



Southern Alberta Institute of Technology: Harnessing Analytics to Boost LMS Adoption

Southern Alberta Institute of Technology creates a data-driven student LMS adoption strategy with D2L

When its researchers uncovered a correlation between students' engagement with learning management systems (LMS) and student success rates, Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) decided to use the analytics capabilities of D2L's Brightspace platform to reveal new ways to encourage LMS adoption.

AT A GLANCE

Student Number: 14,680

Interviewees:

- Bradley Ackroyd, Manager, Center for Learning and Teaching
- Matt Karns, Education Developer, Center for Learning and Teaching
- Kevin Kowal, Manager, Education Technology Services
- Dan Stephenson, Instructor in New Media Production & Design
- Lisa MacDonald, Instructor in Broadcast News



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Kevin Kowal, Manager, Education Technology Services, SAIT

SUMMARY

SAIT worked with D2L to analyze student and faculty engagement with its Brightspace LMS instance and set a benchmark for measuring ongoing efforts to boost LMS adoption. By creating a successful faculty community of practice and improving integration between Brightspace and other systems, SAIT has seen measurable improvements in use of the LMS—contributing to improved student outcomes.

QUICK FACTS

- 30 percent reduction in time spent by faculty on course administration and grading
- 15 percentage point increase in faculty adoption of Brightspace in just 18 months
- Inspires more students to use Brightspace to track the progress of their studies, contributing to improved student utilization

PUTTING STUDENTS FIRST

To achieve its vision of being a global leader in applied education, SAIT places great emphasis on the student experience. Its focus on participatory learning aims to give graduates the qualifications and hands-on skills they will need in their careers.

For students to succeed, they need to complete their courses, so student success is always on SAIT’s agenda. When research indicated a strong correlation between students’ ability to access SAIT’s Brightspace learning management system (LMS) instance and their chance of graduating, the organization acted immediately.

Kevin Kowal, Manager of the Education Technology Services department at SAIT, explains: “Research showed that the more students interact with our LMS, the more successful they are—almost across the board. That sparked a whole new initiative around making our Brightspace platform even more useful for our students.”



Bradley Ackroyd, Manager of the Center for Learning and Teaching adds: “We started by asking students for ideas to enhance our LMS. The most common feedback was that they didn’t want one system for course management and a separate system for grades—they wanted Brightspace to be a single hub for digital learning.”

The data also showed that the main obstacle wasn’t getting students to use the platform — many of them were already fans of Brightspace because their previous schools had used it at a K-12 level. Rather, the issue was to persuade faculty members of the value of putting Brightspace at the center of the teaching and learning experience.

“I used to be an instructor, so I understand why they can be reluctant to adopt a new system — particularly if they think it will distract them from teaching. We had to find a way to show our faculty how Brightspace could both improve the student experience and reduce instructors’ administrative workload.”

*Matt Karns, Education Developer,
Center for Learning and Teaching, SAIT*

CHAMPIONING CHANGE

To drive change, SAIT decided to combine two complementary approaches: a top-down, data-driven strategy to set appropriate goals, and a grassroots, community-led strategy to promote engagement and adoption.

The Education Technology Services team used the Brightspace Data Hub to gather historical data about student and faculty interactions with the LMS, and then worked with senior leaders to define appropriate metrics around utilization and establish a baseline. They then began using the Data Hub to monitor changes in utilization, and evaluate the success of different improvement initiatives.

Meanwhile, the Center for Learning and Teaching took the lead in establishing a community of practice — bringing faculty members together to share institutional knowledge and best practices around utilizing the Brightspace platform. As a result, SAIT now has a team of 60 faculty advocates, who volunteer to provide support and training to other members of their departments on how to get the most out of the LMS.



“D2L has been very responsive in terms of meeting our emerging needs. 88 percent of our instructors now put grades in Brightspace, up from 38 percent in 2015 — so students can access both their course content and their grades in a single place.”

Bradley Ackroyd, Manager, Center for Learning and Teaching, SAIT

Matt Karns comments: “Our faculty advocators really benefit from some of the new tools that D2L provides for Brightspace. For example, we gave them early access to subscription training, provided by D2L, which allows faculty to sign up to receive new training content as soon as it gets published. We got their feedback. Now, when a colleague wants to learn about Brightspace, one of the first things their faculty advocator will do is encourage them to subscribe.”

“We’ve been able to utilize subscription training very successfully to create just-in-time support and training. To push the whole institute forward in a very short timeframe, we needed a way to scale our training and help faculty accomplish what was being asked of them. Subscription training filled that niche — it’s been extremely beneficial in terms of both the costs and the quality of the deliverables.”

*Bradley Ackroyd, Manager,
Center for Learning and Teaching, SAIT*



To boost adoption, SAIT also worked with D2L to improve the integration between its systems. For example, some instructors were initially resistant to the idea of uploading students’ grades to Brightspace, because they already had to upload them to SAIT’s Ellucian Banner ERP system. D2L helped to integrate the two systems, so faculty members can just upload the grades once, and the data is automatically populated in both systems.

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DRIVING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

SAIT's data-driven approach has enabled senior leaders to verify that the initiative to increase LMS adoption has been a major success. The data shows that instructor engagement has increased from 58 percent to 73 percent in just 18 months—an improvement of 15 percentage points.

Kevin Kowal comments: “For the first time, we have accurate, quantitative data that proves that our initiatives are making a difference. It’s not just about the analytics and it’s not just about the work we’re doing—you need both to drive continuous improvement.”

Anecdotal evidence suggests that faculty have come around to the idea that Brightspace is not “just another system”—it reduces administrative work and helps them focus on teaching.

“The time I spend managing my classes, marking assignments and prepping my lessons has decreased by at least 30 percent since I started to use Brightspace.”

Dan Stephenson, New Media

Production & Design Instructor, SAIT



And according to Lisa MacDonald, an instructor in broadcast news: “What I like most about Brightspace is that you can put in a due date for an assignment and the program sends a student a reminder 48 hours before. You can’t tell me you didn’t know the assignment is due when you get a reminder sent to you with the link to the assignment!”

Crucially, students are engaging with the platform too. One comments: “Having access to course materials in Brightspace at any time is helpful.” Another adds: “I can’t imagine learning without Brightspace. Everything I need is on there, so I can be paperless and know that I can access my content whenever I need it.”

“The partnership between SAIT and D2L has played a critical role in helping us increase student engagement with our digital learning platform, and we’re excited to see the impact on retention rates. Above all, I’d like to acknowledge the tireless volunteer work of our 60 faculty advocates in driving the whole initiative forward—they have been an essential element of our change management strategy here at SAIT.”

Bradley Ackroyd, Manager,

Center for Learning and Teaching, SAIT

