Modernizing and Personalizing the Learning Experience at a Historic University

Inspired by forward-thinking leadership and new strategic goals, Marshall University implemented Blackboard to elevate its online learning presence.

Marshall University is an R2 public research institution with a rich heritage dating back to 1837. From its campus in southwestern West Virginia, the university serves a diverse community of over 10,835 students and offers a comprehensive list of undergraduate, graduate, and professional degree programs. Despite its size and stature, the university prides itself on its tight-knit community and inclusive learning environment for those embracing their "Marshall Moment."

INSTITUTION TYPE:
PUBLIC RESEARCH INSTITUTION

LOCATION:
HUNTINGTON, WEST VIRGINIA

POPULATION: 10,835

ANTHOLOGY PRODUCT:

Blackboard

"We just want to create a phenomenal learning experience for students. We want students to really feel like, once they come to Marshall, they're part of our family.

—Julia Spears
Assistant Provost for Online Education and Certification, Marshall University

Anthology®

The Challenges

The historic university found itself at an inflection point. In a short period of time, Marshall welcomed new leaders in several key roles, including president, provost, CMO, and CFO. This transition coincided with a strategic initiative to bolster its online presence. The move entailed more than just increasing online course offerings—it represented a significant opportunity to overhaul online degree programs and innovate the use of technology in education, particularly in teaching and learning.

"At our institution, we're in a significant growth space right now. We just finished our strategic plan, and as part of that strategic plan, we are looking at ways that technology will help us move forward with our growth goals for some of our teaching and learning outcomes and our student outcomes.

—Julia Spears
Assistant Provost for Online Education and Certification, Marshall University

The Solutions

The new Marshall team acknowledged that a modern LMS will play a critical role in achieving their strategic objectives. "We met with our leadership, our president, and our provost. And we had full conversations with our academic leaders, our deans, and some of the key personnel," recalled Julia Spears. "And everyone thought, 'You know, this is the time.'"

> With the **backing of leadership** and a **refined vision for the learning technology space**, Marshall University embarked on a holistic implementation of Blackboard®.
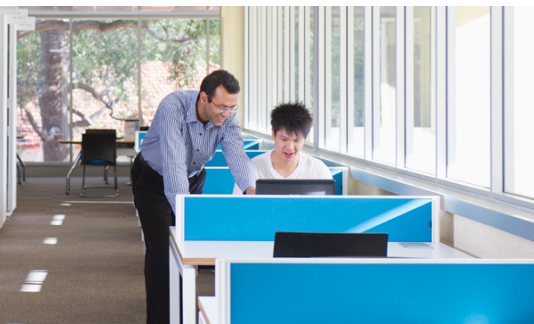
The implementation team started by soliciting feedback from faculty and students on what they desired in a new LMS. Students called for consistency in accessing information and mobile device responsiveness. Faculty echoed those requirements, adding requests for flexibility in grading, embeddable content, and ease of use.

Early in the process, the institution formed a faculty advisor group with representatives from each college. The aim of the group was to provide transparency into administrative goals and timetables, as well as to demonstrate how and when support would be delivered. "The faculty knew that we were trying to listen," added Spears.

As the implementation process unfolded, Marshall offered a range of training opportunities for faculty, including an "Ultra Academy," a standalone micro-credentialing program on content migration and technology tools provided by the university's design center.

The transition to Blackboard started in April 2023, with superusers who volunteered to move their classes over and provide feedback. These early users celebrated Blackboard's innovative features, such as the streamlined interface, drag-and-drop content building, and document view. They also noted "constant new releases" to the platform, which created positive momentum and excitement among other cohorts.

Marshall's goal is to create a consistent learning environment, and has worked with the Anthology team on a plan to get 100% of faculty trained by August 2024. They're also working with Anthology to ensure that Blackboard complements their technology and campus needs, such as integrating with Microsoft® Teams.

Early super users at Marshall University celebrated Blackboard's innovative features:

- Streamlined interface
- Drag-and-drop content building
- Document view
- Constant new releases

Faculty's Favorite Blackboard Features:

- Standard navigation document tool
- Grade center
- Class conversations
- Multimedia content
- Accessibility
- Intuitive layout

Supports diversity goals and **10-YEAR** debt-free committment

A Win-Win-Win

The move to Blackboard has been a positive experience for Marshall's learners, educators, and staff. Students appreciate the streamlined view, easy access to content, and elimination of distractions.

"Early opinions from our faculty that have already made the change are, 'This is wonderful. We're so excited,'" said Diana Adams, a senior instructional designer. "They're able to save time on how they're preparing their materials for our students," she said. Favorite features noted by faculty include the course navigation, grade center, class conversations, multimedia content, accessibility, and the intuitive layout.

Finally, Blackboard has also benefited administration and staff. "That has made our job more encouraging. We're helping people with instruction design, not just little technical issues that they've come across along the way," Adams added.

Supporting Strategic Initiatives

Blackboard is pivotal to the university's new "Marshall For All, Marshall Forever" initiative. Announced in 2023, the initiative aims to diversify the student population and enable students to graduate without debt within 10 years. The flexible technology of the solution accommodates a wide range of learners, including first-generation college students.

We have 10 different student segments, so we're looking to diversify the type of learner that comes into our institution, and our technology needs to be flexible and meet people where they are.

—Julia Spears
*Assistant Provost for Online Education and Certification, Marshall University*

More Than an LMS

Marshall is eager to leverage Blackboard to its full extent. The platform seamlessly integrates with software from other vendors. The university is also in the initial stages of establishing a data governance framework to understand and utilize available data points for timely student support.

Words of Wisdom

For those considering the best time to upgrade to Blackboard, Julia Spears's biggest piece of advice is simple.

> *Do it. I think the product is ready for the different things we need it to do on our campus.*

From a pragmatic standpoint, the Marshall team also recommends maintaining an open, honest relationship with faculty. Or, as Adams positions it, "Letting them know that you care what they're creating for their students."
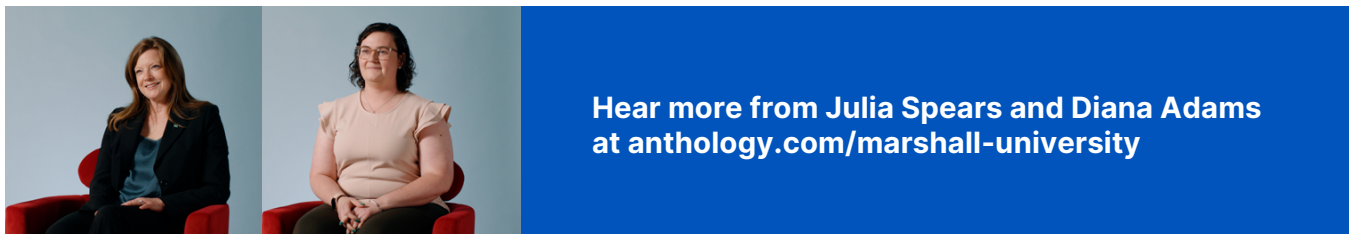
Hear more from Julia Spears and Diana Adams at anthology.com/marshall-university

Products highlighted in this success story:

Blackboard

Learn more at **anthology.com**

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