

# Setting the Standard: How EdTech Innovation Drove Digital Excellence at South Texas College

By leveraging Blackboard's AI Design Assistant, South Texas College improved the roles of instructors and instructional designers and achieved the prestigious QM Exemplary Course certification.



## Putting the Community in Community College

Established in 1993 in the Rio Grande Valley, South Texas College is a public two-year institution with a resolute focus on personal and professional development. It has grown to support more than 30,000 learners—40% of whom are the first in their family to attend college—and become a respected source of graduates for the area's industries and four-year universities.

"Our goal is ultimately to put people to work," explains Rachel Sale, Ph.D., dean of the Digital Learning Department. "As much as I love reading, writing and arithmetic, the bottom line is helping students to pay the bills and be happy at home. Digital learning allows us to extend this opportunity to a wider range of learners, and to keep materials up to date as the needs of employers change."

**INSTITUTION TYPE:**  
TWO-YEAR PUBLIC

**LOCATION:**  
MCALLEN, TEXAS

**POPULATION:**  
30,000+

**ANTHOLOGY PRODUCT:**  
Blackboard



## The Challenge

### To Rapidly Adopt Digital Learning at Scale

The COVID-19 pandemic laid the situation bare for STC: when it comes to the future of education, it's digital or bust. Leadership at the college embarked on an ambitious plan to ensure all course materials were available online.

"In the Digital Learning Department, we went from managing 800 courses one day to 8,000 the next," Sale recalls. "While managing the pandemic was difficult, it opened doors, minds and attitudes to the possibilities of technology in higher education. In the blink of an eye, we were embracing new things that I'd thought might take us years."

Beyond the task of scaling online instruction, STC also placed emphasis on meeting the highest quality standards. This included embracing the direction of Open Education Resources (OER), moving away from expensive, one-dimensional textbooks to provide materials in a range of accessible formats, as well as an ambition to achieve QM Exemplary Course certification.



## The Solution

### Leveraging AI to Meet Demand

When Sale first saw a video for Blackboard's AI Design Assistant, she immediately spotted an opportunity to scale course design processes. She enabled the functionality without hesitation, which is available to Blackboard institutions as part of the core Ultra package.

*"I immediately organized an open daily training session for faculty to learn more about how the AI Design Assistant can help build test question banks. By day three, more than 100 instructors were in attendance."*



**—Rachel Sale, Ph.D.**

*Dean of the Digital Learning Department, South Texas College*

The instructors' interest went well beyond curiosity. The AI Design Assistant quickly became a staple of the institution's teaching approach and skepticism for the use of AI—which had previously been high—rapidly dissipated. In less than a month, faculty at STC were taking to the stage at the school's Digital Learning Symposium to talk about how much they loved the tool.



## The Results



*I came to South Texas College from a Canvas school and planned to adopt it here too. But Blackboard really listens to us and is releasing new features which make a huge difference. Now when I look at a Canvas course, it makes me appreciate the many features available only in Ultra. Blackboard has completely changed my opinion."*

**—Rachel Sale, Ph.D.**

Dean of the Digital Learning  
Department, South Texas College

### More Time to Focus on Strategic Initiatives

The AI Design Assistant has helped instructors at the college to manage time for teaching and course development. They can now take a more proactive approach to developing their courses, going beyond the practical steps of building a course and focusing on making it engaging and exciting for learners.

"They can use the AI Design Assistant for their practice tests, for example, and then collaborate with the instructional designers in my team to devise a really interesting final project," Sale explains.

Instructional designers have also been major beneficiaries. They too have additional time to tackle larger initiatives, as AI does the heavy lifting with core course creation tasks, and many have noted an improved work-life balance as a result.

"It makes us faster, quicker and better," Sale says. "Because now we can envision every class launching at a best-practice level to create successful faculty and students. The Blackboard AI tools let us make those design dreams come true."

The outcome is that STC is setting the standard for excellence in digital learning. It has proudly attained QM Exemplary Course certification and is the only online college in the state of Texas to have achieved this milestone.

Aside from the AI Design Assistant, Blackboard® has brought several additional benefits. The functionality to create alternative formats has been important in complying with OER standards, in areas such as Criminal Justice which has previously preferred a traditional approach to instruction. Blackboard makes it easy for the institution to communicate with learners and has fostered more collaborations between academic departments and student affairs to provide timely outreach to keep students on track. The addition of 24/7 virtual information technology (IT) support, via Anthology® Help Desk, has significantly reduced the number of inbound inquiries for the IT department, meaning that they can turn their attention to larger strategic initiatives.

According to Sale, each of these benefits has contributed to her becoming a Blackboard advocate.





## Epilogue

Anthology congratulates Rachel Sale and her team at South Texas College for achieving QM Exemplary Course certification. We're tremendously proud of the partnership and grateful for their willingness to adopt new Blackboard features and share those experiences publicly.



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

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