

# **My Football Ticket: Online Student Football Ticket Management**

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## ABSTRACT

*The University of Alabama's My Football Ticket program promotes online customer self-service, streamlined paperless game day access into the football stadium for students, and ensures maximum distribution of a limited high-demand campus resource-student football tickets. The program is a collaborative effort by the campus community to enhance services to our students. From concept to reality, it took the combined efforts and vision of the university's Student Government Association, Action Card Office, Information Technology, Student Affairs, Intercollegiate Athletics and our transaction system vendor, Blackboard Transact.*

*Prior to the online program initiation, paper tickets were manually distributed to students who then had to bring both their student ticket and ID card to the stadium for a two-step entrance process. The University of Alabama's student enrollment has experienced growth for several years with current enrollment just over 28,000, an increase of 32% since Fall 2005. The student football ticket allocation of 15,000 is tied to a limited facility capacity so the gap has grown each year between the number of student tickets available and the number of students vying to purchase tickets. A physical transfer of the paper ticket had to occur for eligible students to swap tickets between themselves. Too often, the inconvenience of swapping the physical ticket left unused seats in the stadium on game day when thousands of students without a ticket wanted to attend. Additionally, physical tickets that could be upgraded to a Guest Ticket, combined with the high demand within the Alabama community for football game tickets, encouraged the sale of those student tickets on the open market at high prices again leaving eligible students out of the stadium on game day.*

*With the installation of the My Football Ticket program, students now receive an electronic ticket and can self manage their student football account online. Those electronic tickets can be used to attend the game with a simple swipe of their ID card at the stadium, transferred online to another eligible student without a ticket, or donated to the Ticket Bank for redistribution to another eligible student without a ticket for the upcoming game. Eligible students without an electronic student ticket can go online to be placed on the Wait List for a donated ticket. As donated tickets become available, they are automatically redistributed against the Wait List. All online transactions generate an email to the students university designated email account.*

*Quicker game day stadium access, 24x7 online customer self-service, elimination of printing, distribution and replacement of paper tickets, and the ability to easily redistribute entrance for a premium campus event that is part of our student's college experience has made My Football Ticket a 'best practice' for the University of Alabama campus community.*

## **Introduction of the Organization**

Founded in 1831 as Alabama's first public college, The University of Alabama is a major, comprehensive, student-centered research university and an academic community united in its commitment to enhance the quality of life for all Alabamians. As a senior comprehensive doctoral-level institution, its mission is to advance the intellectual and social condition of the people of the State through quality programs of teaching, research, and service. Our vision is to be the university of choice for the best and brightest students in Alabama and a university of choice for all other students who seek exceptional educational opportunities.

Situated on 840 acres within Tuscaloosa, Alabama, the university serves a diverse population of 28,807 students from across Alabama, the U.S. and 72 countries. Our students are supported by 5,255 dedicated faculty, administration and staff. The University of Alabama is a member of The University of Alabama System which includes campuses in Huntsville and Birmingham and outreach locations throughout Alabama. As President of the University of Alabama since 2003, Dr. Robert E. Witt's leadership has led to record levels of enrollment and academic quality has increased significantly. For nine consecutive years, The University of Alabama has ranked among the top 50 public universities in the nation in *U.S. News and World Report's* annual college rankings, fall 2009. The Action Card Office is a campus service center within Auxiliary Service, which serves under the Division of Financial Affairs.

The Action Card department is a service provider to the university community for efficient technological one-card solutions for campus operations. Our vision is to be the campus community's "key" to everyday academic, financial, access and identification needs including

programs beyond the physical boundaries of campus. Nine full time staff and 3 to 5 part time student employees comprise the Action Card Office which is responsible for carding, transaction and point-of-sale systems for the university. In 2008, the campus enterprise level transaction system processed 7.3 million transactions including over \$19 million in sales. Departmental services include validation, event access, point-of-sale, debit card programs, off-campus merchant program, authoritative data feeds, interface agents to other campus systems, online services and customized database warehouse reporting.

While the My Football Ticket project management and daily operations are supported by the Action Card Office, this project remains a collaborative effort by multiple divisions across the university and our campus card system provider.

- (1) Student Government Association (SGA): Elected by the students, the SGA's first priority is the advancement of student interest in a cooperative relationship with the University administration. My Football Ticket is a prime example of the benefits the SGA and the administration can create for the students by working together to address a concern and enhance services.
- (2) Intercollegiate Athletics is the owner of the student football ticket process and event facility, Bryant-Denny Stadium, which seats 92,138. Athletics represents an important and strong tradition for the university. Gameday on campus is part of the total student experience. From football, to gymnastics, basketball, rowing, cross country, golf, soccer, softball, swimming/diving, tennis, track and field and volleyball, The University of Alabama can boast 16 team NCAA Championships and countless more conference championships and individual honors. Athletics worked tirelessly with the SGA to approve the concept and financially support the program.

- (3) Office of Information Technology (OIT): OIT facilitates research, enhances instruction, and supports administrative operations by providing quality leadership, services, and resources in information technology. OIT provides ongoing technology design, customized programming and technological support for the My Football Ticket application. This support includes home game electronic ticket assignment to the cardholders Action Card ticket account, as well as special programming such as random prize drawings for cardholders donating tickets. OIT's support for this program is included in the Action Card Office's annual Service Level Agreement and is listed as a service goal.
- (4) Student Affairs (SA): SA fosters an environment supporting learning, healthy lifestyles, leadership and career development, personal growth and inclusiveness. SA is committed to building a sense of community and their personnel are devoted professionals who strive to develop a meaningful and lasting camaraderie among students. Student Affairs works directly with the SGA and supports communications to the students. They embraced the My Football Ticket program as an enhancement to the student experience and an opportunity to promote a culture of caring among our students by their taking the initiative to redistribute a limited and high-demand campus resource.
- (5) Blackboard Transact : Blackboard provides the transaction system application which included an online module for debit account balance checks and deposits. By tapping into that established application, My Football Ticket became a customized application under that established module. Conceptually designed by the university, Blackboard Implementation Services built the online application.

## Statement of the Problem/Initiative

Prior to the implementation of the My Football Ticket program, the university identified multiple areas of concern with student football ticket processes and game day entrance particularly in the face of growing enrollment. These concerns included:

- Printing, distribution and replacement costs and inconvenience of handling paper tickets
- Growth of student enrollment creating an increasing gap between the number of student tickets available versus the number of students vying for tickets
- The value of the student ticket on the open market created opportunities for students to purchase with the sole intent of upgrading the tickets to Student Guest status and then selling the entire season package to a non-student despite the fact thousands of eligible students were without tickets to the football game
- Access to the stadium was cumbersome for gate keepers with both swiping the ID card at the reader, as well as validating and tearing the physical student tickets
- The inconvenience of swapping a physical ticket at the last moment, left unused student seats at the stadium on game day.

Solutions proposed utilizing the My Football Ticket concept:

- Move to electronic tickets student tickets for football entrance
- Move to online student cardholder football ticket account management for 24x7 self-service opportunities:
  - Transfers between eligible students
  - Donate unused tickets
  - Request donated tickets

- Check ticket balance for the upcoming game
- Move to game-by-game ticket access versus full season access
- Utilize UA's transaction system, ID card and customer service support as the common denominator for all students

Challenges faced by the university:

- Identifying a secure transfer process to validate online transactions without requiring the sharing of campus-wide ID numbers
- Ensuring online systems could support the volume of transactional traffic, particularly on game day when system resources were already at a peak
- Customized internal and external programming to create the electronic ticket access and online account management program pieces
- Awareness and training for 27,000+ students on a new application shortly after their return in the fall
- Linking multiple systems
- Encouraging a change in culture to donate unused student tickets to their fellow students

## **Design**

The first step was approval of the concept and program vision in order to create the program technological design. The concerns identified within the student football ticket process originated with the SGA as they listened to their constituents, particularly as increasing enrollment brought additional attention and pressure to the situation. The SGA initiated discussions with both Athletics and Student Affairs and those groups identified the Action Card

Office as the project manager. OIT became a partner in the initiative as the Action Card Office has a Service Level Agreement with OIT for application support. With all the stakeholders now identified, representatives from each area were assigned to the project. The My Football Ticket campus design and implementation project team included:

- Student Government: President, Vice President for Student Affairs, Athletic Ticket Commission Chair
- Action Card: Director, Technician Supervisor
- Intercollegiate Athletics: Assistant Athletic Director, Director of Ticketing
- OIT: Director for Application Support, Senior Program Analyst
- Student Affairs: Associate Vice President

As listed above critical concerns were identified and a solution attached to each concern.

Concern	Solution
Paper Tickets: Cost, Inconvenience	Electronic tickets
Enrollment growth	24x7 online self service account management to encourage donations, transfers and ticket requests
Season tickets sold on open market	Release electronic ticket for upcoming home game only starting the Sunday prior to a home football game
Multiple validation at the gate with tickets and card swipe	Electronic ticket access validates enrollment and ticket purchase with a single swipe in the reader
Inconvenient to swap physical tickets	24x7 online self service account management to encourage donations and transfers in a real-time format

From this point, a list of basic program features was created and basic criteria listed for each feature:

Feature	Criteria
Transfer Ticket	Eligible as based on Student Receivables Athletic Entrance criteria. Student transferring must have an electronic ticket count. Student receiving a ticket must not have an electronic ticket count already.
Donate Ticket	Remove electronic ticket count.
Request Ticket	Eligible as based on Student Receivables Athletic Entrance criteria. Student must not have an electronic ticket count already.
Check Balance	Enrolled student with a Bama ID account.
Electronic Ticket Count for Game Day Entrance	Purchased ticket as designated by Athletics. Eligible as based on Student Receivables Athletic Entrance criteria.

The design team then looked at each feature and determined if the resource was currently available under the transaction system, could be designed internally within OIT or would be outsourced to Blackboard Transact Implementation Services. It was determined assignment of the electronic ticket for each game would be managed in-house within Action Card and OIT based on a data file from Athletics. Action Card readers had been utilized for student football event access for years so no changes would be needed at the gates. Online services would be outsourced to Bb Transact which included transactions to transfer tickets, donate a ticket, request a ticket or check a ticket balance. At that point in time, Blackboard was contacted for customized services. With the savings associated with the elimination of printing and distributing paper tickets, Intercollegiate Athletics funded the one-time programming costs to Blackboard, as well as annual maintenance to ensure support and upgrade compatibility for the customization. The attached University of Alabama Student Football Ticket Process flow chart outlines the design steps for each option under the program.

The initial concept and feature design was presented for approval to the President by the SGA, to the Athletic Director by Athletics, to the Vice President for Student Affairs by Student Affairs and to the Vice President for Financial Affairs by Action Card. With their approval, the project moved forward to implementation.

## **Implementation**

The design team transitioned into the implementation team. Meanwhile, the current SGA administration had changed with the annual elections. We were fortunate that the new SGA administration had been either involved with the project or were well versed in the previous year's activities and easily stepped into their role for the implementation stage.

One of our early concerns in establishing the online program was a secure online transfer process for the transfer of tickets where students would not be required to share their campus-wide ID numbers. Aside from a campus-wide ID number, a unique identifier for all students, that was still an official university account but without the privacy concerns of a campus-wide ID number, was their required university campus email. Utilizing their crimson email account meant a student transferring simply needed to know the following information on a person receiving the ticket: (1) their name, exactly as it appears on their Action Card, and (2) their full crimson email address.

The next issue to address was concerns with online transaction volume. The current online campus transaction system application for debit account deposits, balance checks and transaction history review is hosted by Blackboard and had been in place for years. With the vast majority of our debit deposits made online, students were familiar with the website, it was

installed and stable technology with LDAP authentication established for secure sign-on. It was a natural fit to add My Football Ticket as a tab under this site versus establishing a new site for football ticket administration. Working with the vendor, we estimated volume during the week both online applications were expected to generate and moved both applications to a load balancing option. Stability of the application was identified as a critical component to ensure a high adoption rate and acceptance of the program by the student community. Student cardholder transactions for donating, requesting and transferring a ticket, and verifying their ticket account balance for the home game were applied under a new tab within our current online application. System administration components include monitoring of the Wait List, donated ticket bank balances for processing, game dates to regulate the tab opening and closing, text for web pages and emails, usage counts for traffic administration and planning, and a searchable transaction history log for customer service questions.

Now it was time to create and test internal OIT and Blackboard programming. Internally, UA has had a card privilege established for athletic entrance for eligible students as based on Student Receivables criteria for years. What we added was a separate count privilege, similar to a count meal plan. Each game, for students who were eligible and had purchased a ticket, an automated program would assign a count of one to that cardholders count privilege. That count could then be accessed at the game reader for entrance or for online transfer or donation. Additionally, an exception report would be created as returning student tickets are purchased in the spring and a small portion fail to return for the fall or, while enrolled, fail to meet the athletic entrance criteria. OIT created programming and, together with the Action Card, tested the program from assignment to swipe at the reader and analyzed exception reporting for accuracy.

Starting in June, Blackboard had their online customization ready. The program was attached to our online Blackboard site where we could allow online limited access for select UA representatives. Action Card and OIT strenuously tested the features and subsequently enabled the tab to a select group of SGA and Student Affairs representatives for testing from the student perspective. Both the SGA and Student Affairs representatives were pleased with the results. In order to ensure students received receipts for online transactions, an email would be sent to the students official university crimson email account for any parties involved in a transaction. This notification was needed for the students to feel comfortable their transaction had completed. It also allowed students on the Wait List to know when they have received a donated ticket. This notification would also serve as backup for a dispute should a question arise regarding a transaction. The SGA and Student Affairs assisted Action Card with the text for the emails.

As July approached, the system components and features had been tested so everyone's attention turned to training solutions for the full student population upon their return in August. Football is serious business for the students, and we all understood how important it was for them to feel comfortable using the solution and trust the system outcomes. While some limited information about a new ticket system had been released in the Spring, the students had neither seen nor heard any specifics about the application before arriving back at the University in August. The implementation team wanted to give the students every opportunity to experience and learn how to use the system prior to the first home game, so we created the following training plan:

- SGA created a My Football Ticket logo that would be placed on all communications.
- Action Card created training videos introducing the system and showcasing screen shots with audio instructions, which walk the students through each specific transaction type.

The videos can be viewed at <http://actcard.ua.edu/> under the My Football Ticket logo.

This information is also available online in a printable version.

- The Action Card Office created online Frequently Asked Questions and Tips based on questions the students had asked during the testing phase.
- The My Football Tab was opened for a trial period the week classes started. An electronic ticket count of one was assigned to the football account for all eligible students which allowed them access to the system for live testing. We utilized all campus student electronic notification media to promote the trial week. Over 7,000 students tested the service during the trial week offering the implementation team the ability to increase student awareness and comfort level for the system and provide system load testing to ensure quality system performance.
- The Action Card Office positioned tables at major foot traffic areas the first week of school to demonstrate the product, answer questions and promote the trial week.

With a home football game on September 6, 2008, My Football Ticket went live and the tab was opened on Sunday, August 31. Each Sunday prior to a home football game, UA's OIT department has a scheduled program that takes a file of purchased student tickets from Athletics by game, validates against eligibility on a cardholder within the card system, and applies a deposit of one to the football account for eligible cardholders via a shared mode import. Exceptions between the files are forwarded to the Action Card Office for review. Eligibility status changes for students, which process after the Sunday morning program and up to the early morning of game day, are processed at 5 a.m. on game day by a second scheduled program created by UA's OIT department. The eligibility changes are processed

against the exception file and, when appropriate, a deposit of one is placed on the football account for the newly eligible student cardholders.

During the trial period and the week of the first home game, the Action Card Office phones were busy, but manageable. A significant drop in the call activity occurred by the second week as a large group of students had successfully utilized the system. Game day went smoothly with 10,981 card swipes for game entrance. *Crimson White*, our student newspaper expressed their approval of the program and the ease of the technology change for the campus. For the first game, there were 26,460 hits to the website, 96 donated tickets, 1954 transferred tickets, and 805 requests for donated tickets.

The SGA worked hard to encourage students to donate tickets to another student fan if they were not attending the game. By working with Athletics and Action Card for prizes, they established a program where students donating tickets online to the ticket bank are automatically entered for a chance to win a weekly prize and a Grand Prize at the end of the season. Using donation history from the My Football Ticket system, each Monday after a home game, UA's OIT department utilizes a random generation program to choose a winner. A steady increase in the number of donated student tickets occurred as the season progressed.

## **Benefits**

The My Football Ticket system has resulted in several benefits for the student and campus community including:

- Quicker access for students into the stadium reducing lines and wait time by eliminating the validation and tearing of paper tickets

- Redistribution of Athletic financial resources of \$15,000 to support the Bb customization by eliminating costs associated with printing and distributing student paper tickets for home games
- Environmental benefits from eliminating paper tickets
- Enhanced student customer service with online 24x7 self service ticket account management
  - 130,063 hits to the My Football Ticket tab
  - 94,184 student ticket counts over 7 home games
  - 3,677 donated tickets
  - 14,677 ticket transfers
  - 5,233 requests for donated tickets
- Measured outcomes for marketing, tracking student attendance and rewarding ticket donations
- Reduction in the resell numbers of student ticket packages at enhanced pricing on the open market
- Reduced ticket upgrades to Guest Tickets allowing student seats to be utilized by students
- Elimination of lost/stolen paper tickets
- Successful collaboration between the students and multiple campus divisions
  - 2008 National Association of College and Auxiliary Services (NACAS) South Collaboration Award

## **Retrospect**

The My Football Ticket program met its initial goals and its success was measured with the increased usage as the season progressed and the instant acceptance by the student

community. Throughout the season, calls were received from administrators and SGA officers from other universities across the country that had heard about the initiative and were looking at similar implementations for their campus. For UA, the implementation team continues to work together to encourage no student seats remain unused.

In retrospect, we have identified two areas for continued improvement. First, the design and implementation team was naïve in the belief the convenience of the system would virtually eliminate unutilized student tickets on game day. Data revealed an average in excess of 2,000 unused student ticket counts over the 7 home games in 2008. Looking at the system statistics and analyzing each particular game day experience, components affecting student attendance included the perceived quality of the opponent, weather conditions and whether the game was a conference opponent. Utilizing that information, target marketing and system administrator ticket bank adjustments can be utilized to increase attendance by distributing tickets to the Wait List.

Secondly, unlimited Guest Tickets upgrades were allowed so students dedicated to selling their tickets on the open market to non-students could continue this activity. While inconvenienced by the game-by-game in-person upgrade process, and a far fewer number doing so, no penalty occurred for continuing the process.

Based on the My Football Ticket statistics and analysis from the 2008 football season, this past Spring the Student Athletic Ticket Committee recommended 2 penalties to address the concerns listed above. (1) Students who fail to either utilize, donate or transfer their electronic student ticket 3 or more times during the season will forfeit the ability to buy postseason tickets this year and will not be able to purchase regular or postseason tickets for the 2010 season.

(2) Students who upgrade their season ticket 4 or more times during the season forfeit the right to purchase postseason tickets for this season.

We also realized other opportunities existed to utilize the program. At the start of the 2009 football ticket season, an additional 500 student ticket packages became available. Anticipating demand for these student tickets would be larger than the 500 tickets allotted, the My Football Ticket Waiting List feature was utilized for students to conveniently register for the random draw for the ticket issuance. The Waiting List report was extracted and utilized by OIT for their random draw program which selected the students eligible to purchase one of the available packages.

The My Football Ticket program continues to evolve. For students, this program has been a successful addition to their campus life. For the administration, it proved to be a successful collaboration between multiple campus divisions and the SGA to bring the program from concept to reality. For all those directly involved in administering the program, it enhanced our departments' reputations and demonstrated the value we collectively provide the campus by embracing new technology.