



CASE STUDY

Mid-South Community College Rolls Out New LMS with One-Stop Communications Portal

“We knew we needed a portal, but we wanted something that would integrate with Datatel, because we had huge investment in that system. Blackboard could do that, but we would have had to upgrade to the enterprise version, and the cost was steep. We looked at other options. The option our faculty and staff liked most was Timecruiser. ... We replaced our LMS for about the same cost, and we gained a portal. In a way, we got the portal for free.”

— Raul Fletes, Director of Data Systems, Mid-South Community College

Challenge: Outmoded campus communications

Mid-South Community College (MSCC) in West Memphis, Ark., takes an entrepreneurial approach to education — as evidenced by a blended learning curriculum that offers an online component for every course. Faculty used the Blackboard platform to manage and deliver course content. Students logged on to the college computer network to access class materials. What was missing from this otherwise advanced learning management system (LMS) was a campus portal for communication and community.

Founded in 1992, MSCC had evolved from a vocational technical school serving fewer than 100 students annually to a comprehensive community college with more than 1,800 students and 100 full-time faculty, staff and administrators. The two-year college now serves eastern Arkansas, western Tennessee and northern Mississippi, providing higher education in a region that has traditionally lagged behind more prosperous areas in educational and economic development.

For several years, the college had relied on website updates to make announcements about registration deadlines and weather advisories, with blinking red alerts on the home page. In an emergency, a hallway paging system reminiscent of those in primary and secondary school buildings is used to alert students who were on campus. More recently, plasma TVs had been installed around campus to display daily announcements. Still, these modes of communication did not reach the entire college community.

When it became clear that campus communications lagged behind other colleges and universities, the administration had to find a way to roll out a more advanced system without significantly increasing its budget. Raul Fletes, Director of Data Systems, began evaluating campus portal solutions in mid 2007. A major selection criterion was the ability to integrate the portal with the student information system maintained in Datatel Colleague. This would keep student records in synch and avoid double data entry.

Upgrading to Blackboard's Enterprise edition was too costly. Moodle, an open source course management system, was free -- but integration was not. Moodle also lacked a clear line of support and growth. The ANGEL Learning Management Suite had appealing features, but compared to Timecruiser Computing Corporation's solution, it ranked as the second choice among faculty who reviewed both products.



Solution: Integrated LMS, portal and emergency alert system

Timecruiser's software products — CourseCruiser, CampusCruiser and CruiserAlert — work together seamlessly to provide a fully featured learning management system, campus communications portal and emergency alert system. Using the Software as a Service model, Timecruiser delivers CampusCruiser as the core platform and offers additional products as plug-ins. "After seeing the demos, the ease of navigation and the number of options, we new CampusCruiser was the answer," Fletes said.

As a replacement for the existing LMS, CourseCruiser offered powerful tools for designing, deploying and managing online courses, hybrid courses, and face-to-face courses with online components. The web-based, faculty-focused LMS integrates seamlessly with CampusCruiser, providing a one-stop location for classroom-level and campus-wide communications.

Fulfilling the need for more far-reaching campus communications, CampusCruiser provided the platform for an online campus community with features such as email, event calendars, chat rooms, message boards, survey tools and course catalogs. It also provides students with secure online access to course registration, current classes, financial aid records and other information.

For instant notification about emergencies and other urgent announcements, CruiserAlert will allow the administration to create, schedule, deploy and track notifications via text message, voice message, email, RSS feed and portal announcements. These tools will put MSCC on the forefront of campus communications technology.

The Timecruiser solution was a reasonably priced alternative to the Blackboard Enterprise edition and provided added functionality. With MSCC's Blackboard license up for renewal in May 2008, the administration declined to renew that contract and instead signed a three-year contract with Timecruiser in June 2008.

MSCC's course management designer immediately began to convert two online courses from Blackboard to CourseCruiser so they would be available for the summer session. Timecruiser worked with Datatel on the high-priority integration of CourseCruiser Gradebook and Datatel WebAdvisor, which is used for online transactions such as registration.

"Timecruiser did a phenomenal job of making sure all the basic functionality was in place within about three weeks," Fletes said.

Throughout the summer, Melissa Cox, the course designer, continued to convert courses, integrate the systems and provide training. Katherine Stoddard, from Data Systems, worked on Datatel's data feeds and user accounts. They gave students login instructions and tutorials for CampusCruiser, and scheduled three-day workshops to introduce faculty to CourseCruiser. Help desk support was available by phone and email. Initially, a majority of questions concerned forgotten usernames and passwords. The Data Systems department has since issued a new password policy, providing a single username/password for logging in to both the campus computer network and CampusCruiser portal.



Results: Three Systems for the Price of One

CampusCruiser has become the home page on all student computers, and students also access the portal from their home computers via the Internet. During the first three months of the Fall 2008 semester, the first semester of the rollout, a whopping 92 percent of students logged in to use the portal. In one month alone, 1,300 students logged in to retrieve campus communications and course materials.

The course management designer converted 50 courses from Blackboard to CourseCruiser in time for the Fall semester, just before taking time off to have a baby girl. With their course templates set up and ready to go, faculty members quickly learned to navigate the new system, update syllabi, add content and assignments. About 90 percent of the faculty now use the portal regularly to manage the online components of their courses, track attendance and do their grading. Data Systems continues to hold workshops to help faculty better use the system. For example, at the end of the semester the training has focused on entering grades.

"I consider the implementation a success, because all classes are fully functional," Fletes said. "I will consider it a huge success when we finish the CruiserAlert implementation and when most faculty members are able to create and design their own courses."

Because Timecruiser and Datatel have an established relationship, the integration itself was as quick and easy as installing software patches. Datatel configured its products to work with the Timecruiser software, requiring minimal investment of IT resources by the college. Throughout the implementation, Timecruiser provided on-call support to answer questions, fix issues and add customized features.

"Timecruiser is an open-minded company," Fletes said. "They have taken several requests and implemented them into the current system. That is very unique for a company to be so responsive. For example, when grades are exported into Excel, some faculty wanted the total to be computed in a certain way. I passed that request on to Timecruiser, and on the next release, it was there."

For a total cost comparable to the licensing agreement pricing of one LMS, Mid-South Community College purchased a powerful new LMS, a versatile campus portal and a leading-edge emergency alert system -- effectively implementing three systems for the price of one.

"CampusCruiser provides a lot of functionality in one place. It's easy to navigate, and it's easy to receive communications from the college and instructors."

— Raul Fletes, Director of Data Systems, Mid-South Community College