



LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM SELECTION PROCESS

ELEARNING ADVISORY GROUP TASKFORCE REPORT

Date

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**ACCD INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES
ALAMO COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT**

ADVISORY GROUP STATUS REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alamo Community College District (ACCD) selected WebCT as the Learning Management System most suited to our faculty/student requirements in 1999. A committee representing each of the District colleges evaluated WebCT and other programs – LearningSpace, TopClass, Blackboard and determined that WebCT best met our requirements for transparency, ease of use, student friendly navigation, robust platform, available budget, security and technical support. Strengths included options within:

- Gradebook and Student record management.
- Online assessment.
- Discussion board.
- Student presentation.
- Collaborative tools – Calendar, Email, Chat.
- File management.

Although the system has not been without flaws (chat function failures), since adoption, the vendor has provided new versions, each better than the previous. Since then there has been an exponential growth in the number of active WebCT courses at the District. Today, ACCD WebCT platform hosts over 2088 courses and a total of 35,527 enrolled students. Appendix A, Chart details WebCT usage statistics. During this time the company has changed ownership, merged with Blackboard and a new version of the application is now available. Our eLearning Advisory Group, along with the ACCD Information Technologies felt it was important to assess the implications of the software upgrade and also wanted to make sure that WebCT Vista is the right choice for the Enterprise Learning Management System.

In light of the above decision, an advisory group of ACCD Distance Education administrators, Instructional designers, Faculty and IT professionals came together to explore the available Learning Management Systems, Market forces, Vendor product directions, System transition requirements, Support, Maintenance and Application feature options. The group discussed faculty needs, technical and functional requirements. In addition to the meetings, the process also consisted of studying the system to date, user statistics, incident database, available network resources and budget options.

Our current eLearning faculty felt that the current Learning Management System (WebCT Campus Edition) is an older learning management system which does not take advantage of the current technologies, up to date hardware, web and database technologies, security options to support student centered learning, classroom interactivity, discussion group assessments, assignment integration, gradebook access, learning object repository, community branding and content management options. Our eLearning Advisory Group feels our current situation creates a

significant risk for the over 2000 courses that currently use WebCT Campus Edition. The team strongly advocated the review process to select the successor. Four to five Learning Management applications were identified for evaluation, Moodle (Open Source System), Blackboard, Course Compass, WebCT Vista and Angel. Sub task-force groups were created to assess and evaluate the applications and also to return their findings for an in-depth product consideration.

The eLearning Advisory Group overwhelmingly favored WebCT Vista over other Learning Management Systems. Vista is a significant improvement over our current Campus Edition version and is designed to provide enterprise level web services. WebCT Vista has state of the art course development, content management and course management tools. The system is ADA compliant and has many instructional design options. WebCT Vista seamlessly integrates with our Banner student information systems and our ACCD Portal (PALS). Easy to use interface allows for simplified system administration and support.

Using Vendor supplied migration tools, courses within our current Learning Management System will seamlessly transfer to the new WebCT Vista version. In spite of the company changing ownership and Blackboard merger, WebCT Vista continues to maintain its position as a Learning management system of choice and a global market leader.

WHY UPGRADE LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Fall of 1999, ACCD, after a comprehensive review of available Learning Management systems, selected WebCT as its Learning Management system of choice. The product went into production at ACCD during Spring of 2000. Fall of 2003, WebCT was integrated to our enterprise portal system (ePortal) and the student information system (SIS Plus) to provide automated user and course management services and single sign on options. WebCT service currently supports over 35,527 students and more than 2088 courses.

By late 2005 with the exponential rise in the number of webCT courses, it had become evident that the current system (WebCT Campus Edition 4.1) is not scalable and feature rich to satisfy the demands of our current faculty and staff. In addition, the vendor is planning on scaling down support for the current version of WebCT Campus Edition. The system is getting difficult to manage and has limited technical options for system integration, enterprise reporting, community branding and third party system integrations.

Our students and faculty, expect Alamo Community College District to provide a reliable, stable Learning Management system. Our District is expanding through programs and is also in the process of opening a new college. We are continuously challenged with adding more students and creating a more student centered learning environment. Without this planned upgrade, the quality of the online course and the student learning experience will fall below higher education accepted standards.

Our current version of WebCT 4.1 is not robust to meet our current distance education standards. The system is built-in on single point of failures and is not designed adequately to provide a mission critical service.

Advantages of WebCT Vista:

WebCT Vista version is a significant improvement over the current version of WebCT campus edition. The system is ADA compliant and has state of the art facilities for course management, instruction design, application integration, usage reports, system branding, and system administration. Vista user interface has been redesigned to reduce navigation time and organized for ease of access. System integration facilities offer better options for interface with the Banner Student Information System and ACCD's PALS portal environment. Vista's new version has more enhancements in the area of electronic portfolio, program assessment and Learning objects. Vista, offers Content management capabilities that gives institutions the ability to store, reuse, manage and share content between departments easily. With the Learning Objects option, Faculty will be able to effectively share educational content between departments, colleges and/or the entire institution.

On the back end, the system has a better technical infrastructure that supports server clustering, load balancing and system security. The new architecture will support a more reliable and a stable system environment.

LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM SELECTION PROCESS

One of the goals of the WebCT Upgrade project is to provide a newly supported standard, scalable enterprise-wide learning management platform. An eLearning advisory group was formed to undertake the responsibility of evaluating both industry and open source course management system options. The review included both a functional and technical assessment of the following systems:

- WebCT CE 6.0
- WebCT Vista
- Blackboard
- Course Compass
- Moodle (Open Source)
- Angel

After the review, our committee removed Angel from a list of possible options. For an institution our size, we wanted to use a more robust Operating System – UNIX and an Oracle environment for our database. Angel runs on Windows 2000 or 2003 and uses SQL for the database. Angel did not meet the technical network requirements of the Alamo Community College District.

We also assessed Moodle Open Source solution. Moodle is currently used at one of the ACCD Colleges. Moodle, although, a fully developed solution, it does not easily integrate and interoperate with other applications. Moodle also has limitations in the areas of accessibility. Moodle is not scalable to meet the demands of our institution and offers limited vendor support options in comparison to Industry products, such as, WebCT and Blackboard. During the evaluation, the advisory group felt that Moodle will require a strong application development group or additional IT staffing or third party organization support to maintain an enterprise Moodle instance. Another reason to disqualify Moodle for enterprise wide installation was its limited track record with comparable higher education institution. Moodle instance will require the PHP safe mode to be turned off and that could provide an IT security risk. Several of our students still use Dial-up mode to access their online course and upon investigation, we have discovered Moodle

session time-outs to be a problem with dial-up ISP providers. Gradebook feature has been recognized a key feature of the Learning management system. Product research also showed WebCT Vista gradebook option to be a far better and user friendly tool than the gradebook option available within Moodle. Product support and options were limited and some solutions unproven.

Faculty members from the eLearning Advisory Group assessed Course Compass Learning management system and found that materials for Course Compass were not available in all academic and applied science areas. The system is also hosted on a vendor site and therefore provides limited support and maintenance options. If Course Compass is selected as an enterprise platform, faculty will experience a lot of difficulty with the course conversion and migration process.

With Moodle and Angel and Course Compass out of the pool of considerations, the Advisory group focused its resources on evaluating Blackboard, WebCT CE 6.0 and WebCT Vista.

ACCD eLearning group invited vendors from Blackboard to present on WebCT versions and Blackboard. Vista version is a premier version of the product and came out ahead of all the reviewed products due to its functional advantages, in the areas of course management, student management, student collaboration, content management, role management and system administration. Vista Enterprise Virtual Course Environment also came with a community manager to support diverse groups, Learning Object Manager to share content, Powerlinks options for application integration and software development and a Powersight option for enterprise reporting. WebCT CE version was limited in its functions and did not meet all the online learning requirements of ACCD faculty and students.

Blackboard, although, a comparable tool to WebCT has separate modules for content and course management. Application modules have to be purchased and implemented separately. Blackboard system traditionally had an advantage over WebCT in the areas of navigation. However, the new version of WebCT Vista has a very sophisticated user interface and therefore exceeded the quality of the Blackboard application. Especially, workflow enhancements on tasks of group management, gradebook, discussions, multiple file uploads, powerlinks will provide a greater eLearning user experience. In comparison to Blackboard, WebCT Vista also has better options for disaster recovery and security. By continuing to use the WebCT platform, there is not a major learning curve for our faculty by going to a new version of WebCT as opposed to another Learning management system. Selection of another Learning management system will also have a great impact on migration of current course content, course building options, definition of roles and capabilities and extra planning. By selecting WebCT Vista, system transition for system administrators and users will demand significantly less amount of time and will result in a more successful outcome.

RECOMMENDATION

After a careful evaluation in the areas of teaching and learning, enterprise system integration, technical architecture, system administration, the advisory group selected WebCT Vista Enterprise Edition as best fit solution for the Alamo Community College District. Extensive research on WebCT Vista capabilities clearly indicates that WebCT Vista will expand the capacity of the current version of the Campus Edition, content delivery, course interactivity, calendar maintenance, Course grading among many other things. Subject to a review of the product contract, hardware analysis, cost-benefit analysis, resource planning and major milestone implementation plan, the advisory group recommends the acquisition and deployment of WebCT Vista Enterprise Edition.

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APPENDIX – A – WEBCT USAGE STATISTICS

