

Customer Success Story

Western Michigan University

United States | Higher Education | Blackthorn Events

Part One

About Western Michigan University

[Western Michigan University \(WMU\)](#), founded in 1903 as a teacher's college, has grown into a comprehensive public institution with nine colleges, including engineering, business, aviation, and the Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine. The Advancement team focuses on building relationships with alumni, donors, and friends of WMU. Events are a key part of that work, helping support fundraising campaigns and deepen community engagement.

Part Two

The Challenge

Before adopting [Blackthorn Events](#), WMU Advancement managed events with iModules, then moved to a custom Salesforce object in 2020. When key marketing staff left in 2022, maintaining the custom platform became difficult.

The team faced real challenges:

- Disconnected tools and siloed data
- Duplicate records and manual spreadsheets
- No reliable way to track attendance or follow up
- Reporting was slow and based on anecdotes, not data

"We went from spreadsheets and silos to one place in Salesforce – and that changed how we connect with donors," said a member of the Advancement team.

In 2022, the team began cleaning and consolidating historical event data in Salesforce. While 230 events were imported, only 26 actually took place that year – most of them virtual or hybrid. That initial import inflated attendance averages and highlighted the need for better context around engagement data.

Part Three

Why WMU Chose Blackthorn Events

In early 2024, WMU selected [Blackthorn Events](#) for its native Salesforce integration, flexible payment options, and ability to write data directly into Salesforce without connectors.

Blackthorn's flexibility stood out. The team could customize forms to capture donor relationships, spouses, and graduation years – and build reports using standard Salesforce dashboards.

Implementation began in August 2024, just one month before Homecoming – the first major event run through Blackthorn. Knowing the stakes, the Advancement team leaned on Blackthorn's onboarding and training support to set up the system, manage registration, and check guests in onsite.

"Blackthorn's onboarding manager was responsive, knowledgeable, and easy to work with," shared the team. "They even sent someone in person on Homecoming Day."

FY25 was a hybrid year, with events running in both the legacy system and Blackthorn. That overlap gave the team space to test, learn, and train staff without losing data. Events weren't duplicated, and staff built early trust in the new process.

Part Four

Use Cases: How WMU Leverages Blackthorn Events

1. Data-Driven Engagement for Gift Officers

Gift officers now see who registered and attended events, giving them visibility into potential and existing relationships in their portfolios – all without manual tracking.

"[Blackthorn](#) gives gift officers snapshots of who has registered and attended, who's in their portfolio, and their giving capacity," shared WMU's Advancement team. "Gift officers have more insight into which events they should personally attend to move their relationships forward."

This new level of visibility allows WMU's development team to prioritize high-value opportunities, personalize outreach, and create more meaningful interactions with donors.

2. Presidential Donor Events

Private events hosted by the university president are now logged directly in Salesforce. Leadership and Advancement teams have full visibility into who attended and how those interactions support stewardship.

“Our presidential donor events are finally tracked in Salesforce, giving us clarity we never had before,” said a WMU staff member.

With every key interaction now recorded in real time, the university can connect attendance data to giving outcomes and stewardship efforts—something that was impossible with the old system.

3. Cross-Functional Collaboration

By unifying data within Salesforce, WMU broke down silos between advancement, development, and events. Teams now collaborate on campaigns and annual fund initiatives with shared data and insight. Departments that once operated independently now align around a common data source, improving efficiency and communication across Advancement.

Part Five

The Impact: Transforming Event Management at WMU

Since implementing [Blackthorn](#), WMU has replaced manual tasks with real-time dashboards and reliable data. Teams now focus on strategy instead of reconciliation. Gift officers and leadership teams trust the insights they’re using.

As the team enters FY26, they plan to expand their toolkit by adding [Blackthorn Messaging](#) and Donation payments. Blackthorn Messaging will deliver updates that are easily accessible to attendees even as they arrive. Separating registration and donation payments will make reconciliation easier for Gift Accounting and provide a better experience for registrants.

“Looking forward, we’ll measure success by how well we engage donors and how our events support giving outcomes,” shared the WMU team.

This forward-looking mindset reflects WMU’s commitment to continuous improvement—leveraging technology not only to manage events more efficiently but to create experiences that strengthen donor relationships and advance the university’s mission.

Part Six

Growing Together: Opportunities for Continued Enhancement

WMU's Advancement team is already seeing results using [Blackthorn](#): cleaner data, faster workflows, and stronger event impact.

They've also provided thoughtful product feedback rooted in real use. That input is helping shape Blackthorn's roadmap — especially for higher education needs like permissions, email communication, and form flexibility.

This partnership has grown beyond software. It's a collaboration that improves both the product and WMU's advancement ecosystem.

Part Seven

Realizing ROI

For [Western Michigan University](#), return on investment means measurable, donor-centered outcomes. The team is now on their way towards tracking how quickly donors give after attending an event, how many registrants are added to gift officer portfolios and later become donors, and how alumni participation changes over time.

These data points help WMU evaluate what's working and where to focus. Since partnering with [Blackthorn](#), they've eliminated silos, given staff real-time access to event data, and improved alumni and donor records through cleaner contact collection during registration.

This evolving view of ROI reflects WMU's ongoing commitment to asking better questions, uncovering deeper insights, and building stronger outcomes for the university, its donors, and the wider community.

Ready to explore what premium event management could mean for your organization?

[Book a call with the Blackthorn team today.](#)