To: eLearning Committee, IT Council

From: LMS Roadmap Task Force

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Date: February 23, 2016

Subject: Academic Technology Planning engagement with Blackboard

**Summary**

As part of the eLearning Strategic Planning process, UCIT facilitated a three-day Academic Technology Planning (ATP) engagement with representatives from Blackboard. Fifty-three members from the UC community participated in at least one of the sessions, while the members of the LMS Roadmap Task Force participated during all three days. Following the recent ATP engagement, Blackboard’s CEO and CFO are scheduled to visit UC and meet with key leadership on February 25, 2016.

The discussions during the ATP between the UC community and the team from Blackboard were very candid in nature, with a great deal of emphasis being placed on Blackboard’s next generation LMS platform, Blackboard Ultra. In an effort to better understand the impact that Blackboard Ultra might have for UC, the team from Blackboard conducted a brainstorming session to identify current and future learning scenarios at UC. Those learner scenarios ranged from the more effective use of the Discussion Board to utilizing Blackboard Ultra as a workforce development platform. A summary of the learning scenarios and associated recommendations from Blackboard are included in their report.

In the three weeks following the ATP, additional discussions were held with the LMS Roadmap Task Force, the Instructional Design & Pedagogy subcommittee, the eLearning Committee, and staff in the Center for Excellence in eLearning. A broad consensus has emerged from those discussions:

* **No clear path to Ultra** – It is unclear when and how UC can move to Blackboard’s next generation platform. Ultra is now more than a year overdue, and Blackboard’s strategy surrounding Ultra has changed. For example, Blackboard has announced their intent to implement several of the planned Ultra features (responsive design, competency based education, improved instructor workflows) in their 9.x product line (which UC currently uses). However, self-hosted schools will be receiving access to the improvements in 9.x and Ultra well after Blackboard’s SaaS customers.
* **Viability of Blackboard as a company** – There exist significant concerns about the viability of Blackboard as a company (e.g., high debt, rumors of an impending sale of the company, several rounds of layoffs, a recent CEO change, customer defections to other LMS platforms, etc.). At least part of the reason for the visit by Blackboard’s CEO & CFO is to reassure UC about the state of the company.
* **Current 9.x design is dated** – The ease of use and functionality in Blackboard 9.x is perceived by UC students and faculty to be not as good as other platforms such as Instructure’s Canvas. For example, the current Blackboard interface is not based on responsive design, but rather is based on out-of-date web standards, and is correspondingly difficult to navigate. Further, Blackboard’s support for mobile devices lags behind other LMS vendors.
* **Lack of innovation** – Very little innovation has emerged from Blackboard in recent years. Based on what was shared during the ATP engagement, the company’s strategy is to focus on implementing many of the current Blackboard 9.x features in Blackboard Ultra. However, they appear uncommitted to (and may possibly remove) specific features that are critical to UC students and faculty, such as Inline Grading via Crocodoc integration. Additionally, it’s unclear that Blackboard’s roadmap for their core platform aligns well with UC’s goals and aspirations for eLearning.

**Recommendations**

The LMS Roadmap Task Force reviewed the information that Blackboard shared during the ATP engagement, and also evaluated an early release of Blackboard Ultra. Many of the core features of Blackboard 9.x (e.g., tests, graded discussion forums, groups, etc.) have not yet been implemented in Blackboard Ultra. Despite the inability to fully assess Blackboard Ultra, the LMS Roadmap Task Force makes the following recommendations:

* **Role of Shared Governance** – Due to the importance and widespread usage of Blackboard, the LMS Roadmap Task Force strongly recommends that any decision about whether to remain with the Blackboard LMS, move to Blackboard’s SaaS offering, or even pilot test alternative LMS platforms should be made through the shared governance process. In particular, the LMS Roadmap Task Force recommends that at each step of the process an update be shared with both the eLearning Committee and IT Council for their review and endorsement. Should a recommendation ultimately be made to switch LMS platforms, that recommendation will likely need to go through UC’s Integrated Decision Making Process.
* **Establish a broadly representative group** – Because of the delays in the release of Blackboard Ultra, as well as significant reservations about whether that platform will meet UC’s eLearning needs, the LMS Task Force recommends expanding the current Task Force to include broad representation from faculty, students, CET&L, UC Libraries, Risk Management, and other affected units or populations. The current membership of the LMS Task Force only includes UCIT staff + instructional designers from several colleges, and so is not sufficiently representative to take on this responsibility.
* **Market scan** – Once a more representative Task Force has been formed, the LMS Roadmap Task Force recommends that it be charged with conducting a market scan to identify the leading LMS platforms, and to assess whether any of those platforms are viable for UC. The current Task Force has already consulted a market assessment prepared by Gartner to assist in identifying potential alternative LMS platforms.
* **Contact peer institutions** – The LMS Task Force also recommends contacting approximately ten peer institutions about their LMS plans, particularly those institutions (e.g., Indiana University, University of Kentucky, and Miami University) which have recently migrated LMS platforms. In preparation for those discussions, the Task Force has prepared a list of questions for each institution.
* **Potential pilot** – After conducting a market scan and assessing the potential alternative LMS platforms, the LMS Roadmap Task Force would make a recommendation to the eLearning Committee and IT Council for their review and endorsement about whether UC should commence with a formal pilot test of one or more alternative LMS platforms, or continue with Blackboard.
* **Messaging to the UC community** – Because of the significance of the Blackboard LMS platform to UC students and faculty, as well as the potential disruption that may occur should UC elect to switch LMS platforms, the LMS Task Force strongly recommends that the process by which UC assesses and evaluates its LMS platform be open and transparent. Further, it is strongly recommended that regular updates are provided to the appropriate governance committees for their review and endorsement, and that those updates be shared with the broader UC community.

**Conclusion**

While UC has used Blackboard as its primary LMS platform since 2001, it is unclear whether Blackboard will remain the market leader in the near future. Many schools, including several Ohio schools and peer institutions, have recently switched to other LMS platforms, particularly Instructure’s Canvas. Based on the information shared recently by Blackboard, and input from the eLearning community, the LMS Roadmap Task Force is recommending that we conduct a strategic assessment to see whether an alternative LMS platform is a better fit for UC. The LMS Roadmap Task Force further recommends that this assessment be conducted with broad representation from the UC community, that the assessment be open and transparent, and that any decisions regarding UC’s LMS be made through the shared governance process.

Respectfully submitted by the LMS Roadmap Task Force,

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