

# Your Roadmap to Using Blackboard

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Take the time to read this entire document as you prepare to use Blackboard with your online, hybrid, or classroom courses. The material is designed to provide you with an effective step-by-step approach to online course development that reflects best practices and standard College procedures. Consider the following as you get started:

- **Start small:** If possible begin to use Blackboard with a classroom or hybrid course, start with minimal content, and add materials as you develop familiarity and expertise. This will help you develop a coherent and well-designed online learning environment and avoid the negative consequences of trying to add too much too fast.
- **Less is More:** As instructors, we all quickly learn the same lesson when we deliver an online learning environment – keep the focus on the essentials. Start with well-defined learning objectives for each course component (chapter, module), develop assessments that effectively measure how well each student meets these objectives, and determine a reasonable sequence of learning activities that will enable students to successfully complete the assessments. If you wish to include supplemental material that may serve some students but is not required, clearly separate this material, for example in "Additional Resources" folders within your modules.
- **Keep It Simple:** Help yourself and your students by making it easy to navigate your course, understand requirements, and locate materials. Your course should not be a maze. Provide all general course information on a single page. Create a folder for each course module (or chapter), and use this folder to locate all materials associated with the module (learning objectives, required reading, assignments, references, quizzes, etc). That way students can easily see everything they need to do to complete a module. Minimize the use of sub-folders.
- **Design for Efficiency:** For example, instead of pasting your syllabus, schedule, or other lengthy reading material directly into Blackboard, simply add a link to the document. That way students can just click the link when they need to read or print it. This spares students from scrolling past this material to find other material on the same page.
- **Use Support Staff Effectively:** Once the semester has started, try not to develop significant new course material unless you are preparing this for future semesters. During the semester your friendly support staff must focus on training, problem-solving, and technical management, and may not be able to provide last-minute assistance with development.

## Before the Semester

First decide what material you want to place online. If you are teaching a classroom or hybrid course, start with a course Announcement, general course information (syllabus, schedule), and contact information. You may want to create an online grade book which is easy to manage and allows your students to see their grades. You can download your grade book into Excel at the end of the semester. Be sure you know how to make your course Available to students on or before the first day of classes.

If you are teaching a fully online course or you want to go beyond the basics, you will want to design your course as a series of modules or chapters, and decide what learning materials assignments, tests and quizzes you want to deliver online. You will also want to decide whether the nature of your courses requires communication **between** your students, for example using a Discussion Board.

The Faculty Resources Web site provides step-by-step tutorials to add basic content to Blackboard, and to work with assignments, quizzes and test banks, discussion boards, and more. The Faculty Resources Web site can be found at: <http://abtech.edu/vcampus/facultyOL.asp> . Always check the latest versions – these tutorials undergo constant improvement.

### Best Practices:

- Avoid adding components to your course until you are sure about the purpose and value. For example if your course does not really require discussion or group activities, don't add these feature for the sake of it. On the other hand, discussion and group activities may be very relevant to your course.
- Start early. Familiarize yourself with each course component to avoid surprises. Note that it takes time to develop some features in Blackboard, especially online tests. Initial planning and development of effective tests and question pools will pay great dividends over the long term.
- Get feedback. Invite other faculty to look over your course design. Or ask your support staff. They are very experienced in effective course design and delivery and a few timely words of advice can save you and your students a lot of grief.

## Starting the Semester

### 1. Prepare your course before making it “Available”

Be sure that your course is coherent and gives students everything they need to get started before making it available. Even if you are only using online content as a supplement to your classroom course, remember that many students will visit the online material before they come to class on the first day. So be sure that your course contains, at the very least, the following (for instructions, see below):

- An **initial announcement** that welcomes students and help them understand what online content you are providing, and what they need to do to get started. If your course is hybrid, remember that your students may visit the course in Blackboard before the first day in class, and will be concerned if the course is not available or is uninformative.
- **Staff Information** that includes your name and contact information, best ways to contact you, expected turnaround time for email or phone response, and expected turnaround time for grading assignments. If your course includes High School students, consider including contact information of the High School facilitator(s).
- **Course syllabus, policies, schedule, and any other general course information** that will help you your students get started, or provide important references throughout the course.
- **Additional help for students:** in addition to your own contact information, let your students know that they can find comprehensive Blackboard help under the Distance Learning link on the A-B Tech home page. Provide a direct link to this site from your course menu, or under Course Information: the URL is: <http://www.abtech.edu/vcampus/>

For step-by-step instructions to add the items described above, begin with the tutorial:

#### "Providing your Syllabus, Contact Information and Gradebook in Blackboard"

This is available on the Faculty Resources site at: <http://abtech.edu/vcampus/facultyOL.asp> and also includes important material to help you start and end your semester correctly.

### 2. Develop your First Week Activities

At least if you are teaching a fully online course, you will want to consider some first week activities to help your students get started. You can also use these activities to confirm attendance of online students (be sure that the activities are due before the 10% mark, and that students know they **MUST** submit on time in order to be considered “In Attendance”). Provide a clear checklist of first week activities with due dates.

### Best Practices:

- A short "Getting Started" quiz is an excellent way to get students started. The quiz should contain questions that require students to review the online course material, read the syllabus and schedule, and perform other activities that ensure that they are ready to begin the course. You can include questions that help set clear expectations, for example a question that requires them to read a statement regarding cheating and plagiarism can be useful in reinforcing these policies and providing a record of acceptance.
- As another option, provide a first course assignment that is due before the 10% date. This could be an assignment directly related to the course material, or a special "Getting Started" assignment with requirements similar to the "Getting Started" quiz described above. Be sure to grade and return these assignments in a timely manner so that students feel "seen" as they get started in the course.
- If your course will require the use of the Discussion Board, you could consider an "Icebreaker" forum. Create the **Forum** and introduce yourself. Then invite your students to introduce themselves. You can assign a grade to the forum so that students receive a point or two for participating. Be sure that students understand that they must participate by a specified date to be registered as "in attendance".

### 3. Make your Courses Available

Be sure to make your course(s) available for the first day of classes or a day or two ahead. Until you make the course Available, your students will not see it listed when they log into Blackboard. New students especially can become easily discouraged and confused if they can't find their courses online. To make your course available, go to the Control Panel. Under Course Options, choose Settings, then Course Availability, and choose "Yes" for "**Make Course Available**".

### Best Practices:

How far ahead should you make your course available? Some students are anxious to get started but it's inadvisable to make your course available more than a day or before the start of the semester. As soon as the course "appears," you will begin to hear from your students, and you may also be working on last minute modifications. On the other hand, course should always be available at the start of the first day of classes, otherwise students will flood College help desks with calls, thinking that they were not registered correctly.

## During the Semester (online courses)

### 1. Post Announcements regularly

Post announcements regularly (weekly) to help your students stay organized and let them know what is coming next. Keep the announcements short but sufficiently conversational to give students a feel that they are being spoken to. Add value by including useful headsups, hints and gotchas.

To post an Announcement, go the **Control Panel** and choose **Announcements** under **Course Tools**, then choose **Add Announcement**. Type a subject and your message text.

#### Best Practices:

- Let students know in your contact information what day of the week you usually post announcements. It is generally good practice to set each Announcement as **permanent**. This ensures that most recent announcements appear first, and that students can review a history of your announcements throughout the semester.
- When you copy a course, announcement may need to be significantly modified or deleted to be valid for the current semester. If you find yourself spending a lot of time removing or updating old announcements, consider copying and pasting the entire list of announcements from your previous course into a text editor such as Notepad (copying into a text editor will remove any formatting), then save this file. Now you can then copy and paste specific announcements from this file into your new course and edit as needed.
- **High School Students?** If your course includes High School students, send a copy of your course announcements to the High School facilitators when the announcements are posted, so that the facilitators are kept informed of course-related activities.

### 2. Maintain a Well-Structured Learning Environment

#### Best Practices:

- Respond in a timely manner to email and other communications (within 24 hours at the latest).
- Grade work within a reasonable time period so student get timely feedback.
- Ensure your students are clear about what they need to do.

- Encourage questions and respond in a supportive manner that helps students feel heard.
- Clearly indicate due dates for each assignments. Consider also indicating the date that your grades will be published for each assignment.
- Make work due at midnight on the due date rather than at some arbitrary time during the day. This helps to ensure a fair submission policy since some students can only study in the evenings.
- Unless you have compelling reasons not do this, configure your exams and quizzes so that students can review their work and see correct answers.
- Unless you have compelling reasons not to do this, leave your exams and quizzes accessible to students so that they can go back later in the course and review their answers and errors as they prepare for subsequent work.

### **3. Avoid Last-minute Changes and Additions**

Try to avoid adding material to your course during the semester (you will often need to make minor corrections and modifications). This will often confuse student who expect that what they see at the start of the semester is the entire course. Also if you run into last minute difficulties, be prepared for less support than might otherwise be available - support staff can be much more effective when helping you design/develop material for the next semester (non-urgent) than helping you develop last minute material for the current semester.

If possible post all assignments for the semester before the course begins. If this not possible and you need to develop or refine your course "on the fly", provide placeholders at the start of the semester so that students know that additional assignments are forthcoming, and post the assignments at least several weeks in advance so that students can plan their time effectively.

### **4. Ask for Help with Technical Problems**

Contact your support staff if you or your students run into technical problems during the semester. You can expect a fast response to help resolve these problems.

## End of the Course

At the end of the course, you will want to:

- Submit your grades
- Save your grade book and course statistics
- Make your course Unavailable so that students can no longer see the course when they login to Blackboard.
- If one or more students are taking Incompletes, you will need to leave the course available but make it unavailable to other students. A tutorial is available on the Faculty Resources Web site with step-by-step instructions.
- Now is also a good time to make notes of your experiences, along with any design or structural changes that you wish to make to the course before the next semester. Write it down while it's fresh!

## For more Information

See the appropriate tutorials for help creating and using online assignments, tests, discussions, and the grade book. Tutorials, workshop schedules and other support information can be found at:

<http://abtech.edu/vcampus/facultyOL.asp>

If you have any problems or questions as you prepare your course(s), contact:

**[distancelearning@abtech.edu](mailto:distancelearning@abtech.edu), or ext. 300**

Please do not give this contact information to students. Students needing help should start at the **Distance Learning Web** site on the A-B Tech home page:

<http://abtech.edu/vcampus>