

# Instructure Case Study

## Brown University

### Learning in the Cloud



## BROWN UNIVERSITY

#### Institution Type

Higher education

#### Founded

1764 in Providence, Rhode Island

#### Interesting Facts

7th oldest college in the U.S.

Students from all 50 states and 100 countries

Over 140 undergraduate and graduate degrees

2010 Princeton Review's #1 College in America for Happiest Students

#### Population

|                                   |       |
|-----------------------------------|-------|
| Undergraduates                    | 6,000 |
| Graduates                         | 2,000 |
| Medical students                  | 400   |
| Summer, visiting, online students | 5,000 |
| Faculty                           | 700   |

### Re-evaluating the LMS Space with a Focus on Users

In summer 2010 Brown University decided to re-evaluate its overall LMS strategy based on a number of recent innovations in the marketplace and a growing concern that its current LMS technologies were not keeping up.

The university had used WebCT since 2004 and about half its courses resided there. Blackboard's decision to end WebCT support in 2013 presented an opportunity. "We saw it as the moment to look at the LMS space again," said Catherine Zabriskie, director of academic technology services at Brown.

Brown's immediate focus in selecting an LMS centered on the entire user community, including students, faculty, and staff. Because the users would ultimately be the ones benefitting from the LMS, Zabriskie ensured that the **users drove the selection process**.

Brown considered a wide range of LMS solutions and then narrowed the list to four by gathering and assessing the needs of the user community. Methods included student and faculty focus groups and extensive user surveys. The final four included Canvas, Blackboard 9, and two other open source LMSs – Sakai and Moodle. Each contender, Zabriskie said, offered good functionality and features. The challenge was selecting the one system that the user community felt would most meet their needs over the long term.

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*"What attracted us most to Canvas, if I had to boil it down, is the overall look and feel. The students feel comfortable because Canvas looks and feels much more like the tools they spend time in."*

— Catherine Zabriskie  
Director of Academic Technology Services  
Brown University

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### Brown Needed:

- **Usability:** a clean interface and ease-of-use that would appeal to students, faculty and staff
- **Functional and technical fit** with Brown's student-centered focus
- **Interoperability** and integration with mobile devices, Google Apps for education, and the student information system.

### Brown Received:

- An innovative, **cloud-based LMS** with a heavy focus on users
- **A clean design** that meshes well with leading web-based software and includes integrated video and live chat
- **Deep hooks into Google** Apps and Google email with great mobile device compatibility

## Focus on Students and Usability

In addition to the users, feedback came from executive sponsors representing major campus stakeholders, including a standing Academic Technology steering committee. The project team itself was faculty- and student-heavy, reflecting Brown's emphasis on student input.

Users were able to test the program by following scripts as they moved through the LMS, and students used "sandboxes" that allowed them to visit a showcase site and use the product in a sample setting. This **student participation was integral** through all aspects of the selection process, from building showcase sites for



testing to sitting on the technology steering committee to interacting with executive sponsors.

The **focus on ease of use** brought Canvas' tight integration with Google Apps to the forefront, along with out-of-the-box support for mobile devices. (Brown uses Google for email, calendaring services, and some collaborative tools.) Instructure's open APIs were also important – a Brown student who is so inclined could build an app adding specific functionality to Canvas.

## Design that Integrates Teaching and Learning

One appealing feature that set Canvas apart from other options and made it a particularly good fit for Brown, Zabriskie noted, is a **design that integrates teaching and learning**. While instructors and students have different roles as they use the product, they are all part

of the same environment. "That feeling is very much a part of Canvas," Zabriskie said, "and it echoes a philosophy at the university. The integration in the design is in line with the way we think at Brown – we very much value the perspective of our students."

Involving the user community in the selection process of Canvas has **really paid off for Brown University**. Not only do they have the best product for their school, it is clear that the investment in the success is now shared between administrators, faculty and students alike. Moving forward, they will all continue to reap the benefits of a decision they all played an important role in making.

## About Instructure™

Instructure is focused on helping institutions improve education through technology. Founded in 2008 by two computer science graduate students, Instructure builds Canvas the only simple, open learning management system native to the cloud. Instructure services more than 120 post-secondary and K-12 educational institutions. Investors include OpenView Ventures Partners, EPIC Ventures and Tomorrow Ventures. For more information, visit [www.instructure.com/ecampuscs](http://www.instructure.com/ecampuscs).



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