There’s no getting around it. With increasing demand for online learning coming from both non-traditional distance learners and traditional on-campus students, colleges and universities no longer have much choice. They must provide a platform for synchronous learning. Beyond satisfying this need, institutions are increasingly interested in providing web conferencing and real-time collaboration capabilities as well. To meet the needs of their evolving student body, colleges and universities are going to have to innovate. Many institutions take a look at online meeting tools to meet these needs, and there’s no shortage to choose from. Simple and free. Low-cost/low-feature. Enterprise-grade offerings built for business. But online learning and academic collaboration just aren’t the same as making a sales pitch. Colleges and universities face different challenges than businesses do. When online meeting tools and other platforms with limited learning features (and often old-school interfaces) are used, it’s more difficult to engage students, make them feel a true part of your institution, and retain them. The ability to engage is just one critical consideration when choosing an online learning solution designed to face down the many challenges presented by today’s educational environment.

This guide lays out these critical considerations, elements that can spell the difference between a solution that works and one that fails to make the grade. Based on our long experience working with academic institutions worldwide, we’ve learned a synchronous learning, web conferencing, and real-time collaboration solution should offer:

- A fully engaging classroom experience, online and on campus
- An environment for everyone, every time, everywhere collaboration and conferencing
- Accessibility for learners
- The ability to deliver online student services and support
- Streamlined integration with your LMS either directly or via an API
- Capabilities that help you meet your institution’s goals – like recruitment and retention – and improve your bottom line

Whether you’re evaluating a synchronous learning, web conferencing and collaboration solution for the first time, re-evaluating your current approach, or just curious about why a just-for-meeting tool may not be the right choice for an academic environment, this guide’s for you.

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The growth in online learning has been significant. eLearning Industry estimates that, in 2013, 40 percent of college students took at least one online course, and that by 2019 roughly half of all college courses will be e-learning based. In Grade Level 2014: Tracking Online Education in the United States, 71% of Chief Academic Officers indicated that online learning was essential to their institution’s long-term strategy.
A fully engaging classroom experience, online and on-campus

A lecture delivered by an instructor to a classroom full of note-taking students is no longer the norm. With so many institutions now offering online learning options, students are as apt to attend class from home or the office as they are to be present on campus. Increasingly, online learners want courses delivered in real-time. They want to participate in discussions, ask questions, and give answers. Even when their schedules mean that much of their schooling is asynchronous, students look for ways to connect with instructors and classmates.

Meeting the needs of your online learners requires a platform capable of providing a level of engagement that makes students forget they're not in a physical classroom. However at a distance learners are, they want to make their points in class and puzzle out solutions on the whiteboard.

Your on-campus students also want more engagement. And for today’s learners, the way to engage is electronically. A synchronous learning solution can add new elements to the traditional or hybrid classroom: polling, real-time research, problem-solving, game-based learning. It can also enable you to bring in guest lecturers, let students studying abroad take a critical class, and hold class during weather emergencies.

Your instructors also need a way to deliver online instruction that’s varied, interesting, and engaging. They may want to flip the classroom, share resources or provide pre-learning - eliminating the lecture and focusing on dynamic in-class interaction.

Today, many of the standard tools designed for meetings can accommodate some type of interactivity. But they won’t provide for the rich level of engagement that a solution built from the ground up to be a virtual classroom will. And keep in mind that today’s students are used to applications that work fast and have a sleek and modern interface. They won’t put up with any application that doesn’t.

We initially created CCC Confer to save time by holding meetings online but we expanded courses, too. One of our instructors conducted a two-year survey and found that courses that were taught online with a synchronous component had a higher retention rate, success rate, persistence rate, and students earned more A’s and B’s.

— Blaine Morrow, Project Director, CCC Confer

To learn more visit: blackboard.com/collaborate
An environment that enables everyone, every time, everywhere collaboration and conferencing

In any college or university, learning is going on 24/7. Sure, students have always pulled all-nighters, but what students are experiencing now goes well beyond that. They’re not only accessing course information online around the clock, they’re comparing notes with classmates, working on group assignments, and putting learning into action with team projects. This is happening whether their classmates are across the quad or across the world. They may also be letting their instructors know that they’ve hit a roadblock, sending an SOS via text.

While on-campus students often have the option of collaborating in person, distance learners do not. For these learners, the ability to collaborate on assignments and projects is critical to the learning experience. Through real-time online collaboration and interactive web conferencing, they get to know their fellow students and can make more personalized connections with their instructors. And when distance learners are engaged and more closely connected to learning, school becomes “their” school, and retention rates rise.

It’s difficult to overstate the importance and relevance of online collaboration. In the work world, collaboration across wide geographies is gaining in popularity. Collaboration experience on a student’s résumé could tilt the balance towards a job or internship offer.

Students aren't the only ones collaborating. Instructors collaborate with peers at other colleges and universities, joining forces on research projects and papers. And administrators can take advantage of an online system for meetings and training sessions.

Mobile access is foundational to everyone. On campus students are no longer tethered to the dorm-room desktop. Distance learners may want to grab learning on the go. Instructors are no longer restricted to on-campus office hours. Administrators are on call 24/7. A synchronous learning, conferencing, and collaboration solution must support the mobile devices that today are in everyone’s hands.

Having a mobile collaboration app, such as Blackboard Collaborate mobile web conferencing, will be the icing on the cake for our campus to provide the innovative degree programs our students so richly deserve.

— Marcel Brechtoldt, System Admin-Principal and Senior Lecturer, University of Missouri-St. Louis
Accessibility for learners, whatever their learning needs or styles

For colleges and universities, accessibility isn’t an option, it’s an imperative. And for years, institutions have demonstrated their commitment to educating all their students by removing barriers that can hold back students with disabilities. They’ve made their facilities more accessible, and provided one-on-one assistive services to students in need. A synchronous solution for online learning, conferencing and real-time collaboration is a further way in which colleges and universities can even more fully demonstrate their commitment to accessibility.

What should a solution that’s built with accessibility in mind provide? Here are just a few of the capabilities that should be offered:

- Closed-captioning for those with hearing impairment
- Screen reader support, enabling text-to-speech output for those with vision-related disabilities
- Improved keyboard navigation and accelerator keys for those with limited mobility
- Class recordings for those with cognitive disabilities (or for those who missed a class)
- Class broadcast for those who are home-bound

- A broader variety of engagement tools for at-risk and developmental education students where one-on-one interactions are critical to their success

While much of the focus of the accessibility imperative is on those with physical and cognitive disabilities, there are other populations with accessibility demands. These include students who are geographically distant from institutions of higher learning, who may be in areas with low bandwidth connections to the Internet. Distance learning provides a tremendous option for these students. Whether they have a disability or live in a remote area under-served by the Internet, no learner should be left behind.

A synchronous learning platform provider should share your commitment to accessibility, but keep in mind that “commitment” means more than satisfying a set of checklist requirements, like those set out in the Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT). Yes, specific product features are important, but so is engaging those with disabilities in the product discussion. A truly accessible synchronous solution will incorporate the wisdom and experience of those who encounter accessibility issues in “real life”.

To learn more visit: blackboard.com/collaborate
The ability to deliver online student services and support

Today’s students have grown up in an always on world. Knowledge is gained, experiences shared, and relationships conducted online. Increasingly, your students expect that many of the events they’ll attend and services they’ll tap into will be available online as well. Academic advising, career services, office hours, the library research desk – even on-campus students may prefer to connect virtually, rather than in person. With globalization being such an important factor, a growing number of students take part in study abroad programs. Enabling them to continue to work with their advisors, and with career services to line up internships and other job possibilities, lets them take advantage of studying abroad without sacrificing their on-campus benefits.

For distance learners, providing student services online improves their overall learning experience and makes learners feel more connected to their institution and a part of the academic community. Even those distance learners taking asynchronous classes want to meet with and get to know their instructors! Online orientation is an excellent way to introduce your remote students to the services that are available to them; a synchronous learning and collaboration platform makes it possible.

And think of campus tours. Yes, many prospective students, and their parents, still make the rounds with campus visits, but for those living further away, synchronous virtual tours – with the same student guides answering the same sorts of questions – provide a way to capture interest and develop a more diverse student body by expanding your application pool.

Streamlined integration with all the components of today’s overall learning environment

Today’s students take care of business online. They register for courses, submit assignments, check grades, pay fees, which are capabilities typically provided through a learning management system (LMS). This is the environment they’re most familiar with, and their online learning and collaboration should be easily and quickly accessible from within it.

Integration is particularly essential for instructors, who are likely to already be using an all-encompassing LMS, a Content Management System (CMS), or some type of Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to support them in tasks such as class scheduling, roster management, grading, managing assignments, and course creation. As the scope of the LMS has grown well beyond course management, it’s critical that your synchronous learning and collaboration platform is tightly integrated with the most popular LMS’s, and that it supports the Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI) Standards for integration with other applications.

The solution should also offer Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) to help make the connection to non-supported products, enabling you to leverage the technology you already have in place.

Integrations also benefit online learning administrators and IT staff charged with deploying and managing learning technology. With built in integration, online learning administrators can seamlessly take care of the behind the scenes tasks that facilitate instructors – setting up accounts, managing IDs, and scheduling events. And with tight integration, IT departments won’t have to devote their scarce resources to customization.

An instructor came to me wanting to use Second Life for virtual office hours. I asked him what his goals were and he said he wanted to be accessible to students and have it be more personal than text on a screen. As soon as I was done showing the video and screen sharing in Blackboard Collaborate’s enterprise instant messenger, he was SOLD.

— Jane Himmel, Associate Director, Center for Distributed Learning, University of North Texas.
Capabilities that help you meet your institution’s goals – like recruitment and retention and helping with the bottom line

You won’t be implementing a synchronous learning and collaboration platform for implementation’s sake. You’ll be doing so to help ensure that your institution’s goals are met, goals that will be as varied as your institution is. But large or small; public or private; college, university, or community college; liberal arts or business and technical, most schools are looking to:

› Recruit and retain students
› Offer or grow distance learning programs
› Provide virtual and hybrid learning
› Enhance the classroom experience
› Enable collaboration opportunities for students and instructors
› Conduct campus, department-wide, or administrative meetings
› Provide academic continuity during weather and other emergencies

Some of these goals – like student retention and expanded distance learning – are top line builders. Others, like running web-based meetings and conferences, can have direct bottom line, cost savings benefits. The vendor you choose for your solution should understand these and the other goals typical of academic institutions – and be able to demonstrate how their solution will help ensure the outcomes you’re looking for.

Recruiting students is facilitated through in-depth virtual college tours. Student retention is improved as distance learners grow more connected, and when the expectations your on-campus students have about a technologically-advanced education are met. Introducing real-time courses, or real-time elements to asynchronous learning, makes the learning experience more attractive to distance learners.

With the right solution, you can provide a range of collaboration opportunities: students working together on project teams; student-faculty collaboration; faculty research with instructors from other institutions. Meetings can be more cost- and time-effectively run, especially across large or geographically-dispersed campuses. And classes can be held even if instructors can’t make it to school (or students are snowbound in their dorms).

Your goals are important. Your synchronous learning, conferencing and collaboration platform must be able to help you meet them, and yield the return on investment you’re looking for.

We’d like to see increased enrollment and a lot of that will be through online programs – and Blackboard Collaborate will be a big part of that. I see Blackboard Collaborate as an integral part of our growth. If we didn’t have Blackboard Collaborate, as a department chair I don’t see how that program could grow.

— Ray McCandless, Director, Center for Teaching Excellence, University of Findlay
Blackboard Collaborate™:
The essential synchronous learning and collaboration solution

Blackboard Collaborate was purpose-built to meet the online learning and collaboration needs of academic institutions. As the name Blackboard implies, we’re all about learning, and we have been since we were founded over twenty years ago.

With Blackboard Collaborate, we’re enabling colleges and universities to offer a more collaborative, interactive, and mobile learning experience – the sort of experience that today’s students are demanding, and which faculty and administrators are increasingly committed to delivering. Blackboard Collaborate is an easy to use solution that provides the best synchronous learning and collaboration application in the realm of education. It can stand on its own, or live fully integrated with your overall learning management system.

With Blackboard Collaborate, you’re getting a solution that has all the essentials covered:

- A fully engaging classroom experience, online and on campus
- A 24/7 environment that enables everyone, every time, everywhere collaboration
- Accessibility for learners, whatever their learning needs and styles
- The ability to deliver online student services and support
- Streamlined integration with the Learning Management Systems that so many institutions use today
- Capabilities that help you meet your institution’s goals

You can learn more about how Blackboard Collaborate works here.

Blackboard Collaborate was designed for synchronous learning, conferencing, and collaboration in the academic environment. Key features include:

- Simple user experience
- Moderator tools
- Interactive tools (like whiteboarding and polling)
- Application sharing
- Multipoint video
- Integration with your LMS either directly or via an API
- Support for LTI
- Application Programming Interface
- Universal accessibility

Blackboard Collaborate is the Swiss Army knife of synchronous learning technology. For the University of Salford and others, Blackboard Collaborate became a tool for just about any situation. I am looking forward to applying my approach to new synchronous online programmes at Unitec.

— Denis Mc Grath, Academic Advisor–Technology Enhanced Learning, Unitec Institute of Technology