

MEMORANDUM

TO: Members of the Faculty
FROM: Information Technology Committee¹
SUBJECT: Course Management System Change
DATE: 3/26/2008

First introduced in January 2002, the use of our institutional Course Management System ²(CMS) has reached usage such that it is imperative that we integrate it with our identity management system (LDAP) and automate data entry for course and enrollment information. Our present license with Blackboard (<http://www.blackboard.com>) does not allow us to do that. This results in Clark being at a crossroads. Should we invest in a “higher level” Blackboard license that will allow us to achieve data integration or should we consider an alternative product, in this case a product called Moodle?

In our February meeting, Faculty members of the Information Technology Committee endorsed ITS's recommendation that the University migrate to Moodle. Several factors contributed to the conclusion that Moodle is the best choice for Clark. Among them:

- Moodle is capable of supporting the data integration, critical to the sustainability of Clark's CMS implementation.
- Moodle is a good fit for our CMS needs at Clark. While Moodle can, with ease, meet basic purposes (such as posting syllabi and readings), it also has robust ability to scale for more sophisticated use without the requirement to license additional products (such as would be the case with Blackboard if we wanted integrated wiki, blog, or podcasting support).
- Moodle is an open source product. There are no licensing fees associated with it. While this does not mean that it is a zero cost product--the University will incur support costs associated with staff time and server hardware for it—the investments we make in staff resources to support it can be leveraged for other purposes as well.
- Moodle's open source nature means that Clark would own the system (rather than lease the right to use it such as with Blackboard's licensing scheme) and have rights allowing us to change and modify it. This, combined with the vast community associated with Moodle's use and development, means that there are an enormous number of plug-ins available. These plug-ins would allow us to consider adding functionality that is non-standard (e.g. support for sending text messages, podcasting, 3D molecule models, etc.) Should we choose, we could also develop our own plug-ins and contribute them back to the Moodle community.
- The open source community and operating philosophy are a good fit with academe and the tenets we hold for collaboration, knowledge production, and knowledge sharing.

¹Membership of the Information Technology Committee includes: Matt Malsky (chair), Bob Ross (Sociology), Li Han (Math/Computer Science), David Angel (Provost), Pennie Turgeon (Chief Information Officer), Judy Miller (Associate Dean), Gwen Arthur (University Librarian), Cheryl Turner Elwell (Academic Technology Services).

² Course management systems provide a web-based interface allowing faculty to manage materials distribution, assignments, communications and other aspects of instruction for their courses.

- Finally, Clark's negative experience with Blackboard as a corporation and service provider. Following the January ITC meeting, Pennie Turgeon and Cheryl Turner Elwell had a conference call with Blackboard that they hoped would lead to licensing option that would allow Clark the same system functionality as the current "basic" Blackboard license with the added ability to automatically feed identity and course registration data to the system. Blackboard was inflexible in its licensing scheme leaving us with two options:
 - To renew our contract with Blackboard and not achieve needed data integration, at a 20% price increase (the new contract would be \$15,000 annually with no discount for multi-year renewal). ITS noted that this was particularly bothersome as Blackboard increased the cost of product by 25% last year;
 - To upgrade the license to a level (Blackboard Learning System) that allows data integration the University and pay \$42,700 annually with projected increases of 5-7% per year.

While none of us can deny that staying with Blackboard is probably the "easier" choice (it is familiar, it doesn't require transition or change), statements from our Blackboard representatives lead ITS to the conclusion that the current corporate philosophy and vision of Blackboard is not in keeping with Clark's values or interests. Now a publicly traded company on the merger and acquisition trail, Blackboard is focused on being a service provider aimed at much more than the course management system supporting face-to-face learning that we need at Clark. Blackboard appears eager to sell us product at exorbitant costs and hope we will sign up for additional services as well. So unfortunately, while easy, we cannot argue that Clark would get an adequate return on investment were we to pursue Blackboard licensing at the level we need (Blackboard Learning System). This is especially true when we consider that we would be paying \$42,700 for the product alone. There are staff support hours associated with Blackboard, as well as server hardware, that must be accounted for as we consider the total cost of adoption.

After gaining support for the transition to Moodle from the faculty members of the Information Technology Committee, ITS assembled a project team (led by Cheryl Turner Elwell) and developed a project plan to make the move to Moodle as our course management system. The plan includes the following:

- Our changeover to Moodle as Clark's CMS will be made over the course of the next 18 months.
- Faculty may continue to use Blackboard through the 2008/2009 academic year, but after the spring '09 semester, new courses will not be created in Blackboard.
- By the second week of April, ITS will have a test Moodle environment available for any interested faculty to use as a "playground".
- The production Moodle environment will be available by mid-summer '08.
- Before the end of the spring '08 semester, Academic Technology Services (ATS) will have developed initial training materials and offer sessions for faculty interested in using Moodle for their fall '08 courses.
- At a faculty member's request, the ATS team will move course materials from Blackboard to Moodle. As materials are migrated, faculty will need to verify that the contents of the course are working as expected.
- Starting in the summer of 2009, Moodle will be the only course management system available to faculty and students at Clark.

We acknowledge that it will take careful planning and diligence to ensure a successful transition from Blackboard to Moodle, but we are enthusiastic about the possibilities it has and hope you will join us in our excitement about the potential that this change holds for Clark.