Providing peer support in a virtual world

TCASE pivots to provide virtual conferences for special education professionals with Brightspace

TCASE’s biannual conferences are a lifeline for special education professionals, providing a forum where they can share knowledge with their peers. When the COVID-19 crisis hit Texas, that peer support became even more critical to find solutions to a host of new special education challenges. In pandemic conditions, a face-to-face event simply wasn’t an option—so TCASE pivoted to launch its first virtual conference with support from Zoom and D2L's Brightspace platform.

At a glance

**Client:** Texas Council of Administrators of Special Education (TCASE)
**Learners:** 1,200
**Industry:** Associations
**Website:** tcase.org

**Platform/Features:**
- D2L's Brightspace platform

**Interviewees:**
- Ginger Meyners, Associate Director

**Highlights:**
- Built and launched a full-featured virtual conference platform in just eight weeks
- Attracted more than 650 attendees
- Increased accessibility for members who might not be able to attend a face-to-face event
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Ginger Meyners, Associate Director, Texas Council of Administrators of Special Education (TCASE)

Challenge

Special education means special challenges

TCASE is an association for special education professionals in the state of Texas. Its 1,200 annual members include educators and administrators from school districts across the state who rely on TCASE to provide professional development, build support networks, and share knowledge.

TCASE hosts two conferences every year, which provide a priceless opportunity for members to get together, share experiences, learn, and grow as professionals. For special education leaders who do not have a large network in their area, these conferences could be the only opportunity to meet and interact with their peers.

However, when COVID-19 hit Texas in early March 2020, TCASE’s plans had to change. It soon became apparent that a face-to-face conference wouldn’t be an option—yet the crisis meant that special education professionals were facing unprecedented challenges and desperately needed each other’s help and support.

"COVID-19 created a huge issue for special educators," says Ginger Meyners, Associate Director at TCASE. "It’s not as simple as telling students that they need to stay home and learn online. Many students with disabilities need much greater support. They might also have medical conditions that make them more vulnerable to the virus, so we need to be even more careful about finding ways to deliver education safely."

To support its community, TCASE decided to run a virtual conference that both members and non-members could attend online. However, it needed to move fast: With only a few months between the start of the pandemic and the scheduled date for the conference, TCASE’s small team needed to find the right technology and the right partners to help it pivot to an online model quickly.
Solution

From idea to event in eight weeks
TCASE began its search by attending several other virtual events to help it pin down the key requirements for its own solution. “We knew that we wanted to have a live video component,” says Ginger Meyners. “If you’re just hearing a voice and seeing a set of slides, that’s a much less engaging experience compared to actually seeing the speaker. Our other priority was ease of use. This was going to be the first time that some of our members have participated in a virtual event, so we had to make it simple and intuitive.”

For the live video component of the new conference platform, TCASE chose Zoom, believing that most members would already be familiar with its simple user interface. TCASE also needed a platform to manage registration, manage schedules, and act as a central hub for information and content.

“We had heard a lot about D2L’s Brightspace platform, and we knew it could integrate with both Zoom and our association management system,” says Ginger Meyners. “The question was more about timing: Could we go live with the Brightspace platform in time?” That’s when TCASE met with enSYNC, a D2L partner that specializes in software solutions for the associations sector. Ginger Meyners recalls: “We did some demos with enSYNC and D2L, and everything just fell into place. We liked how the Brightspace platform looked and how it was built, and we knew that enSYNC could make it happen and meet our timeline.”

D2L and the enSYNC team helped TCASE walk through the implementation plan, assigning the appropriate team members to the project. As a result of this well-planned approach, the team completed the implementation in just eight weeks. “Both D2L and enSYNC have been fabulous,” adds Ginger Meyners.

During the conference itself, attendees used the Brightspace platform to view the daily schedule, get all the information they needed on each session, and access links to the Zoom meetings. “The Brightspace platform was the hub of everything, and that made it easy for our small team to run the whole event efficiently,” says Ginger Meyners.

Staged over three days, the conference provided general sessions for all attendees, plus a wide choice of smaller breakout sessions and community-building opportunities. For example, the Brightspace platform provided access to Zoom sessions during lunch breaks, where attendees could meet for unstructured conversations with their peers—mimicking the “hallway track” of a traditional conference, where serendipitous meetings and conversations take place outside the formal program.
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Result

Putting community first
As the first virtual conference it had ever run, TCASE was unsure how its members would respond. “We set a target of 600 attendees, and we had more than 650,” says Ginger Meyners. “More importantly, the feedback from attendees was both positive and useful; for example, people told us that running the conference online meant that their whole team was able to attend, when previously they might only have sent one or two team members.”

The event was popular with TCASE’s sponsors and industry partners too: Instead of a traditional exhibition hall, the virtual format allowed each partner to host their own breakout rooms, and participants could choose which one to visit. This meant that instead of trying to catch the eye of attendees as they wandered through a hall, sponsors’ interactions with participants in the breakout rooms were much more intentional. Sponsors reported that they had much higher-value conversations with attendees who were genuinely interested in their products and services.

“We’ve gotten good feedback from our industry partners that hosted the private breakout rooms,” says Ginger Meyners. “Some of them were using our event as a litmus test for what they would do at other conferences going forward, and they really liked the approach we took.”

She concludes: “Going virtual meant that we’ve been able to keep our community strong. Our members have been so grateful that we went ahead despite all the challenges, because they needed this event, they needed the connection, and they needed the information. Going forward, we’re planning to have a virtual aspect to all our events, with Brightspace as the hub for all our past and future content—a one-stop shop for all their educational needs.”

Ginger Meyners, Associate Director, Texas Council of Administrators of Special Education (TCASE)