Leveraging Existing Support Structures to Drive Student Success

Providing students with robust and comprehensive supporting services has been a priority of Northern Illinois University (NIU) for quite some time. But until recently, these academic and wellness services were dispersed across the campus. The result? Students and faculty alike were sometimes unaware of the breadth of services offered and how to access them.

Fast forward to now: Thanks to the institution's decision to enable Blackboard Assist, NIU is forging stronger connections between students and the robust services offered—and the preliminary results are overwhelmingly positive.

Creating a Holistic Student Support Hub with Blackboard Assist

Serving as NIU's Director of Teaching Excellence and Support, Stephanie Richter was the first to identify Blackboard Assist's potential for NIU students and faculty. She recognized Blackboard Assist as a free tool that would enable NIU to effectively consolidate existing services into one central hub easily accessible right from Blackboard Learn.

"Assist gave us an easy way to put all the links to everything a student might need in one place—within Blackboard Learn, the platform 99% of our students already use—which was incredibly attractive to us," says Richter.

Although the benefits of Assist were undeniable, the decision as to which NIU services to enable within Blackboard Assist wasn't hers to make alone. Richter partnered with the university's Associate Vice Provost for Student Success. Together, they identified the NIU services they wanted to promote and feature within Blackboard Assist.
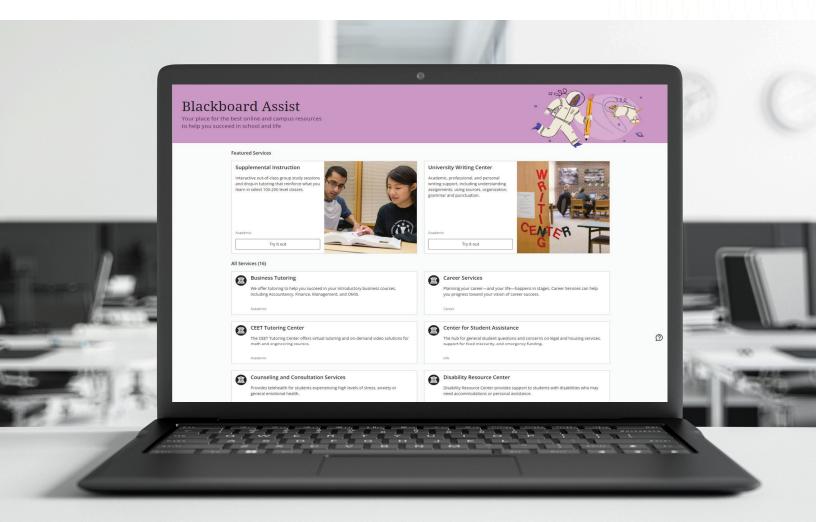
Maximizing NIU's Existing Services

NIU has taken an inclusive approach to using Blackboard Assist to connect students to all existing services. "If a service is useful to our students, we added it to Blackboard Assist," shares Richter, who also sees the value of sharing this information in more than one place. "The thinking is that the more students see a message, the more likely they will be to adopt and use it. If that means creating a page that contains the same resources we promote elsewhere, that's perfectly fine."

Currently, the services included span tutoring, the writing center, career services, counseling and consultation services, the disability resource center, first-year success series, and library services—just to name a few.

Strengthening the Student-Faculty Connection

Richter notes that in the past it could be challenging to get the word out about important resources with faculty members dispersed across the organization. When students would express challenges and uncertainties, faculty would often need to do some homework to find the right resource.

Now, with Blackboard Assist, NIU faculty have a trusted resource for connecting students with needed resources. With Assist's services hub, faculty are empowered to efficiently find and connect students to the supporting services necessary for their success.

"The power of faculty-student connections is incredibly important in student support," explains Richter. "With Assist, if a faculty member hears from a student who's experiencing food insecurity or struggling financially, they can direct students to this page and find a link to a center or resource they maybe didn't know existed."

Incorporating Blackboard Ally File Transformer

Offering students access to Blackboard Ally File Transformer through Blackboard Assist is yet another excellent benefit for Richter and her team. The university uses this free tool to convert digital content (course and external content) into formats that are more conducive to the way students and faculty want to consume the information.

"Our faculty and students are all excited about using Ally File Transformer through Assist, as it makes it easier to work with files outside of those in a course," Richter says.

The Result: A Low Effort, High Impact Solution

For NIU, enabling Blackboard Assist was a win-win. With 99 percent of students and faculty already actively working within Blackboard Learn—and since Blackboard Assist is a free tool within Blackboard Learn— it made logical sense to enable Assist and provide students with a central access point for holistic student supports.

"Advocating for more student support is almost always an easy win, especially when you're leveraging existing support structures—which is exactly what Blackboard Assist does," says Richter. "Plus, it was one of the easiest things we've ever implemented."

Interested in learning more about Blackboard Assist?
Contact your Blackboard Account Representative to learn more about this free tool in Learn.