

Private Schools and Blackboard Learn

Choate Rosemary Hall and Notre Dame Preparatory School are two private schools known as much for their spirit of innovation as their rigorous academic standards. While they aim to provide an education that funnels their students into elite universities, they also face many of the same admissions and retention challenges confronting many public schools in K-12 education. It's why both are leveraging Blackboard Learn™ to offer a blended learning environment that impacts both student achievement and recruiting.

Choate Rosemary Hall

Located in Wallingford, Connecticut, Choate Rosemary Hall is one of the nation's most prestigious and well-known preparatory schools. Students from 40 states and 45 countries make up a student body of over 800 in grades 9-12, three-quarters of whom live on campus. While its academic program centers on the belief that the best preparation for college is a liberal arts education, Choate is a leader among its peers in the appropriate use of technology to enhance learning. After fourteen years of directing Choate's information technology organization, Joel Backon now focuses his energy on academic technology and teaching history and says Choate's teachers recognize the importance of using technology tools to improve education. "We've always felt that if we create a positive, supportive environment for teachers, they will do what is necessary to provide the best education for our kids," he says.

That's why Choate became an early adopter of Blackboard technology in 2000. However, in the early days, the school leveraged the software primarily to post assignments and website links in a structured way. "Blackboard had always been a great tool for posting course materials including rich media components such



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Joel Backon
Director of Academic Technology/History
Choate Rosemary Hall



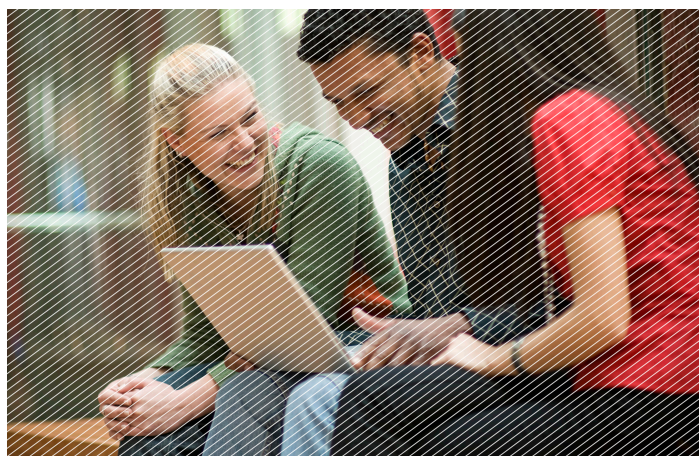
as audio and video,” says Backon. “But in order to have a measurable impact on learning, we needed a way to improve and enhance the delivery of information and course content.”

Choate took a meaningful step in that direction with the addition of Blackboard Learn’s community engagement capabilities. The result is an online home for the non-academic aspects of student life. Once a student logs into the network and Blackboard, the homepage provides the student’s schedule and links to the appropriate teams and clubs. “It gives them all the information they need at their fingertips including customizable information like weather and news,” says Backon. In the same timeframe, Choate also deployed Blackboard’s content management technology to provide web-enabled access to learning content and instruction.

An Enterprise Learning Platform

Choate’s initial Blackboard deployment has grown with the addition of a rich set of course management features, a branded community portal, and a web-based content management platform. “With the addition of rich media content and integrated Web 2.0 tools, there are few blended or online activities we cannot accomplish,” says Backon. “Students can find all their course materials, assessments, and collaborative capabilities in one central online location. That’s translating into a new level of student engagement.”

“I have always felt that Blackboard Learn was the only true enterprise learning management platform because



it integrates learning management with content management, feedback loops and information portals,” continues Backon. “We have always called it ‘one-stop shopping’ and have the metrics to back that up,” he says. “Faculty adoption rates have increased from 10% in 2000 to 77% in 2010 without a single administrative mandate.”

Backon says those high voluntary faculty adoption rates are contributing to a larger blended learning story at Choate. “Even when I’m away, my virtual history classroom is still a vibrant hotbed of good thinking,” he says. “In fact, some of the best discussions of the year occur online when quiet students blossom along side more traditional conversationalists.” Backon also says the result has been a productivity boom for teachers. “Our teachers are beginning to appreciate the benefits of time and space shifting for learning and how the physical classroom is only one place where learning occurs,” he says.

From a recruiting perspective, Backon says use of Blackboard enables Choate to tell a broad educational story. “Choate places a strong emphasis on face-to-face Socratic dialogue, and we leverage Blackboard Learn as the toolkit to augment that. It helps us emphasize our flexibility, richness, and scope to potential students.”

“We recommend Blackboard Learn to other schools on a regular basis,” Backon says. “We simply tell them our story. Those looking for simpler solutions will end up cobbling together a variety of tools that will have to be integrated and redesigned to provide a smooth flow of information. If one is serious about improving teaching and learning, Blackboard’s enterprise solutions are really the only way to plan, deliver, and assess learning.”

Notre Dame Preparatory School

Located in Towson, Maryland, Notre Dame Preparatory School may be one of Baltimore’s oldest prep schools, but that doesn’t mean it refuses to embrace the latest technologies, inspiring approximately 750 girls currently enrolled in grades 6-12. In fact, Notre Dame Prep firmly believes that technology can enhance teaching, motivate learning and prepare students to meet the technological demands of college and the 21st-century workplace.

It's why NDP Upper Level offers a fully implemented 1:1 wireless laptop environment where teachers and students use laptop computers in their instruction and day-to-day communication. But until last year, the school lacked an effective online learning solution. Mia Potthast Walsh is the Curriculum Technology Specialist at Notre Dame Prep. "We had been using an amalgamation of SharePoint, FrontPage and Moodle, as well as shared network drives. It was challenging for the students to utilize so many different tools to share information," she says. "As a private school, we need to be competitive from a technology standpoint. We were in our seventh year of our 1:1 laptop program and felt a real need to augment it with a significant online course management component." What they found was Blackboard Learn™. Designed to foster active and social learning within a school community, Blackboard Learn™ promotes teacher planning and student productivity and enhances course monitoring and evaluation.

A Truly Blended Learning Environment

"Blended learning is more than a buzz word to us," says Walsh. "We wanted to adapt the manner in which we were teaching our students. Blackboard offers tremendous tools to provide blended learning opportunities. These correlate seamlessly to the methods students utilize to share information in other aspects of their lives." Today, Notre Dame Prep's teachers incorporate 21st-century teaching tools into their curriculum with active collaboration tools that include secured wikis, blogs and journals: on-demand quizzes and tests; and embedded video or podcasts. As a result, Walsh says the collaboration between students and teachers has been greatly enhanced and the end results are impacting student achievement. "Blackboard Learn™ gives our students a continuous learning environment where the classroom doesn't stop at the classroom door anymore," she says.

Both faculty and students agree that Blackboard Learn has made file and information sharing easy, and the new communication platform has positively impacted the Notre Dame Prep student experience by increasing productivity on both sides. Students no longer have to

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search disparate teacher websites in multiple locations for the information they need because content is delivered to them in a way that is not only easy to access, but also easy to manage. As Denise Nitkowski '12 explains, "It is so nice to have all of my courses brought to me on my home page 'dashboard,' rather than having to visit all of my teachers' different SharePoint or FrontPage sites."

Melinda Berger is the assistant director of the Middle Level, but she's also a science teacher who considers lab time extremely valuable for hands-on work. "Blackboard gives me the ability to save instruction time by placing basic skill development tasks on the system for at-home work," she says. "That way, I can devote our classroom time to developing critical thinking. I can't imagine teaching without Blackboard at this point."

In terms of recruiting, Walsh says Blackboard has become part of Notre Dame's overall technology story. "As a preparatory school, 100% of our students go on to college. Part of our message is that we give our girls the technology that they will be utilizing during their years in higher education," she says. But even more importantly, she says Blackboard Learn™ is "changing the way we teach. It's simply more effective. I've never implemented a piece of technology or software that has received such a positive response from both faculty and students alike."

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