Blackboard Advisory Committee: Status Report, summer 2008
JQ Johnson, 4 Aug 2008

Overview
This note is an update on Blackboard status written for the Blackboard Advisory Committee meeting of 7 Aug 08.

Blackboard usage this term
Blackboard overall usage for spring term is consistent with previous patterns. As of 5 May:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>As of 18 July</th>
<th>200604 (18 July)</th>
<th>200704 (28 July)</th>
<th>growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active summer-term coursesites</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students in at least one active coursesite</td>
<td>5617</td>
<td>6044</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total student coursesite enrollments</td>
<td>11832</td>
<td>14234</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We appear to be near saturation in terms of number of distinct users, with most UO students enrolled in at least one coursesite. However, we continue to experience growth in the total use of blackboard, particularly in small and mid-sized courses.

Regularly scheduled and unscheduled downtime
We’ve been sticking closely to our schedule of regular downtime since the last Advisory Committee meeting. No system downtime was taken on June 14 or July 12.

We experienced three periods of unscheduled downtime. Early on May 13 network problems resulted in intermittent unavailability for most users. On July 8 all user accounts were temporarily disabled for about 12 minutes. On July 22, work in the library computer room resulted in an unexpected restart of one of the redundant blackboard application servers; for about 9 minutes half of all users were unable to access the system.

Follow up from our May meeting
As agreed at our May meeting, JQ contacted David Griffin from ASUO and relayed the news that the committee had recommended against creating a blackboard site for the ASUO. Based on that meeting we are also moving slowly on allowing non-CRN uses of the system, though we continue to add coursesites for special functions including non-credit courses and faculty-sponsored groups.

Upgrade and downtime plans
Planning for the Aug 16 upgrade is now fairly firm. We will be installing Blackboard 8.0, including the new Facebook sync application. In addition, we will be replacing our 2 existing application servers with newer hardware.

Blackboard 8.0 is described in many places including the official release notes at http://libweb.uoregon.edu/tools/blogs/cet/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/blackboard_academic_suite_faculty_release_notes_for_80.pdf. As noted at our previous meeting, the largest change is in the gradebook. We are now running 8.0 on our test server, so committee members who would like to experiment with it before the Aug 16 upgrade can do so.
On Aug 16 we also plan to switch to our new application servers. These servers are substantially faster than the old ones, and run 64 bit linux with xxx GB memory.

Note that the Aug 16 downtime is 2 days before the start of Law Fall semester, and 3 days before summer term grades are due. We plan to encourage all faculty teaching summer term to try to get their grades in by Friday, Aug 15.

Longer term, we have updated our planned downtime schedule for the next several months. Of particular note:

- We expect to be down for part of Sunday, Sept 7, due to a campus-wide electrical shutdown.
- We expect to be down for the morning of Saturday, Sept 13, for a variety of small maintenance fixes. We may install a hotfix for Blackboard 8.0, and Information Services plans to rebuild table indices in our Oracle database to optimize for the new Blackboard 8.0 code, and to clean out old data from the activity_accumulator table.
- We are likely to take additional maintenance time during winter and spring breaks. However, given our expectations for the release schedule of Blackboard 9 we do not anticipate installing it at either of those times.
- We plan another major Blackboard upgrade on August 22, 2009.

We do not currently have budget or plans for application file server upgrades, but that planning is a high priority for us. File server upgrades are a possibility for winter or spring break.

We have also negotiated with Information Services a change in the schedule for weekly Blackboard downtime. The change is motivated by easier Oracle backup made possible by last year’s upgrades and by changes in operator coverage at IS. Rather than being down every Friday from 10pm until midnight, we now expect to take a brief downtime every Tuesday morning at 6am, probably for about 15 minutes.

Coursesites from 2004-05 will be removed from the system during the week of Sept 8-13.

**Other news of note**

**Blackboard World**

Tim Boshart attended Blackboard World in Las Vegas in mid-July. There were a large number of announcements, including a great deal of data on the future of the Blackboard product line.

Bb World information appears at [http://www.blackboard.com/company/events/BbWorld08](http://www.blackboard.com/company/events/BbWorld08).

Perhaps most interesting was information on “Blackboard NG,” the next generation of the Blackboard systems. The company seems finally to be making serious efforts to develop the product (JQ’s opinion is that they did a lot of development effort pre-2004, but that for several years their products lagged, perhaps because they were coping with their acquisition of WebCT). More on Blackboard NG below.

**Blackboard NG**

Blackboard NG will be released in pieces over the next 2 to 3 major releases of the system. Grade Center (in Blackboard 8) is the first piece. Bb 9 will be released probably before the end of 2008
(with UO likely to install it August 2009). There will be several Application Packs for Bb 9 in the time leading up to Bb X. There will be new features added in each App Pack.

There is still a great deal of uncertainty as to exactly what features will be in what release, and what features will be included as part of Learning System (the version of Blackboard that the UO licenses) versus Community System, Content System, or separately licensed products. We should get much better data at Educause at the end of October.

Perhaps the most visible change in Blackboard NG will be a move to AJAX-style user interface. The new Grade Center is an example. In general, the AJAX-style user interface features much more dynamic interaction. One can often rearrange a screen by dragging and dropping. Changes in one part of a screen may result in changes in another (for example, selecting an option may produce sub-options). Gratuitous “confirmation” screens after a “submit” are largely eliminated. Etc.

In addition, we now know that Blackboard 9 will have blogs and journals. The groups functions will be enhanced and they can have a dedicated space for collaborative work in a course. It will also support lesson plans. This is meant mostly for K-12 but could be used in higher ed. The instructor would create a lesson plan and then the different parts of the course would be marked as to which part of the plan the support.

Some of the features that will be added either in the App Packs or in Bb X at the latest include:

- Wikis
- iPhone app to work with Blackboard
- Syncs to myYahoo, iGoogle and SMS for phones
- Social learning spaces (probably only in Community System)
- Enhanced Portfolios (probably a separate product, but possibly requiring Content System)

Blackboard produced several short videos about Blackboard NG and showed them at the Bb World Conference. They are takeoffs of the Apple VS PC ads and are hilarious: http://www.blackboard.com/projectng/ads/

**Higher Ed Reauthorization**

Hidden in the Higher Ed Reauthorization Bill passed by congress this week are a number of items that may spell major changes for course management systems. For example, a recent Chronicle of Higher Ed article suggests that one obscure paragraph may imply that it will be necessary to do biometric authentication as part of distance ed exams. We will be tracking this closely over the coming months.

**iClicker progress**

Libraries, TEP, and Bookstore (now “Duck Store”) are moving ahead on schedule towards widespread use of iClickers starting fall 2008. Several large courses will be requiring that their students purchase clickers from the bookstore. Instructor kits are now available from CMET (formerly Media Services), and training and support are available from a variety of sources.

So far as we know, there are no significant problems with using iClickers with Blackboard. It is fairly easy to download a class roster from Blackboard and incorporate it into the iClicker software, then to use the iClicker polling registration to associate clicker numbers with individuals. After that, the instructor can collect information about individual responses, which the iGrader software can export to a CSV file for upload to the blackboard gradebook.
Campus-wide single signon progress

Information Services has made major progress in implementing single signon solutions for the campus. Extending the current model, in which multiple systems (including Blackboard) query the same username/password database to check identity and authorization, in a single signon system a user logs in once and obtains access to multiple resources for the same web session. There are several protocols for single signon, with the two most popular being Shibboleth and CAS. Information Services and Library believe that Shibboleth is the long term strategic direction, since it has mindshare and since it offers numerous other features such as federated identity. However, CAS is somewhat easier to implement, and a few departments on campus need it. The expectation is that IS will implement both protocols, and that there will be two sets of systems, each of which supports single signon among its members but not with the other system.

In the short run, we expect that Blackboard will not be able to participate in either the Shibboleth or CAS sso systems. To do so would require that we upgrade our Blackboard license to the Blackboard Community System.

NW eLearning fall conference

Following up on last year’s successful Northwest Blackboard Users Group meeting at UO, the organization – under its new name “NorthWest eLearning Consortium” is planning its fall 2008 conference. Its co-chair, Tim Boshart, is handling much of the work. The conference is scheduled for October 16 and 17 in Pasco, WA at the Columbia Basin College.

Current Policy Issues

Several issues exist this term for which input from the Blackboard committee would be particularly valuable.

Funding

As noted in the spring status report, we expect the Blackboard budget to be very tight for 2008-09. We started the year with a structural deficit of more than $35,000 – commitments including salary and expected software license and maintenance renewals exceeding the recurring budget. On top of this would be any expenses for additional needed hardware upgrades. We have taken a few steps to minimize expenses. For example, we have eliminated the Respondus site license which we had maintained for several years; however, at $2300 the Respondus license was less than 10% of our expected shortfall. More significantly, the Business Office is now charging our Blackboard license, which renews each April, ¼ in the current year and ¾ in the following year. This resulted in a 1-time positive balance carried forward to this year of $54,000, which will leave us in the black for 2008-09.

Longer term, the library has submitted to the Provost a request that the base Blackboard budget be increased to cover the expected annual deficit. We do not know yet whether this change will be possible. If it is, we will be able to proceed with file server upgrades during 2008-09. If not, we will need to defer upgrades and seek other sources to cover the structural deficit. The committee’s advice on where to look for additional funding would be very helpful.

New Blackboard features

Although we don’t have budgeted money, we do have a commitment from library administration to look seriously at proposals for expansion, and perhaps to forward them to the provost. It would be worthwhile for us to ask what new directions are most important to this committee and to the university.
In years past we had identified blogs and wikis as an important new feature, and had considered the Campus Pack product. Since Blackboard plans to introduce such features in its product set, this seems to be lower priority than it had been.

On the other hand, the imminent deployment of a campus-wide single signon system makes it important that we take another look at the Blackboard Community System, which would be needed if Blackboard were to take part in single signon. Unlike some Blackboard customers, we license only the “learning system,” which is primarily designed to support courses. Blackboard Inc. also has a “community system” add-on with various additional features. It provides or will provide a portal product, support for use of Blackboard by departments, organizations, etc., easy integration of coursesites and functions implemented in a non-Blackboard system such as Moodle or Sakai, and easy integration of single signon authentication systems. Many customers such as Oregon State license that version of Blackboard, but we have never been able to justify the hefty (about $30K/year) additional cost.

Other Blackboard modules that might be of interest include the Blackboard Content System, Blackboard ePortfolios (it is not known at this time whether the new ePortfolio system will require Content System), Outcomes, etc. In addition, Blackboard has announced that it will be easy to implement integration with features of Sakai and Moodle for campuses that have multiple course management systems. This begs the question of whether we should explore the costs and benefits of running a central Sakai or Moodle server.

**Hardware upgrades**

As noted in the spring status report, we are in the process of upgrading our application servers, and are looking ahead to the need for upgrading our application disk system. The library was unable to fund the storage area network system that we mentioned as a possibility last term, so we do not currently have any solution in sight for space upgrades. We currently have 756GB of disk space in use on a 1.2TB server, so we are at about 65% of capacity. This may be enough to get through 2008-09. However, if the average size of coursesites increases it may be necessary to become somewhat more stingy with space for very large coursesites (those that exceed our current 2GB/coursesite default quota). This would impact a few courses where the professor places numerous videos of lectures on the site, or where the course includes assignments for the students to produce their own videos and submit them electronically to blackboard.

If we find ourselves actually running out of disk space, what criteria should we use for allocating limited space? How conservative should we be this fall?

**Accounts for visiting lecturers, etc.**

This continues to be a major issue, but one we haven’t made much progress on. Information Services is aware of the issues, and is in principle willing to work with us on implementations.