

Practical Learning in a Virtual World: How USC Upstate Modernized the Student Experience with Blackboard

With flexible, mobile-first workflows, built-in accessibility, and ethical use of AI, Blackboard has helped USC Upstate prepare learners for opportunities in the workforce.



Driving Upward Mobility in the Palmetto State

The University of South Carolina (USC) Upstate is a regional public comprehensive that supports over 5,000 learners across more than 50 graduate and postgraduate programs. It has grown exponentially since its foundation as a nursing school in 1967 and is now regularly rated among the [leading public institutions in the south, contributing over half a billion dollars annually to the local Spartanburg economy.](#)

While proud to form part of the prestigious USC system, USC Upstate operates as an independent institution and maintains a resolute focus on the needs of students in their area. This includes many first-generation and continuing learners, and the program offering at USC Upstate is centered around practical instruction that directly aligns with opportunities for career development. As their [mission statement](#) outlines, “The University of South Carolina Upstate is a leading regional public university that transforms the lives of our diverse students, their families, and communities—advancing social and economic mobility throughout the Upstate region . . . We offer innovative courses and programs in a variety of accessible educational formats and locations to meet undergraduate and graduate student needs.”

INSTITUTION TYPE:
FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC

LOCATION:
SPARTANBURG,
SOUTH CAROLINA

STUDENTS:
5,000

ANTHOLOGY PRODUCT:
Blackboard
Anthology Ally



The Challenge

Creating an Online Learning Environment That Meets Student Needs

With 75% of students now doing at least some of their classes online, the team at USC Upstate recognized that learning technology is crucial for them to achieve the mission detailed above. Specifically, the directives on “innovation” and “accessibility” align with key requirements for a modern learning management system (LMS), and USC Upstate wanted to ensure they were providing the very best digital learning platform for their students.

Varied stakeholders were enthusiastic to explore the opportunity to upgrade their LMS. The Master of Nursing program, for example, whose learners are balancing their studies with long shifts in the hospital, were eager to see how flexibility of learning modalities and devices could be embraced. Administrative staff, meanwhile, were intrigued by data and accessibility capabilities that could be used to strategically advance student success.

USC Upstate also realized that an investment in learning technology can also drive pedagogical best practices for instructors. To pursue their vision of meeting the needs of diverse students, they sought an LMS that could provide teachers with a modern learning interface developed with pedagogical excellence at its core.



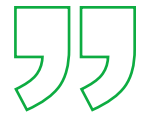
The Solution

An Updated Blackboard Instance, Complemented by Anthology Ally

USC Upstate chose to upgrade to Ultra, the latest version of the Anthology® Blackboard LMS, and to partner it with Anthology’s market-leading accessibility tool Anthology® Ally to create a holistic learning environment that would benefit all learners. Many parts of the institution, including those overseeing the aforementioned nursing programs, were excited by Ultra’s modern interface and the flexibility it offers to its students.



[Blackboard] allows students to engage with their classes anywhere, anytime, and on any device. It's seamless and immediately removes a bunch of hurdles and barriers to learning."



Dr. Celena Kusch

Executive Director, Center for Academic Innovation and Faculty Support, USC Upstate

A staggered rollout was designed and successfully executed, allowing USC Upstate to monitor closely the improvement in student outcomes that the newest version of Blackboard delivered. They worked in partnership with the team at Anthology to develop a transition plan based on lessons from other similar institutions, resulting in a smooth process that accommodated the needs of varied departments and stakeholders.



The Results

A Measurable Increase in Student Engagement, Powered by Innovative Learning Practices

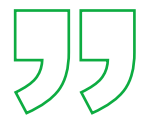
USC Upstate instantly observed an [increase in student engagement](#). In the spring 2024 semester, where a combination of Ultra and Original courses were taught, allowing for a direct comparison, it was established that students using Ultra were 11.8% more likely to spend 21+ hours in their course, 20.5% more likely to have substantial interactions with course materials, and 27.7% more likely to turn in 25+ assessment items, such as discussion contributions, assignments, and tests. Crucially, much of this increase was driven by students who had previously been unengaged, with only 2.3% of students submitting no work at all, down from 27.9% previously. This has led to a significant uplift in grades, with grades of D or below declining by 2.2% overall – including a 2.5% drop for fully online courses and a staggering 5.4% and 5.7% for HyFlex and Hybrid respectively.

Much of this improvement in student outcomes can be attributed to Ultra's modern, user-friendly interface. This starts with a great mobile experience and extends to a clear presentation of materials, multimedia learning content, and search functionality that makes it easy for students to quickly locate the information they need. The activity stream and customized notifications are crucial to keeping learners on top of looming tasks and helping them to complete them on time.

USC Upstate students have been particularly fond of the new AI Conversation tool, the latest innovation from [Blackboard's pioneering journey with generative AI](#). This has proved a great help in the

institution's goal to make courses practical and career oriented; as the business school grapples with the potential impact on commerce and the economy, they've been pleased to extend a tool that allows learners to engage with AI in an ethical and safe environment, while the languages department has been able to put their students' linguistic skills to the test in a range of fun, real-world environments and those in the medical space have challenged learners to develop their bedside manner. In all of these cases, the AI Conversation tool has allowed students to practice important skills and build confidence before being thrown into the deep end with hands-on assessments and industry engagement.

It really helps our students who have gone through COVID and who live in a social media universe. They're not always confident to participate in practical tasks live with their peers in the classroom, so having this safe space like the AI Conversation to practice beforehand makes a huge difference.



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Instructors have also benefited from the latest version of Blackboard, and pedagogical best practices have been advanced by embracing the technology. This starts with Anthology Ally, which syncs perfectly with the LMS to improve the accessibility of course materials. As well as making the process of revising and improving content much faster, Ally has helped to build awareness among faculty of the importance of accessibility in digital learning and key issues to look out for.



The way that Blackboard integrates with Ally is truly wonderful. It speeds up the process of making sure that your course is effective and accessible, making it really quick to achieve the highest quality standards for learning content.



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Here, too, we see a clear impact from Blackboard's AI functionality. Academic leaders at USC Upstate have long championed the use of grading rubrics to clarify expectations for learners and promote transparency in assessment. However, use from faculty has often been inconsistent as these were time consuming to create. Blackboard's AI Design Assistant means that instructors can now create rubrics in just a few clicks, leading to more widespread use and improved learner outcomes.

Finally, faculty at USC Upstate have enjoyed access to the [Anthology Idea Exchange](#) to submit suggestions for Blackboard directly to the Product Development team. This has been particularly the case for those teaching the sciences, who often have specific requirements to allow for great instruction in their field. To date, more than 20 features voted for by the USC Upstate team have been incorporated into the product.



Epilogue

Anthology thanks Dr. Kusch and all her colleagues at USC Upstate for their partnership over many years. They have been tremendous advocates for Anthology within the USC system and beyond, including the development of [blogs](#) and other materials to demonstrate the learner benefits that our collaboration has achieved.

To learn more about what's new in Blackboard, [check out the Anthology blog](#) or see for yourself with a [free 30-day trial](#).

Products highlighted in this success story:

Blackboard
Anthology Ally



Learn more at anthology.com

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