

Web Course Management Software Recommendation Executive Summary

May 23, 2000

In December 1999 a team was convened to evaluate and select a Web Course Management (WCM) system for the university. The charge was to “Evaluate and recommend to the Dean of Information Resources web course management packages for installation and production rollout by Fall 2000.” The primary goals were two: 1. Evaluate and recommend cost-effective web course management package(s) that best meet PLU faculty needs, and 2. Develop training, support, and communication plans for the Fall 2000 semester. This summary reports on the first goal and recommends *Blackboard* as the solution that best meets the needs of PLU faculty and students.

The process used to conduct this evaluation included a literature review, data collection on each likely product, phone interviews with technical and sales representatives, local loading and testing of software systems, and interviews of overall impressions. Interviews were conducted with faculty to identify features desired in a WCM package. Detailed data for each of these steps is provided in the final report.

The literature review identified over thirty viable WCM packages. Based on the criteria developed by the committee, three packages were selected for local loading and testing: *Blackboard*, *WebCT*, and *Web Course in a Box*. Halfway through the evaluation process *Web Course in a Box* was purchased by *Blackboard* effectively reducing the field to two. Considering the criteria below, the consensus of the Evaluation Team was that none of the packages satisfied all criteria. Most disappointing was the inability of *Blackboard* to integrate with the current user account generation system or ePass and provide support for populating and maintaining courses and users. However, *Blackboard* was, without exception, regarded as the most intuitive and easy-to-use software package. After using both *Blackboard* and *WebCT*, it was very clear that *WebCT* would require significantly more user support and training. Considering ease of use as the top priority for effective use of this technology, it was clear that that *WebCT* would not be a viable option.

Criterion	<i>Blackboard</i>	<i>WebCT</i>
Comply with standards for data exchange and portability		
Provide data exchange pathways between web course management system and other campus databases to enable functions such as populating student info into courses	Provides batch and individual import capabilities for users, courses, and enrollment. Does not provide API or command line interface for synchronization.	Allows command line interface to provide scripting of account creation and maintenance
Insure interoperability among base client platform and browser sets	Supported.	Supported.
Support IMS, ADA, and other relevant standards to insure access to and migration of course content	Accessibility standards supported with user option for text only pages	Accessibility standards not supported
Provide basic levels of functionality with pathways for scalability and enhancements		
Include basic functions such as discussion groups, chat, resource area, and file distribution (especially <i>MS Office</i> and <i>Adobe Acrobat</i> files)	Supported. Handles <i>Office</i> and other files in browser window.	Supported
Provide support for enhancements such as whiteboards, multimedia components (e.g. streaming media), calendars, assessment and reporting, grading, email list support, search function, bookmarks, course/material archiving/reuse.	Supported	Supported
Personalization & Customization		
Make ease of use for faculty and students a top priority	Excellent intuitive interface	Clunky interface made it difficult to operate
Provide options to customize and personalize interfaces as appropriate for students and faculty	Customization is supported	Customization is supported
Provide a variety of customizable templates	Customization is supported at various levels for system and instructor	Customization is supported
Provide common user interface for navigation features among courses	Feature is supported	Feature is supported. Instructor interface and navigation very arcane.