ✸ Enrollment Management

Contact us today for a consultation on how a partnership with Blackboard can help your institution optimize its online efforts and achieve maximum ROI.

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