Digital Transformation Builds Learner Engagement and Retention at Grand Valley State University

After an in-depth review of the LMS market, the university transitioned to Ultra and modernized its digital learning experience.

Making Waves in the State of Great Lakes

Founded in 1960 in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Grand Valley State University (GVSU) has always had an innate understanding of the crucial role that great teaching plays in developing individuals and communities. "At Grand Valley State University, we empower learners in their pursuits, professions, and purpose," reads its mission statement. "The university enriches society through excellent teaching, active scholarship, advancement of equity, and public service."

Today, GVSU supports more than 22,000 learners, spanning 146 undergraduate and graduate programs. Their growth hasn't come at the expense of the learner experience, however, and they are proud to have kept the average class size as low as 26, while also maintaining an affordable offering that welcomes learners from a range of backgrounds.

INSTITUTION TYPE:
FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

LOCATION:
ALLENDALE, MICHIGAN

STUDENTS:
22,000+

ANTHOLOGY PRODUCT:
Blackboard
Anthology Ally

Anthology

The Challenge

Modernizing the Learner Experience in the Wake of the Pandemic

The pandemic caused huge disruption across higher education, and the state of Michigan was sadly no exception. Overall enrollment in Michigan dropped by 13% between 2019 and 2022, with four-year public institutions seeing a decline of more than 8%.

It has been a really tough time in our area. There are a number of nearby institutions who continue to struggle with enrollment numbers and staff layoffs.

—Kim Kenward
Director of eLearning Technologies, Grand Valley State University

GVSU knew that the best approach to maintaining enrollment and retention was to focus on the learner experience. The pandemic ushered in a new era of student expectations, one defined by digital access and flexibility, and modernizing the online learning experience thus took precedence for the institution. Similarly, the rapid adoption of online learning that occurred in 2020 piqued faculty interest in digital instruction and technology, and GVSU was eager to capitalize on this momentum.

Far from shying away from the challenges posed by COVID-19, GVSU identified opportunities to grow from the experience, undertake a genuine digital transformation in teaching and learning, and future-proof the institution as a result.

The Solution

A Detailed and Strategic Plan for Tech Adoption, with Buy-in from Varied Stakeholders

Between 2021 and the present day, GVSU has embarked on an ambitious, **four-step journey** to modernize its digital learning experience.

1. Find the Right Vendor

Across 2021 and 2022, GVSU conducted a detailed review of the learning management system (LMS) market before deciding to continue its relationship with Anthology® Blackboard. This review sought input from all major stakeholders, including faculty, to

determine that Anthology remained the best provider to drive pedagogical creativity and innovation.

Crucial to this decision was Anthology's vision for Blackboard's future, including its commitment to seamless integration with other tech platforms to provide a holistic learning environment for all users. In particular, the ease of alignment with accreditation tools, such as the Engineering Accreditation Commission (EAC), was a big draw for many stakeholders at GVSU.

2. Embrace New Technology

GVSU's next step was to maximize its investment by reviewing and adopting the latest teaching and learning technologies that Anthology provides.

This started by updating their Blackboard instance to the latest, SaaS version of the platform, Ultra. They moved to Base Navigation in May 2022 and, within a year, had completed a full Ultra transition, spanning more than 4,400 courses overseen by 1,820 faculty members. A detailed communication and training plan allowed the transition to advance at pace, while ensuring that the full institution—including leadership—was engaged in the process.

GVSU also recognized that accessibility is a core component of a great, modern learning experience and elected to continue its partnership with Anthology's market-leading accessibility tool, Anthology® Ally. The transition to Ultra provided a great opportunity to also boost the visibility and adoption of Ally around the institution.
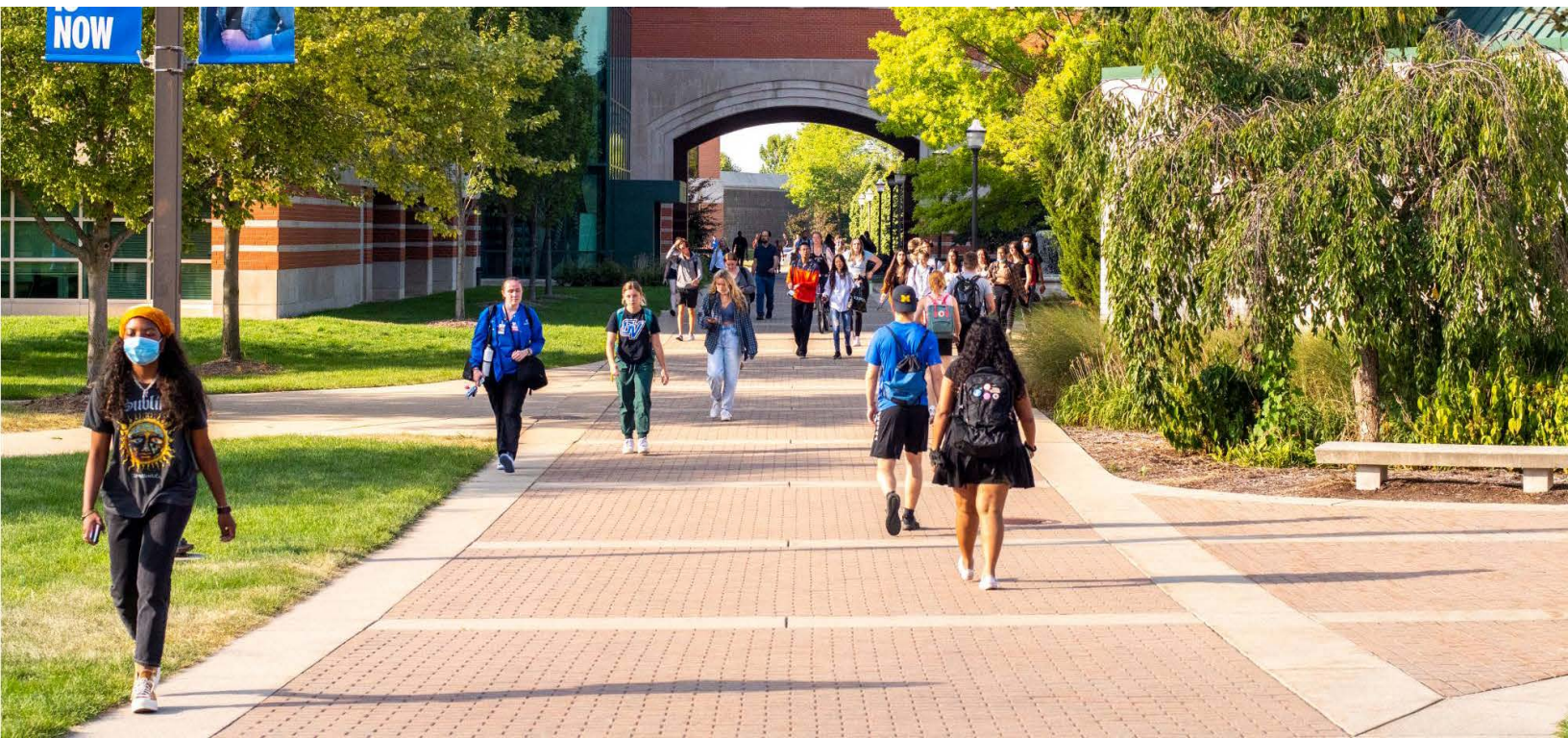
3. Engage Key Stakeholders to Drive Adoption

Kim Kenward, director of eLearning technologies at Grand Valley State University, and her team at GVSU understood that the power of education technology lies in its adoption. They created a strategic plan to disseminate news through the institution, build confidence, and ensure users were using the technology to its fullest potential.

A team of 120 faculty champions was assembled as part of the Ultra Migration Champions program This allowed power users to familiarize themselves with the updated user experience, experience the benefits for themselves, and, in turn, promote these benefits to the broader faculty cohort.

Faculty listen to faculty. We created testimonials featuring them in all kinds of newsletters—everything from the Provost newsletter to our own newsletters—because we knew that if faculty were listening to their peers, that would help us push forward what we needed to get done.

—Kim Kenward
Director of eLearning Technologies, Grand Valley State University

In the case of Ally, GVSU's experts in Student Accessibility Resources (SAR) were engaged to help with the rollout. By combining the latest technology with SAR's knowledge and expertise, trust was built with faculty, who quickly accessed and applied Ally's insights to make digital course content accessible for all learners.

4. Drive Innovation through Collaboration

As the needs of learners continue to evolve, both institutions and technology providers must share a commitment to ongoing innovation if they're to engage students and retain them through to completion.

GVSU has been a regular contributor to the Anthology Community. This starts with the Anthology Idea Exchange, where their users have been in frequent dialogue with Anthology's product development team to shape our roadmap for the future and extends to presentations at our Anthology Together conference and in user groups.

By taking an active role in the product development process, GVSU has felt confident about trying new Blackboard innovations as they come to market. The institution has enabled the rubrics and images capabilities of the AI Design Assistant—the first-to-market generative AI tool which provides instructors with efficiency and inspiration for several course and assessment creation tasks—and it has established pilot programs to steer the enablement of the remaining features. GVSU has also been an eager adopter of the native insights that Blackboard provides within the LMS environment and has empowered its instructors to use these to identify and support learners who need exceptions or extra attention.

The Ultra transition provided us more exposure within the Provost's office, including with the VP who's in charge of data. We've expanded this relationship and now meet regularly to review LMS data and insight capabilities of Blackboard, so that when he's in Provost cabinet meetings, Presidential council meetings, or meeting with the Deans, he can keep reminding faculty as well as the administration of the possibilities this data holds to improve student retention.

—Kim Kenward
Director of eLearning Technologies, Grand Valley State University

The Results

A Revitalized Learning Environment, with Benefits for All Users

GVSU's ambition has been rewarded, with students, faculty, and administrative staff all reporting improved outcomes because of the expanded partnership with Anthology.

The upgrade to Ultra instantly drew praise from learners and instructors alike. Many reported an improved user experience, with a superior visual presentation, clear and consistent workflows, and a great mobile experience listed among an extensive range of other benefits.

Feedback from students included:

"I started with the original Blackboard and then experienced the switch, and I actually really like it; it's a lot easier to navigate."

"Everything's super easy to find on Blackboard, so I appreciate that."

"I really like the color and like the drop-downs. I feel like it's way more organized and like it's easier to get to."

Blackboard's insights have become a key part of GVSU's initiatives to understand learner progress, intervene where required, and boost retention. By surfacing insights natively within the LMS, based on customizable parameters set by the instructor, Blackboard helps to identify learners who are at risk of falling behind, and provides communication tools so the teacher can reach out to them. Meagan Knoll, senior affiliate faculty at the Seidman College of Business Management, provides an emotive testimonial about the impact that this can have on the learner journey.

It came down to data and using data-driven analytics to really help me make that connection with my students... With Blackboard, it's really not very time-consuming at all. So much of it is so built into my workflow and what I would be doing anyway, like I would already be grading. So the extra step of just hitting the message takes no more time than it ever has before.

—Meagan Knoll
Senior Affiliate Faculty, Grand Valley State University.

GVSU's participation in the Anthology Idea Exchange ensures that Blackboard continues to meet their needs. Since its inception in July 2022, the team at GVSU has voted for no less than 185 ideas that have already been implemented in the LMS, along with dozens of others that are on the roadmap for the future. Thirty-four ideas that were directly suggested by users at Grand Valley are now available in Blackboard.

> *It has made a huge difference for us to be able to circle back with faculty and say, 'Remember the feature you were asking for? Well, guess what—it's in the next release!' Every month in our newsletter, we try and highlight the feature request that we know faculty keep asking about so we can bring it forward and show that Anthology is really listening. That isn't necessarily true of other learning management systems.*

—Kim Kenward
Director of eLearning Technologies, Grand Valley State University

Crucially, core practices and processes which have driven GVSU's digital transformation are now being applied more broadly across the institution. The team of faculty champions that was set up for the Ultra migration remains in place and ensures that instructors have a voice in all important matters of institutional strategy. For example, as GVSU, like many others in higher education, looks to develop a plan for further adoption of AI tools, faculty have been involved in pilots to guarantee that the needs and concerns of instructors are adequately represented.

When combined, these benefits can be summarized in just a single word: growth. Despite a hugely challenging market and economic environment, the faith that Grand Valley State University has placed in the fundamental importance of teaching, along with the recognition that this now involves a strong technological component, has led to steady growth in enrolled students and increased faculty hiring to support them. Their willingness to engage with new technologies and work collaboratively to tailor them for use in education has them ideally placed to continue this growth trajectory into the future.

Epilogue

In addition to speaking at Anthology Together, Grand Valley has collated and created valuable Ultra adoption resources, which they've promoted among the Michigan Blackboard User Group and other important forums. Anthology thanks the GVSU team for their ongoing advocacy and partnership.

> To learn more about Blackboard, contact sales to **request a demo** or sign up for a **free trial.**

Products highlighted in this customer case study:

Blackboard
Anthology Ally

Learn more at **anthology.com**