

Memo

TO:Carol Smith

FROM:Jeff Hansen, Chair of ATAC

DATE: 5/17/07

SUBJECT: Course Management Software

The Academic Technology Advisory Committee (ATAC) has been deliberating for several months about the most appropriate way forward in regards to Course Management Software (CMS) to be used by the University. The University has been using Blackboard for several years. During this time overall use of Blackboard has increased as has the degree to which individual instructors use it. Some faculty have invested considerable time and effort into developing their Blackboard sites. Yet, for several reasons it seems a good time to change our CMS. Besides the fact that Blackboard is costly and likely to become costlier, in several ways it does not meet our needs. The interface for Blackboard is far from ideal. Additionally, the university would like additional functionality - notably the ability to integrate the CMS with other services such as e-Services, course registration, grade submission, and Netstorage. Although some or all of these capabilities could be had from Blackboard it would cost significantly more to upgrade to this level of service. Consequently, ATAC has been looking into alternative CMS's.

Memo

After considering several, we settled on Moodle as one worth further investigation. Advantages of Moodle are many. Moodle is open-source software. This means it is not sold by a corporation. It has been developed by many contributors and its source code is available to anyone and anyone can modify it as they want. Consequently, it is free. Ironically, even though we don't pay for Moodle, support for it is better than for Blackboard. This is due to a vibrant community of developers and users who are very willing to answer questions. These developers and users are mostly educators, so generally Moodle is made to work the way educators need it to work.

Moodle is also made to communicate well with other systems. Blackboard is not. To gain the additional functionality we want we would need to upgrade our Blackboard license. While doing this would give more functionality, at this level of functionality Blackboard wants to do everything for us. This is not an acceptable situation. We have too much already invested in e-Services, our course registration program, and other services to throw them away in favor of Blackboard. On the other hand, Moodle only does course management. However, it is very good at communicating with other systems which should allow us to integrate it with those other services.

Memo

The downside of Moodle is that those who currently use Blackboard will have to be retrained to use Moodle. Some faculty members have extensive Blackboard sites. These sites will have to be transferred to Moodle which may require considerable time.

To help determine if DePauw should change to Moodle ATAC undertook a trial of the program. A Moodle server was set up and several people set up course sites using it. Two informational meetings were held to show people how Moodle works in comparison to Blackboard. One was sponsored by FITS and the other by ATAC. After each we obtained feedback from those who attended. The feedback we have received has generally been positive. While those most heavily invested in Blackboard are understandably reluctant to switch, nearly all see the value of Moodle relative to Blackboard. Therefore ATAC recommends that we switch to Moodle.

We understand that such a change will require some time to implement. Our recommendation is that the Moodle server be made available to faculty as soon as possible so that they may begin to learn how to use Moodle. During the 2007-2008 academic year Moodle and Blackboard should both be available for faculty members to use although faculty members should be encouraged to switch to Moodle as soon as they can. Blackboard would not be available as of July 1,

Memo

2008. Should we for any reason find during this time that Moodle is somehow not meeting our needs we could certainly fall back to our current level of use of Blackboard although that seems unlikely. During this transition period we will need to provide faculty members with training on how to use Moodle. Additionally, some faculty will need help in transferring content from Blackboard to Moodle - perhaps using ITAP students.

While ATAC realizes the potential for significant cost savings in this change, it is not the primary motivation for this change. The cost savings is difficult to determine anyway since implementing features such as integration with e-Services will require IT staff. This staff may be new or newly retrained. Our primary motivation in making this recommendation is the improved user experience and functionality available with Moodle.

We realize that this change will require a considerable effort from the staff of Library and Information Services. ATAC looks forward to working with you to make the transition as smooth as possible.

Jeff Hansen
Chair, Academic Technology Advisory Committee