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Streamlined systems to create a unified campus card solution

MERCER UNIVERSITY

› Students on campus: 8,600+
› Schools & colleges: 11
› Regional academic centers: 4

› **Challenges**
  » No integrated door access solution on campus
  » Four independent access control systems to administer and manage
  » Large amount of manpower spent maintaining the card systems to keep them up and running
  » Need for improved access control in student residence halls
› **Solution**
  » Implemented a comprehensive, unified campus card solution to replace multiple door access systems and integrate vending, food service point-of-sale, and bookstore transactions

Mercer University expanded from multiple door access systems in its residence halls to an integrated campus-wide initiative encompassing a range of functions to provide high service levels to students and staff.

As one of America's oldest and most distinctive institutions of higher learning, Mercer University offers rigorous programs that span undergraduate liberal arts to doctoral-level degrees. Founded in 1833 by early-19th century Baptists, Georgia-based Mercer—while no longer formally affiliated with the Baptist denomination—remains committed to an educational environment that embraces intellectual and religious freedom, while affirming values that arise from a Judeo-Christian understanding of the world.

With over 8,600 students enrolled in 11 schools and colleges on campuses in Macon, Atlanta, Savannah, Eastman, Newman, Warner Robins, Douglas, and Henry counties, Mercer is consistently ranked among the nation's leading institutions by such publications as U.S. News & World Report and the Princeton Review.

Need for a Streamlined Solution

As the university grew and spread, so too did its use of campus access control systems. When the project was originated years ago, university officials wanted to initiate a one-card platform to consolidate the many different access control systems used in Mercer's residence halls.

Ken Boyer, Mercer's associate vice president of auxiliary services, was tasked with finding a comprehensive one-card solution to replace the institution's varied access control systems. An enterprise campus-wide standard security solution and an integrated food service point-of-sale system could also seamlessly provide other services

Blackboard delivered a cost-effective, versatile solution that met the needs of and integrated fully with Mercer's one-card strategy. Over time, the university added meal plan management, vending, laundry, and copy and printing services, and activities management to its one-card program as well.

such as vending and bookstore transactions. But, he immediately faced several major challenges:

› There was no integrated door access solution on campus—the university had four independent access control systems to administer and manage.
› It took a large amount of manpower to maintain the systems and keep them up and running.
› There was a need for improved access control in student residence halls.

"We wanted to get away from students and staff carrying around a variety of different cards and find a platform that could handle door access and other functions with a single card," Boyer said.

After exploring several solutions on the market, Mercer selected a platform from Blackboard Transact based on its ability to integrate the university's card system and door access capabilities.

" **Moving to this level of door access was a natural progression of harnessing our existing Blackboard one-card system and leveraging its full benefits.** "

Flexible, Scalable Platform

Mercer expanded its use of Blackboard Access Control by installing interior online wireless locks on doors of some of its residence halls. The system provided better oversight for door access and allowed the university to instantly revoke or reassign access rights as warranted; plus gave students the ability to cancel their cards online via web or mobile if they were lost or stolen.

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The wireless solution allowed for fast, more cost-efficient installation that minimized campus disruption. Also, the university could secure doors that were traditionally difficult to run wires to in the past; often these doors are prohibitively expensive so this provided a significant cost savings for the institution.

"Moving to this level of door access was a natural progression of harnessing our existing Blackboard one-card system and leveraging its full benefits," Boyer said.

At the time of the original project, Boyer stated, "Over the next couple of years, our plan is to roll out the locks to all residence halls in order to eliminate keys, gain better access on campus, and improve student security and safety."

› The initial expansion began with about 30 wired doors.
› Today, the university has more than 1,200 doors (815 of them are wireless) on its system.
› Another 200-plus doors went online in 2015 as part of an $18-million expansion of its School of Medicine facilities on the university's Savannah campus.
› Two new residence halls are scheduled to open in July 2016 with another 300 wireless internal door locks.

The flexible, scalable Blackboard Transaction system also processes transactions for Mercer's bookstore and an off-campus network that allows students to use their campus cards with local merchants. "The system eliminates the need to carry cash, making Mercer students less of a criminal target and ultimately keeping them safer," Boyer said.
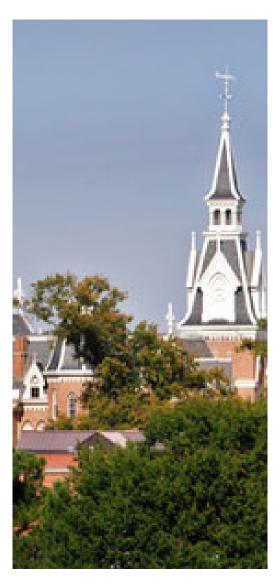
Significant Benefits, Savings, and Return on Investment

The university has realized significant benefits both from its initial move to the platform and from the subsequent expansions that further leverage their initial investment. Mercer has saved on hardware costs, operator hours, and the expense associated with maintaining multiple access control systems and databases. Boyer said he couldn't quantify exactly the total savings the university has saved with its system, but called it "a considerable sum."

"Keeping our previous systems up and running required a lot of manpower and knowledge," Boyer said. "We were able to reallocate staff to other areas while simultaneously enhancing student services."

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>
> **Ken Boyer**
> **Associate Vice President of Auxiliary Services**

Mercer students were quick to adopt the enhanced Blackboard one-card system and the various capabilities that have been added since.

Boyer said he now has his eye on a mobile version of the Blackboard platform and is exploring contactless offerings and the opportunity to use native near field communication (NFC)-equipped smartphones in lieu of cards. This natural progression of the technology is facilitated by the university's decision to standardize on MIFARE NFC as its credential/reader standard and already has many compatible Blackboard readers in place.

"When Blackboard comes out with new options, we're always ready to test them out and integrate them into our lineup," said Boyer. "As technology continues to change, we plan to move forward right along with it."

Accomplishments

› Integrated door access solution provides better access control in security in dorms, offices, and classrooms.

› The auxiliary office has a single campus card system and associated database to administer and manage.

› All meal plan, vending, printing, laundry, bookstore, and off-campus purchases are handled on a cashless basis.

› The university now has a flexible, scalable system that continues to meet the university's growth demands.

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