The Guide to Propelling Your eLearning Program

Deliver on the promise of student engagement, empowered faculty, and institutional success.
Crack open your computer.
The rising importance of IT and eLearning in higher education.

Never before have IT departments been so integral to higher education. Far from merely providing occasional classroom support, IT is now responsible for supplementing (and in some cases, delivering) the entire student experience.

Investments in online learning, plus shifting student demographics, are putting IT departments and eLearning at the center of higher education.

Need proof?

Between 2011 and 2015, the number of online programs offered by 2-year and 4-year universities increased by 110%. That number doesn’t even take into account the growing popularity of integrated teaching methods, such as flipped and blended classrooms, that use eLearning to enhance the traditional classroom experience.

Of course, as the possibilities of the online classroom grow, so do the demands. A successful eLearning program needs to be both easy to use and easy to support, and, increasingly, it must meet a wildly diverse range of student and educator needs— including those that can be complicated to satisfy, such as those of students with learning disabilities.

With such huge demands, keeping everything moving smoothly can seem like an impossible task. It doesn’t have to be. Ahead, we’ll give you a peek at the latest in eLearning issues and technologies, so you can build a program that engages students of all abilities, empowers faculty, and leads to institutional success.

“The division between online and on campus is rapidly disappearing, and, at some institutions, technology has penetrated the classroom so deeply that the distinction will soon be obsolete.”

- Robert Ubell, Vice Dean of Online Learning at New York University’s Tandon School of Engineering

Spotlight on: eLearning and accessibility.

As our digital world continues to evolve, accessibility requirements that were once limited to physical spaces are increasingly being applied to virtual ones. Meeting these standards is not only a legal requirement (universities operating without a comprehensive accessibility policy and dedicated resources risk legal implications)—it also better serves students.

That means many students aren’t getting the help they need to succeed. With the promise of the online classroom in meeting those needs, the onus is now on IT departments to provide technologies that make course content accessible to all.

### Evaluating the accessibility of your online program

These are just some of the requirements your eLearning programs should feature to help students with disabilities.

- Media-like video must be 100% keyboard accessible.
- Video / text can’t use flashing icons as they can cause seizures.
- URLs must be fully spelled out, avoiding shortcuts like “click here”.
- Video must be captioned and include audio descriptions for the blind.
- Accessibility audits should be conducted by a 3rd party.

The path to accessibility is more than just a checklist though. When starting an online class, consider hiring an eLearning accessibility consultant for comprehensive review.

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1. Blackboard, Accessibility in Education in North America [https://help.blackboard.com/Accessibility/Accessibility_in_Education](https://help.blackboard.com/Accessibility/Accessibility_in_Education)
Exploring the possibilities of web conferencing in today’s online classroom.

When it comes to your eLearning program, a web conferencing technology that’s easy to support and easy to use can provide a rich educational experience to all students, including those with disabilities. This is especially true if you choose one designed specifically for education—oftentimes, these serve as an online classroom in themselves, featuring everything students and teachers need to thrive in one place.

4 reasons to integrate web conferencing into your eLearning program:

1. **Enhance your LMS.**
   Integrating additional workflows like seamless recording access, student-led sessions, and flexible course deployment is a simple way to make your LMS even more powerful.

2. **Free up your schedule.**
   Advances in technology and user experience have led to the development of web conferencing solutions that require little to no training for users, and virtually no upkeep from IT.

3. **Exceed accessibility requirements.**
   By nature, web conferencing makes learning more accessible to students of all backgrounds and circumstances. Better yet, the right solution will help you exceed accessibility requirements with features like screen reader support and live closed captioning.

4. **Support institutional success.**
   An engaging online learning experience leads to empowered faculty, better student outcomes, and, ultimately, institutional success.

Ready to get online with web conferencing? Let’s take a closer look how to successfully integrate web conferencing into your eLearning program.
Create a no-buffering zone.

Make sure you choose a web conferencing service that works anywhere and all the time.

You know better than anyone else worldwide connectivity on all devices is a growing requirement.
The web conferencing service you choose must perform reliably in a wide variety of use cases.

To ensure peak performance, ask yourself these key questions before committing to a solution:

Can it support all use cases?
The web conferencing solution you choose must be able to perform under any conditions, including low bandwidths.

Will it scale?
As enrollment grows and more classes head online, your technology must be able to accommodate growing demand.

Does it include mobile support?
Full mobile support is crucial for students and faculty that want to take teaching and learning on the go.

Is it browser-based?
Browser-based solutions require little to no IT support, since there’s nothing to download and no server space needed.

Is it built for education?
Free web conferencing technologies don’t include the features faculty need to create a collaborative experience. Tools designed with education in mind are more likely to include features like an integration with any LMS, digital hand raising, instant polling, and online breakout sessions.
Getting started.
Ensuring implementation is fast, simple, and painless.

Introducing new eLearning tools almost always meets resistance from time-squeezed students and faculty. That’s why it’s so important for your web conferencing technology to be quick to start, with minimal technical and training requirements. Not to mention—it will make your life a whole lot easier too.

Considering the issues outlined below will help you get a sense of how easy (or difficult) implementing a certain web conferencing tool will be.

Browser-based vs. software-based.
Browser-based solutions are ideal due to their “one-click” nature—all students and faculty have to do to use them is go to a URL. Unlike software-based solutions, there’s nothing to download.

User experience and design.
Design can seem superfluous, but it’s anything but. A well-designed experience—featuring clean lines, ample breathing room, and common sense UX—supports ease of use and navigation. Intuitive designs are also ideal for those who may have little technical experience.

Training materials and support.
When you make an investment in a new technology, it’s perfectly reasonable to expect full training support from your vendor. This includes strategic guidance, such as alignment with overall IT goals, advisory input, communication plans, and best practices; as well as hard materials, such as cheat sheets, screenshots, and how-to videos. The best solutions will take training off your plate altogether, with a full suite training service.

Application and file sharing.
Near instant drag-and-drop file sharing makes it easy for students and faculty to share presentations, resources, and other classroom materials.

The Ultimate Adoption Checklist
Make sure your vendor provides you with these key materials to ensure implementation and adoption are as seamless as possible.

- Cheat sheets for moderators and participants
- Communication checklist
- Email, digital ad, and social feature templates
- Flyer design
- Hi-res screenshots to use for custom training materials
- Tutorial video
All the digital bells and whistles.

Today’s must-have features for students and faculty.

One of the best things about web conferencing with live chat and video is that it provides an important sense of face-to-face communication for online learners. What’s more, it can also supplement the traditional classroom experience; for instance, by providing faculty with the option to hold virtual office hours, or by supporting alternative teaching methods like hybrid classrooms. To leverage the full advantages of web conferencing, make sure your solution includes these popular features so faculty can create a lively and collaborative classroom experience.

**Digital hand raising.**

Virtual in-class participation gets a much-needed boost from digital hand-raising. This feature allows moderators to track the order in which hands are raised, and to call on participants.

**Online breakout groups.**

For distance learners and traditional students alike, instant polling adds a new and welcome dimension to classroom participation.

**Virtual whiteboards.**

It’s tough to brainstorm without something to scribble on. Virtual whiteboards make it possible for both students and faculty to collaborate in real time.

**Instant polling.**

Old eLearning technologies made it difficult, or impossible, for distance learners to engage in live group work. Web conferencing technologies that support breakout groups make it simple, and even allow for spontaneous breakout groups.

**LMS integration.**

Integrating additional workflows like web conferencing is the best way to encourage adoption. This provides an element of convenience, consolidating all necessary resources and making your LMS a more powerful tool for students and faculty.

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Face time: it matters.

Despite the rise of digital communication, students still largely prefer to interact with their peers and teachers face to face.¹ That’s why a web conferencing tool that includes high-quality video and live chat can help online students feel more engaged in their coursework, while also helping faculty feel more connected to their students.
Ready for the next step?
Experience the possibilities of the online classroom with Blackboard Collaborate: the one-click, virtual classroom.

LMS-integrated. Blackboard Collaborate easily integrates with every LTI-compliant LMS, creating a seamless experience for students and faculty.

Universally accessible. Features like live closed captioning and screen reader support create a truly accessible classroom, and help ensure your institution meets accessibility requirements.

100% mobile ready. Full mobile capabilities mean teachers and students can take learning on the go, just the way they want to.

Built for education. Blackboard Collaborate was designed for education, so it includes all the teaching and learning tools a complete online classroom needs.

Request a free trial at Blackboard.com/Collabtrial

Need help getting started? Blackboard.com/GetCollab