



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

Vol. 22, No. 1

September 1, 2009

Planning for Changes to the WCU Learning Management System (WebCAT)

**By Carlie Merritt
Health and Human Sciences**

In April, 2009, Provost Kyle Carter appointed a task force representing faculty, IT Services, and WebCAT support to examine alternatives to our Learning Management System (LMS), commonly known as WebCAT. Our current license with Blackboard will expire in 2011 and WebCAT will no longer be available, so WCU must procure either a substantially different Blackboard product or migrate to a new LMS. We will also no longer be involved in shared hosting with other institutions. Provost Carter charged the task force to take a holistic view of the alternative systems, evaluating their educational value as well as their utility, cost and ease of use. Provost Carter, Dr. Anna McFadden and CIO Craig Fowler will make a final decision for a new LMS at the end of fall semester.

The Task Force members discussed several alternative Learning Management Systems, including Angel, Sakai and Moodle. Using the following rationale, they chose to examine Moodle, an open source LMS, as the best alternative to the new version of Blackboard:

- Coulter Faculty Center had funding and resources for piloting only one alternative while also supporting WebCAT;
- Our sister institutions, including Charlotte, App. State, NC State and ECU, as well as the UNC Online system, are already moving toward Moodle;
- Students from the high schools and the community college system will already be familiar with Moodle;
- Moodle has no licensing cost but will require more personnel
- In two years we will be faced with change to a new and significantly different Blackboard LMS if not to Moodle; and
- We can adjust Moodle to suit our own needs, which we cannot do with Blackboard. This would, however, require more hardware and personnel

Over the summer, Task Force members researched experiences from other institutions that have migrated to Moodle and nine WCU faculty members representing each of the colleges began developing fall courses in Moodle as a pilot project. Additionally, the Coulter Faculty Center provided a link to Blackboard version 9 (<http://ncvista9.blackboard.com>) and created a sample course in Moodle (<http://moodlepilot.wcu.edu>) for faculty to review and test. John LeBaron and Neil Torda developed a central repository for feedback and collaboration (<https://media.wcu.edu/groups/lmstf2009/>) for any faculty who have experienced Moodle or who have comments about the Blackboard 9 and Moodle trial sites.

Feedback to Date:

Based on the experience of sister universities and projected WCU hardware, software, and support needs, cost estimates indicate that Moodle will cost more than Blackboard over the next two years. WCU would pay approximately \$60,000 more per year due to increased staffing, hardware and software costs. This estimate includes the continuation of the

Blackboard license until it expires in 2011. After the expiration of the Blackboard license, Moodle costs will decline to roughly \$70,000 – 80,000 less than Blackboard each year.

Some preliminary feedback received from faculty piloting Moodle and those who have worked with the sample sites shows a mixed reaction to the two learning management systems.

- Most faculty feel Moodle is intuitive as far as loading content.
- A number indicated that either LMS will be better than VISTA and that the cost of ownership and stability issues will be very important.
- One individual mentioned that Blackboard was very good in integration with library services.
- A question was raised regarding how either system will integrate with e-Briefcase and QEP.
- No comments were mentioned about grading or in-depth development issues and also looking at the site from the student perspective, a feature that was made available to pilot sites.
- Several people like Blackboard much better because the learning curve will be less and they are too overwhelmed to take on something completely new. Blackboard has some familiar features, whereas Moodle has a completely different interface.
- Some commented, “You get what you pay for.”

The LMS Task Force will collect data from a variety of sources this fall. Blackboard representatives will come to WCU on September 15th and 16th to present Blackboard 9 and answer faculty questions. The task force will gather assessment information from faculty and students in the Moodle pilot midway through the semester. In addition, concerns of faculty across campus will be crucial in making a final determination. The Task Force will host two Open Forums this fall during which faculty are invited to share their experience and ask questions about Moodle and Blackboard 9. One Open Forum will be scheduled in September and another will be scheduled after data is received, but before completion of the recommendations, likely in November.

Feel free to contact John LeBaron or any of the LMS Task Force members to address issues about Blackboard or Moodle. Your responses will be posted on the LMS Feedback and Collaboration wiki for faculty and staff to review.

LMS Task Force Members

John LeBaron, Chair (Coulter Faculty Center), Chris Baxley (WebCAT Support), Michael Caudill (Arts and Sciences), Sharon Dole (CEAP) Regis Gilman (Education Outreach), Bill McDaniel (Kimmel School), Anna McFadden (Coulter Faculty Center), Carlie Merritt (HHS) Peter Savage (FPA), Chris Snyder (WebCAT Support), Michael Thomas (COB) and Zack Phillips (Student Representative).



A Note from the Editor

The Faculty Forum is now beginning its twenty second year as the official communication vehicle by faculty and for faculty. It is a veritable archive of over two decades of faculty observations and comment about the many issues they face in working on this campus and striving to educate the many students from around the globe who come to this university in search of knowledge, understanding and tools for facing the world. **PLEASE** consider writing an article during this coming academic year. We need to know by the first of the month that you'd like to write one, some idea of its focus, and then we'll advise you as to what month we can fit it in. We try very hard to We would need it no later than the 22nd of the month prior to publication. We also urge you to log on to the Faculty Forum webpage through the wiki: <http://media.wcu.edu/groups/facultyforum> to add your comments each month to the featured article. I look forward to working with all of you another year.

Vera Holland Guise
Faculty Fellow, Coulter Faculty Center

The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center.