

The Course Interface

Let's look at how to navigate and interact with a newly-requested Blackboard course.

On the left side of the screen is the "Course Menu," which is available across all pages of your course. The Course Menu contains links to tools as well as content you post for your students. Tools include Announcements, Discussions, My Grades, and Contacts. Three "Content Areas"—"Information," "Content," and "Assessments"—are where you can add course content, such as files, links, or assessments. You can rename, reorder, or remove any of these links, or add more tools or content areas, to match your course design.

Below the Course Menu is the "Control Panel." The Control Panel contains tools and features for managing the course, and is not visible to students. Let's look at some of the more frequently-used features of the Control Panel.

The "Course Tools" menu lists all of the tools that are currently enabled in your course, one of which is the "Send Email" tool, allowing you to email one or more students through Blackboard. The "Evaluation" section includes "Course Reports," which you can run to view student activity or performance within your course. Below that is the "Retention Center," which helps you track class performance and monitor individual students who may need extra help, based on their activity level in the course, their grades, or if they have missed any deadlines. The "Grade Center" section includes a link to the "Needs Grading" page, which concisely lists all student work which has yet to be graded.

After Needs Grading is a link to the "Full Grade Center," which displays all assessments and any associated grades in a spreadsheet-like view, also allowing you to manually enter and edit grades. The "Users and Groups" section contains links to the "Groups" page (where you can create groups of students) and the "Users" page (where you can view the class roster). On the "Users" page, you may also add someone else to your course, such as a co-instructor or teaching assistant. The "Customization" section includes several features for modifying your course's settings. One of the most important is the "Properties" page. If you unchecked "Auto-Availability" when you requested your course, the "Properties" page is where you need to go to make your course available to students, whenever you feel it's ready. If you would like to personalize your course, you can add a banner on the "Teaching Style" page.

Finally, the "Packages and Utilities" section includes features for backing up, deleting, or copying your course. The "Course Copy" page is particularly useful if you teach the same course multiple times. You don't have to rebuild it each semester!

While working in Blackboard, you may want to shrink or hide some of the user interface, to focus on specific content. Both the Course Menu and the Control Panel can be temporarily collapsed if you don't need one of them. Either click on the course name at the top of the Course Menu, or the label "Control Panel," to collapse either one. Then click it again to open it.

Alternatively, you can hide the entire left navigation panel, to give course content more space on the screen. This is especially useful when grading students' work inside Blackboard! To do so, place your mouse cursor next to the right edge of the Course Menu. A thin gray bar with an arrow should appear. If you click that bar, the left panel closes. It will stay closed even if you log out of Blackboard. To re-open the menu, simply click on the bar again.

Throughout Blackboard, you can edit items and their settings using dropdown contextual menus, indicated by a round icon containing a downward-facing arrow. For instance, clicking the dropdown menu icon next to the Full Grade Center page's title lets you turn on screen reader mode for the Grade Center page. However, most dropdown menu icons are only visible when you place your mouse over the item you want to edit. For example, if you place your mouse on the "Home Page" link in the Course Menu, its dropdown menu icon appears, and clicking on it will show you what actions are available for it.

If your instructor controls (such as the various buttons and dropdown menu icons mentioned in this tutorial) ever seem to be missing, it is probably because the "Edit Mode" has been inadvertently disabled. To check whether Edit Mode is on, look in the upper right-hand corner of the screen for "Edit Mode is," followed by an "ON" or "OFF" button. If the button says "OFF", click it once to turn Edit Mode back on.

The final tip for navigating within courses in Blackboard is the "Course-to-Course Navigation." Just below Blackboard's header bar containing the top navigation tabs, you'll see the course's name, followed by a dropdown menu icon. Clicking the icon will display a list of all the courses you have access to in Blackboard. If you then select one of those courses, you'll be taken to whatever page you're currently on in the first course, to the same page in the other course, provided the same page exists in both courses. For example, I can move from the Grade Center in this course directly to the Grade Center of another course. You now have several tools to help you navigate your course: the Course Menu, the Control Panel, the contextual dropdown menus, Edit Mode, and Course-to-Course Navigation.