Chapter 4

Lessons Learned from a Course Management System Review at the University of Florida

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ABSTRACT

In 2008-2009, the University of Florida (UF) undertook a process of selecting a new course management system (CMS) to replace the existing CMS. This chapter presents the process developed to evaluate CMS options, discusses the data gathered during that process and interesting implications of that data, and then presents broader implications of course management system adoption to inform other institutions during their own evaluation and adoption processes. This information will be of value to higher education institutions and also to instructors who may benefit by considering this discussion while looking to maximize their own use of a local CMS and/or to choose tools that enable personal learning environments, as well as other online tools to support teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

The University of Florida (UF) recently conducted a course management system (CMS) review to evaluate and replace its existing CMS due to changes in vendor licensing. This chapter presents the review process that the university used, as well as significant lessons learned from the process to inform other institutions conducting their own evaluation and adoption processes. This discussion will benefit instructors looking to maximize their own use of a local CMS and/or to choose other tools for learning, such as portfolios, wikis, blogs, file repositories, collaboration software and other applications. Educational leaders and institutions will also benefit in terms of matching faculty development programs and support to the needs of instructors, staff, and students. Additionally,

lessons learned will be useful for organizations and programs designing educational content for blended and online instruction. Finally, this chapter provides useful information for institutions seeking to evolve from a closed to an open culture with deep campus involvement that encourages collaboration and engagement with all stakeholders.

Background

Course Management Systems, also known as Learning Management Systems and Virtual Learning Environments, have been around in a variety of forms since the 1980s; however the vision of educating students at a distance has been expressed since at least the early 1700s. For example, on March 20, 1728, the *Boston Gazette* contained an advertisement that "Persons in the Country desirous to Learn [shorthand], may by having the several Lessons sent weekly to them, be as perfectly instructed as those that live in Boston" (Bower & Hardy, 2004). However, it is only since the beginning of the 21st Century that course management systems have risen to prominence to as the dominant technology to support distance education and, in that process, have become central to the mission of higher education.

The importance of course management systems on college campuses is widely recognized. For example, the 2009 Campus Computing Survey indicated that 92 percent of institutions centrally support a single learning management product for the entire campus and that the associated CIOs estimate that roughly 55 percent of all classes make some use of that system, up from 50 percent in 2007 and 34 percent in 2003 (Green, 2009). This is true at the University of Florida and, like every other institution, UF must periodically update, upgrade, and change its CMS.

The University of Florida is a "doctoral/research universities-extensive[1]," public land grant institution with a total student enrollment of about 50,000. UF has a 2,000-acre campus and more than 900 buildings, including 170 with classrooms

and labs, as well as 19 Research and Education Centers across the state and a rapidly growing distance education program. For-credit enrollment includes roughly 32,600 undergraduate students and 17,000 graduate and professional students served by more than 4,000 faculty members.

The University of Florida has operated its "e-Learning System" (as the course management system is locally branded) or simply "e-Learning," since 1998. From a project that started on a desktop computer configured as a server and used by a few early adopters, e-Learning has grown now to support more than 80% of the student body each term and more than half of all sections taught. As such, e-Learning is recognized as one of the top mission critical systems at the University of Florida.

Associated with the growth of the e-Learning System, there has also been corresponding growth in hardware infrastructure, support staff, and, of course, total cost of ownership. This is not only true at the University of Florida, it is true at every institution that has chosen to support teaching and learning through any one of dozens of course management system options. As a result, the CMS represents an important -- and large -- investment for any school. Therefore, identifying what system to adopt, how to promote and use that system, how to support that system, and ultimately how to fund all the related costs is a critical decision for most institutions.

COURSE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM REVIEW PROCESS

The recent University of Florida course management system review process was initiated in 2008 in response to a vendor decision to discontinue the product. The selection of participants for the committee sought to achieve two goals: instructor leadership and direction of the evaluation and selection process (rather than by IT staff), and campus-wide participation.

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