

University of Texas-Pan American

BRIDGING THE COMMUNICATIONS GAP WITH TODAY'S STUDENTS

The University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) offers courses to a diverse group of Hispanic students in southern Texas. Since the university is close to the U.S./Mexican border, it serves both American and Mexican students through a variety of traditional and online classes. While some of the 19,000 students live on campus, many commute or take courses from home.

Because of the diverse student population and course offerings, UTPA was finding it difficult to keep in touch with students on a regular basis. "At first, we had no preferred email policy, so every professor had to ask each student for their contact information at the beginning of the semester," said Kenneth Sailor, Instructional Designer at the university's Center for Online Learning, Teaching and Technology. "Even after a policy was put in place, most of the younger students were still hard to reach because they didn't use email, preferring to be contacted by social media."

At this point, the university knew it needed a better solution. A new solution would need to incorporate as many types of social media as possible, integrate seamlessly with the Blackboard Learn™ platform and offer student privacy measures. After looking at several options, the university decided to implement ConnectYard. "By far, ConnectYard had the most social media options of any solution we reviewed," said Sailor. "The fact that we could seamlessly integrate it right into our Blackboard Learn platform made ConnectYard an easy choice."



CONNECTYARD
COMMUNICATE BETTER

Now, professors can use their preferred method of communications, usually email, and reach students – no matter how students prefer to be contacted. For example, a professor can send an email to a student through the Blackboard Learn platform. The ConnectYard building block then converts the email into the student's preferred contact method, such as a Facebook post or text message. The professor doesn't need to keep track of the student's preferred contact method and the student's social media contacts can't see the post in order to protect the student's privacy.

Students and professors can choose from a wide variety of preferred contact choices including: email, Facebook, Twitter and cell phone text messages among others. When a student registers with ConnectYard, the student can then

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Kenneth Sailor
Instructional Designer
University of Texas-Pan American
Center for Online Learning

select how he or she would like to be contacted on a course-by-course basis - bridging the gap between new and old communication channels.

At first, it was mainly used to notify students of project due dates and if classes were cancelled. But almost immediately, the school started to see ConnectYard's capability for student collaboration.

"It soon became apparent that because of ConnectYard's integration with Blackboard Learn, we could use the technology as a real-time collaboration tool," said Sailor. Through a process called back channeling, a professor can have their Blackboard Learn presentation on one screen and have ConnectYard on an adjacent screen. This process allows students to ask questions and make comments while the professor is teaching, keeping students focused. It also gives professors the ability to see what topics students comprehend and what topics they struggle with as the class progresses.

Because of its successful trial, the university has now made ConnectYard available across the entire campus. "Usage is growing quickly," said Sailor. "Every day I get calls from professors interested in using ConnectYard in their classes."

Recently, Mr. Sailor gave a presentation on the benefits of ConnectYard to a group of 50 teaching assistants. "Within 15 minutes of completing my presentation, all of the teaching assistants had registered and were using ConnectYard. Demonstrations like this are always successful," added Sailor. In fact, the university recently upgraded its user license with ConnectYard in order to accommodate the growing demand.

The university also recently upgraded to the most recent version of Blackboard Learn. This new upgrade allows all of the features between Blackboard Learn and ConnectYard to be usable in every course. Faculty can post a new discussion thread in Blackboard Learn that is then sent to the students via ConnectYard. When the students respond, all of the responses automatically get posted back into the discussion thread.

This function also allows professors to create project learning communities and online class discussions with more ease. Although the technology keeps individual student contact information private, it does allow the professor to see which students are participating in discussions and to what extent. "This feature is critical for both traditional and online courses as it helps faculty grade for participation," said Sailor. "Professors can even require that each student post a certain number of responses to meet class requirements."

So what's next for the university? "Currently, we have 500 to 750 fewer parking spaces than we need for students," said Sailor. "To solve the problem, we are expanding our online learning program where Blackboard Learn and ConnectYard already play an important role. This expansion will help our online students stay engaged in their course work while also giving them a sense of community with the university."

Contact ConnectYard to learn more!

W: www.ConnectYard.com E: info@ConnectYard.com P: 973.494.8063

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