

# **Course Management Systems and Ohio Higher Education**

## **Background**

In the spring of 2002, chief information officers and other interested individuals from Ohio's public and private colleges and universities gathered in Columbus to discuss what some saw as a growing problem in the pricing of and funding for course management systems.

In a few short years, web-based CMS products--the most successful of which are Blackboard and WebCT, have grown from experimental to mission-critical instructional tools. At my own institution, fifty to 60 percent of all faculty use WebCT for at least one course, and this number is growing all the time. As these tools begin to serve a progressively greater percentage on an institution's courses, the support and maintenance of them have become major tasks. Courses must be created and they must be populated with students. Very quickly, the major vendors have recognized the need to form links between a campus' primary administrative system and the CMS. With these links, much of the maintenance can be automated.

Yet the increasing importance and functionality of the CMS has not come cheaply. Prices for WebCT and Blackboard are escalating rapidly. One estimate indicates that in the next 2-3 years, the investment on the part of Ohio institutions of higher education for course management systems will increase by over two million a year. Even a small institution, that currently pays \$7000 for an annual subscription, could soon find itself paying up to \$50,000 instead.

There is another cause for concern: Blackboard and WebCT are proprietary systems. Importing or exporting course content is very difficult and costly.

The rapidly increasing prices of commercial course management systems, coupled with their proprietary natures, pose serious problems for higher education institutions in Ohio. Many of us have characterized this situation as a crisis.

But there is cause for optimism. Ohio has a strong tradition of inter-institutional cooperation with such operations as OhioLINK, OARNET, OSC and OLN. It might be possible for a statewide initiative to control costs for its members, while maintaining or even enhancing current functionality.

### **Some Options**

#### ***continue to work individually with leading vendors***

This offers the most local control, but it does not take advantage of the purchasing power of a statewide consortium. Individual approaches to the companies will not be as effective as joint/coordinated efforts.

#### ***broker statewide contracts***

Ohio has had some success brokering good prices with providers of course management systems. However, there seems to be less willingness on the part of the vendors to do this than in the past.

#### ***dot.edu model***

Wisconsin has established a statewide utility that provides hosted CMS services for its members, as well as a migration path for an institution to reach self-sufficiency,

i.e., to run these services locally. Called dot.edu, the utility is part of the University of Wisconsin system. dot.edu primarily runs Blackboard, though it is currently in negotiation with WebCT as well. dot.edu contracts with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee to provide 24/7 helpdesk services. dot.edu also maintains a staff of instructional designers.

On the surface, the dot.edu model doesn't seem to offer much to Ohio, except to smaller institutions that cannot afford to host their own CMS. However, there are several things that are noteworthy: 1) dot.edu is a higher education agency and as such is less interested in profit than it is in service. 2) dot.edu has been very successful, so much so that 3) it is replicating the model in other states, starting with New Mexico. 4) Because of items 2 and 3, dot.edu has enormous purchasing power and influence. If Blackboard and/or WebCT price themselves out of the market, dot.edu will find another partner more compatible with the goals and budgets of higher education. In fact, dot.edu has recently formed a partnership with such an agency.

One unknown is the levels of assistance dot.edu could/would provide to an institution trying to make course management and back office systems interoperate.

### ***collaboratively mount open-source CMS***

Several agencies, among them the Open Knowledge Initiative (OKI), are developing open-source course management products based upon open standards. MIT's Stellar product and Stanford's CourseWork were demonstrated at EDUCAUSE 2002. They both had good functionality; Stellar will soon be available for download, and CourseWork should follow in short order.

An open-source product should provide for easier importing and exporting of course content. The downside of using such a product is ongoing maintenance and development. One approach to this would be to have a centralized state office handle support and development.

### *A statewide utility*

Another possibility would be to combine several of the elements mentioned above to create a statewide CMS utility. Such a utility could be modeled after dot.edu, employ an open-source and open-standard CMS tool, provide hosting services for small schools and support to larger ones that would run their own servers and systems. The services such a statewide utility could provide might include 24 by 7 user help desk (which would be valuable to both large and small institutions), enhancement of the CMS product, implementation services provided at cost and integration services (integrating with back end systems) also provided at cost.

Such a utility could be managed by one of the existing state technology agencies, such as OLN, OSC or OARNET, or it could be a newly created institution. Membership fees could support the new agency; quite possible, the fees would be substantially less than licenses for WebCT or Blackboard.

While many institutions might prefer to locally host a CMS product, a centralized CMS utility could have particular value for hosting distance learning courses. If, for example, all courses listed in the OLN catalog, had course sites in a single location, think how much easier it would be on the distant learner for both registering for and taking a course.

A statewide CMS utility, if successful, could even in time expand into the realm of other technology support services, including portal development and integration services for its member institutions.

*Some next steps*

The governing board of the Ohio Learning Network is currently investigating future directions for the consortium. One possibility might be to emulate the dot.edu model in Ohio. Meanwhile, the Ohio Supercomputer Center or OARNET could install and experiment with the open-source course products that are beginning to emerge from the Open Knowledge Initiative. Further discussions on these issues between CIO's and other interested parties throughout the state should continue.

--Mark Cain