Blackboard transact™

GSU Streamlines the Student Refund Process with BlackboardPay™

Georgia State University

› 8 academic colleges
› 32,500 students
› 3,500 faculty members
› More than 250 undergraduate
  and graduate degree programs

Challenges

› Ninety percent of students receive
  some type of financial aid, almost all
  receive a credit balance refund
› Students only had two options to
  receive their refund: paper check or
  direct deposit
› The earliest a student could have
  access to their refund was about two
  business days via ACH
› Lost checks or rejected ACH deposits
  caused about 2% of the 50K plus
  refund transactions to be reissued

A public research university located in downtown Atlanta, George State University (GSU) was founded in 1913 and is one of the University System of Georgia's four research universities. With a student population of 32,500, the school offers more than 250 undergraduate and graduate degree programs in eight academic colleges that are supported by 3,500 faculty members. Accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, GSU is classified as a "Research University/Very High Activity," according to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

About five years ago, GSU's student accounts department was struggling under the constraints of a largely manual student refund process. "In 2010, we had a staff of eight people that handled a myriad of manually-intensive processes," says Charmaine Daniels, GSU's Director of Student Accounts. For example, student refunds took several days to process because the department was using a home grown system to process refunds instead of the university's enterprise resource planning (ERP) system. "Needless to say, when I got here in 2010, there was a significant amount of rebuilding that needed to be done."

Tackling the Challenges, One by One

Because GSU's accounts payable office produces Automated Clearing House (ACH) payments or paper checks on a specific schedule,

the student accounts office cannot produce refunds on a daily basis. "We needed another option for issuing refunds," says Daniels.

More than 90 percent of students receive some type of financial aid support and more than 50 percent rely on Pell grants to pay for their education. Nationally recognized for its students' academic accomplishments and progress, GSU relies on technology—in the administrative offices as well as the classrooms—to help create positive impacts on student success.

Already a Blackboard Transact customer, the institution shopped around for a viable solution and viewed presentations from other providers before selecting BlackboardPay and implementing the PantherCard refund program.

"We liked how transparent Blackboard was with its fees and how safe the program was for students in terms of keeping them out of unnecessary debt," says Daniels. "In some cases, we'd heard about programs where students were getting stuck with huge penalties and overdraft fees; we didn't want that for our students."
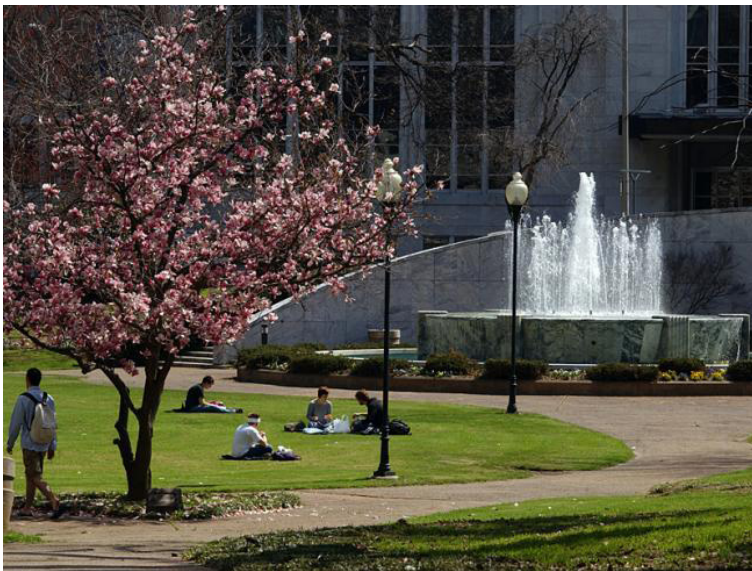
Solution

By implementing BlackboardPay, Georgia State University saves both time and money while adhering to its commitment to make the educational experience as seamless and supportive as possible.

The PantherCard card also serves as GSU's university ID, which means refunds can be added directly to the Transact Student ID. This is an optional choice for schools, which can also select Blackboard's Companion Card program (separate from the student ID).

After an implementation process that Daniels calls "completely seamless," GSU started using BlackboardPay to fund student accounts within 15–20 minutes of wrapping up the approval process. "The shorter time frame was amazing," says Daniels, "and it fit well with our model of leveraging technology to improve efficiency and create positive impacts on student success. The faster we can get the funding to the students, the better."

The PantherCard Gains in Popularity

Today, GSU's 32,500 students can choose from direct deposit, paper check, or the BlackboardPay prepaid debit card to gain access to their credit balance refunds. In addition to speeding up the overall process, the PantherCard refund program—which today is used to provide access to about 16 percent of the credit balance refunds—helps Daniels' office more effectively manage rejected ACH deposits and lost checks. "Our students move and change bank accounts frequently," says Daniels, "so we knew that once processed to the PantherCard using BlackboardPay, refunds would not be lost or rejected."

Perhaps even more importantly, GSU's Office of Student Accounts is confident that once issued via the PantherCard, refunds will never have to be touched again. "We don't have to worry about tracking or reissuing those funds; they're delivered every time," says Daniels. "With BlackboardPay refunds, we only have to issue the refund once."

Accomplishments
› Added an additional option that provides students with faster access to their refund
› Reduced the need for manual oversight for bank account changes and changed addresses
› Cut down on the time spent reissuing refunds to students

To institutions interested in integrating electronic funds disbursement platforms, Daniels says BlackboardPay meets and even exceeds the standards set forth by the various groups that govern such transactions. "This program really works in the best interest of the student," says Daniels, "while also making the entire refund disbursement process much easier for my team to orchestrate."

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