General

Reminder: We archive these quarterly status reports, and other information about the BAC, at http://libweb.uoregon.edu/scis/blackboard/advisory.html.

System status update and news

The following notes are in no particular order:

Usage during summer 2011 appears to be somewhat higher than 2010, with a year to year growth in number of enrolled users of 19.4% and a coursesite growth of 2.6%: As of July 21, 2011:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>users</th>
<th>coursesites</th>
<th>enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sum 10</td>
<td>6792</td>
<td>611</td>
<td>15933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sum 11</td>
<td>8113</td>
<td>627</td>
<td>18508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>growth</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As is typical, summer usage was much lighter than that during the other quarters, but I was a bit surprised that growth in usage continues at a high rate. I had predicted a year ago some leveling off in growth.

We are very pleased to be able to report that the memory upgrade installed in the database servers on 5/10 seems to have resolved the problems that we had been seeing throughout winter and spring terms.

There have been few unusual incidents since our last meeting. The system has not experienced unscheduled downtime, though we did need to schedule downtime on fairly short notice for further IS electrical work (Friday 5/27). Tim also took system downtime on Saturday, June 18, and upgraded the Blackboard application to Service Pack 5 in addition to installing some Oracle patches to the database servers. SP 5 is a maintenance release with essentially no user interface change, but resolved several ongoing problems.

Tim noticed significant performance problems on the Blackboard system Monday, June 13. The most significant impact was on snapshot processing (updating blackboard data from Banner), which went from under ½ hour to more than 4 hours in the evenings. IS was able to debug the problem and trace it to a network switch that had accidentally been downgraded from 1Gb/s to 100Mb/s. The faulty switch was replaced on 6/30, resolving the problem. The incident was a good example of collaboration between IS Systems and Blackboard; Tim detected and partially diagnosed the problem early, and IS was able to resolve it in rapid fashion when it was brought to their attention.

Starting this summer, Nargas Oskui has increased her library FTE from .75 to full time. Her additional time will be devoted to coordinating Blackboard support for end users (mostly instructors).

We have added one interesting new feature to blackboard, support for MathJax for displaying mathematical equations within a blackboard site. See http://libweb.uoregon.edu/scis/blackboard/faq/instructors/i65.html

As I previously noted in email, Blackboard, Inc. has accepted a buyout offer from Providence Equity Partners. We do not expect to see significant changes in the company, at least in the short run. In the middle run they will probably look for synergies between the various companies that Providence owns, though they won't find very many. Maybe Blackboard will get some technology from Archipelago? Maybe Blackboard will be encouraged to look for opportunities to expand in the for-profit higher ed sector? Blackboard has saturated the traditional university sector, and has recently been seeing its
growth opportunities as being largely in K-12 and community colleges. This buyout might push them towards more offerings tuned for the for-profits. I would expect that that would mostly be in their other products, though, and that Blackboard Learn (the course management system we license) wouldn’t see much evolutionary pressure. It’s safe to predict that we will see more effort to develop new products tuned for smart phones, video, and mobile communications in general; Blackboard already moved in this direction with their Mobile product and last year’s Elluminate and Wimba acquisitions, so I expect to see Blackboard Collaborate as an increasingly important part of their portfolio and with a strong push to deliver it on smart phones.

Possibly more significant than the buyout is the copyright lawsuit against Georgia State University by a group of academic publishers. The publishers claim that GSU has engaged in systematic copyright violation by posting course materials in their Blackboard system without permission. Arguments closed in June and we are waiting for the judge’s ruling. It seems likely that the ruling will affect the recommendations the UO gives to faculty about posting articles and other materials in their blackboard sites, at least minimally. A ruling adopting the plaintiffs’ proposed injunction as-is could even imply that we would need to shut down our blackboard system. For one collection of relevant discussions see http://www.educause.edu/icpl/resources/gastate.

The last few months have seen a number of software environment changes that have affected blackboard. For example, Mozilla released new versions of Firefox (now up to v 5.0) with several blackboard compatibility issues, and Apple release Lion, with as yet unknown blackboard compatibility. We have moved away from a definitive statement of what browsers work with blackboard. We are now indicating that Safari 5.0 is the currently recommended browser for Macs and Firefox 5+ is currently recommended for Windows. However, we currently believe that the important thing is to document a number of issues and workarounds with a larger set of browsers (including IE 9, Firefox 3.6, and Chrome) that can potentially be used with blackboard.

Tim Boshart, Nargas Oskui, Sara Stubbs, and Ginny White all attended Blackboard World and/or associated events such as the Bb developers’ conference in Las Vegas in July. Tim received the 2011 Blackboard Innovative Development Award “for significant contributions to the Blackboard Developer Community.”

The UO has joined the Blackboard Idea Exchange, another forum for providing input to the company. Tim Boshart and Nargas Oskui are our members. We are looking for one additional teaching faculty member, perhaps a BAC member, to participate as well.

On 1 Aug we hosted a visit from our Blackboard account rep, Ben Choi, and Gordon Freedman, Blackboard’s VP for Global Education Strategy. No specific new information or initiatives, but a possible interest on the part of Blackboard in some collaborative research with the Ed School.

**Plans for downtime, new releases, etc.**

**Short term**

Database maintenance is scheduled for Aug 13, tentatively 8am until 4pm. It is likely that we will also need to take downtime on Sept 10, though the precise plans for that day have not yet been firmed up. As listed on our downtime calendar, we reserve one Saturday each month but do not currently expect to take and Saturday downtime during October or November.
Two software changes we expect to implement before the end of the summer are Webwork (aka WeBWorK) integration and changes in Blackboard/i>clicker integration.

• Webwork is a web based mathematics homework submission and grading system (software developed by the American Mathematical Society) run by the Math department that currently has no connection to Blackboard. A building block providing integration was developed by University of Missouri with our support, and we are presently testing it. When fully implemented, it will mean that all students will log in to Webwork via blackboard and that homework grades generated by Webwork will be loaded into the Blackboard grade center. We are currently getting it running and hope to have it available to the math department for beta testing in one or two courses this fall.

• Our plans for i>Clicker integration are more tentative, but will likely imply that all students will need to reregister their clickers for fall term courses even if they registered them this summer. For instructors, the “i>Clicker Integrate” software that we have distributed since spring will be required.

A schedule for fall term blackboard workshops from TEP is taking shape at http://tep.uoregon.edu/workshops/events/year11-12/teach_train11.html.

Winter break 2011
Blackboard will be down Dec 20-21 and possibly Dec 22 for substantial upgrades. We hope to finally upgrade our Oracle databases to ASM and RAC. The upgrade will require new server hardware, which is presently on order by Information Services, and we will expect to run RAC on the new hardware this fall in parallel with our existing servers before using it as the back end for our production system. When implemented, RAC will provide greater performance, plus complete database redundancy in the event of failure of one of our database servers.

We also expect to install Blackboard SP 6 and SP 7. SP 6 includes a few noteworthy user-visible changes, including:

• Optional “force complete” on tests – instructor can create a timed test and specify that it be automatically submitted when the timer expires. We will likely discourage use of this feature in favor of the current scheme.

• Official support for Chrome and the current Firefox web browsers. As a practical matter this means Blackboard will accept bug reports, and does not mean that the browser will work any better or worse.

• Bugfix for cases where blackboard items link to files in a different coursesite’s Course Files: Links to files within courses do not rely on students having read permissions. If a file is linked in a course students enrolled in that course will be able to see it.

• Bugfix: course builders can now access unavailable courses.

Spring break 2012
Although we do not currently have detailed plans for upgrades during spring break, there will be downtime scheduled sometime during the period Mar 27-29. We expect that work during that time will be behind the scenes – upgrades of our servers from Red Hat Enterprise Linux 5.6 to 6.0, database, and/or hardware changes without changes to the application software or Blackboard user interface.

Summer 2012
We are beginning to plan for a major software upgrade, to Blackboard Learn SP 8 (or SP 8 and SP 9) which would be installed at the beginning of summer term. SP 8 is expected to be released in December and to include some significant user interface changes, comparable to the ones that came with Blackboard 9.1. At Bb World it was described as “WordPress-like.” As such, we need to be very careful in deciding when to make the changes to minimize disruption to the user community. In addition, we expect to see several other changes, possibly including:

• Cleaner “WordPress-like” user interface
• Wizard for setting up courses based on instructor’s preferred pedagogical approach
• New visual textbox editor based on TinyMCE (will likely imply many changes; example: eliminating <font> tags, which shouldn’t work anyway)
• Ability to navigate between courses without returning to the “My UO” page.
• Built-in integration with Google Docs for universities that license Google Apps for Education
• Calendar improvements
• New enterprise survey tools
• New course relationships including lecture/discussion sections with easy navigation between “parent” and “child” coursesites (would require substantial work to implement at UO)
• Bugfix to IE9 problem opening Word documents (superfluous login prompts)

Also on the long-term horizon are possible changes in the way Blackboard synchronizes with Banner. At this point we do not know if we will want to invest in the programming that such changes would require or whether there would be significant user-visible changes. The two features that we are most interested in exploring are (a) lecture/discussion course relationships and (b) faster synchronization via triggered changes rather than batch downloads and data comparison. We hope to have more concrete proposals by the fall BAC meeting, with possible implementation for fall 2012.

**Question for the BAC: What’s the best time for our next noticeable UI change?**

Scheduling a major upgrade such as Blackboard SP 8 that involves change to the user interface is particularly tricky. We do not want to change the interface in the middle of classes and need to provide adequate time for faculty and student training. We have at least 4 options for our next major UI upgrade. Tim and I need advice from the committee as to what the best time for that upgrade is. Possibilities include:

- **Spring break 2012**  
  Some disadvantages: SP 8 will have only been available for about 3 months and we would prefer to wait until SP 9 – which will be primarily a bugfix release to address issues early adopters find in SP 8 – is released; we would expect many faculty members to be disoriented by UI changes in the middle of an academic year.

- **June 23, 2012**  
  (Saturday after the end of Week 0 of summer session). Disadvantages: some courses and programs including OEMBA operate on a non-standard schedule straddling this date, and a few summer courses begin in Week 0 but continue; would not provide time for training for Week 1 users.

- **August 18, 2012**  
  Immediately after the end of Week 8, but before the start of Law Fall. Disadvantage: during the 11-week summer session.

- **Sept. 2012**  
  Disadvantage: in the middle of Law Fall semester.

**New issue: Purging student data from old blackboard sites**

As most committee members know, we mark coursesites as unavailable during the first week of the following term, and retain blackboard coursesites on line for approximately 3 years after the course was taught. The latter “3 year” rule corresponds to the UO’s records retention policy for course materials, which is consistent with the Oregon Administrative Rules (http://libweb.uoregon.edu/records/schedule/) for course records (166-475-0025 #6), but the primary motivation for the timing is a tradeoff between limited disk space and instructor need to copy instructor-provided materials from a course that he or she previously taught (perhaps with an intervening sabbatical year). Instructors can of course make their own export copies of blackboard coursesites. We committed to this policy in 2007 based on BAC discussion in spring 2007.

We also delete the account records for students and faculty after they have left the university. For undergraduate students, the Registrar retains student status for 1 year after last enrollment; Information
Services retains Duck IDs for an additional 1 year after the end of student status, and we have traditionally kept blackboard logins for the same time. At the end of this 2 year period we actually mark the account as disabled but only purge accounts on an annual basis. When we finally delete and purge a student record it deletes all coursesite enrollments and grade data about the student.

In addition to “course materials,” other retention schedules also apply to materials in a blackboard site, including rules applying to student records documented in 166-475-0110. Two series in this category are:

8. Examinations, Tests, Term Papers, and Homework Records
Records document work of student subject mastery in institution courses not returned to the student. Records may include but are not limited to examinations and answers; quizzes and answers; homework assignments; course papers; term papers; and essay assignments. This series does not include graduate student qualifying or comprehensive examinations.
Retention: (a) 1 term after completion for uncontested grade results, destroy; (b) until resolved for contested grade results, destroy.

18. Instructors’ Grade Records
Records document test scores, class work scores, and final grades for students which may be used as backup to the official academic records held by the Registrar. Records may include but are not limited to instructors’ grade books; grade confirmation reports; grade confirmation and change records; and final grade rosters.
Retention: 2 years, destroy.

We are attempting to comply with the retention rules, though we are constrained by the fact that the Blackboard software tends to combine information that nominally appears in different schedules and is defined technically rather than in the terms the schedules prefer.

Proposed Change #1
We propose to purge student account information on a slightly more aggressive schedule than heretofore. Accounts would be disabled on the same schedule as Duck IDs and would be purged from our database within a year afterwards. Students would as they do now disappear from all old blackboard coursesite listings approximately 2 years after graduation, but would not risk continuing to be stored in recoverable form for an additional year.

A complexity here is that graduate student status is apparently retained in Banner for only 1 term rather than 1 year. As a result, graduate students lose their accounts approximately 15 months after last enrollment. We presently have no mechanism in Blackboard for distinguishing graduate students from undergraduates.

Proposed Change #2
We propose to delete student coursesite enrollment information separately from coursesites and student accounts. Deleting a coursesite enrollment deletes the row for that student from the grade center, removes any tests and assignments that the student has submitted, deletes any private blogs, and for discussion board posts, shared blogs and wikis, etc., changes the listed poster from the student to “anonymous”. This would meet the requirements for #8, and essentially for #18 (though the grade change history would still be preserved). In cases such as this one where conflicting rules apply to the same records, our understanding is that retention should be for the longer of the two periods, so we propose to set deletion of such course enrollments at 2 years after the end of the course. Faculty would need to take additional steps in preserving homework, etc. in the rare cases of a contested grade that had not been resolved after 2 years, but would have access to student work from an old course for plenty of time to deal with the occasional cases of Incompletes.
A complexity here is that such enrollment purging would only apply to students whose enrollments were automatically managed by the system, not students who had been hand-added to a site. In the latter case we think it’s the faculty member’s responsibility.

Questions for our committee:
• Particularly for the teaching faculty – would these changes introduce any unacceptable problems for you in grade management? For example, do you need to refer to old rosters or gradebooks? Do you have other suggestions for how we can assist you in complying with the UO’s records retention and destruction requirements?
• Particularly for other administrative units – have I correctly described current procedures? Are there any changes projected in such policies and procedures that would impact Blackboard compliance?

More Blackboard visits?
Is there interest in having more Blackboard personnel visiting campus this coming academic year? There are several possibilities:
• We can always schedule a meeting with our account executive. If we have serious interest in any new Blackboard products we can get more attention from him, or can meet with specialized sales people e.g. from Blackboard Collaborate or Blackboard Mobile.
• Blackboard would like us to facilitate a senior-level meeting with Deb Carver, Don Harris, other deans, anyone else interested at the vice provost level, etc. Would the committee like to coordinate and participate in such a meeting?
• Tim notes that given his technical contacts it would be quite feasible to schedule a visit by one or two Blackboard design engineers, who could talk to us about specific issues in Blackboard technology and about the company’s design processes.
In each case it’s only worthwhile organizing a meeting if there is significant interest at our end in attending and participating.

Next year’s Advisory Committee
Last summer the committee reflected on its charge for the coming year, and we made a few changes based on that discussion, notably the addition of student members. What further changes are needed? What issues are best brought to the committee, and should the committee be thought of as an “advisory” or policy-setting group?

I continue to believe that the committee would be better structured if a teaching faculty member on the committee could serve as the chair of the committee. That committee chair would then schedule meetings and determine the directions and role of the committee during the year. Is this in fact feasible?

Finally, what current members of the committee would like me to forward their names to the Dean of the Libraries for inclusion on the 2011-12 committee? Do you have suggestions for other faculty and students who might be interested in serving?