



## LTS Statement on Course Management Systems

### At Brandeis University

April 18, 2007

We are faced with the very serious challenge of not being able to sustain the WebCT Vista course management system that is currently used in some 500 courses. This unsettling situation requires rapid and deliberate changes to our support for course management systems going forward. Because of the urgency for developing a new approach, we intend to have systems in place to support Moodle, a course management system, for Summer 2007 and to facilitate a transition to Moodle over the summer. The transition will continue during the Academic Year 2007-2008 during which time we will maintain and support WebCT Vista. Course instructors will have access to Moodle and WebCT Vista through the end of spring term 2008.

The sections that follow describe the background to the problem, the particular problem at hand, our proposed solution, the goals for supporting learning environments more broadly, the transition to Moodle, and information about process and communication.

#### Background

An online course management system (WebCT Campus Edition) was introduced at Brandeis in 1997. Although use of the WebCT course management system has never been required, a steady rise in faculty use during the first five years after the system's implementation (1997 through 2002) required development of an increasingly sophisticated support environment, including trained staff and a larger software/hardware infrastructure. The decision to upgrade the course management system from WebCT Campus Edition to WebCT Vista was driven by the vendor's plan to end support for Campus Edition as well as the promise of a better product developed to support larger numbers of users with more functionality. Campus Edition users at Brandeis transitioned to Vista over a three year period, and by the Fall of 2006, 550 courses were created in WebCT Vista – the largest number of courses in Vista to date.

## The Problem

During the Fall 2006 term, LTS staff began to get early clues about the inherent instability of WebCT Vista's data structure and expressed concern about the ongoing viability of the product. By January 2007, overwhelming evidence indicated that the WebCT database structure may not be sustainable. Adding to our concern was the fact that Blackboard had purchased WebCT, its major competitor, in February 2006. Our close and long relation with a highly supportive vendor ended abruptly as Blackboard fired various senior WebCT staff. Support from Blackboard for WebCT Vista has been unacceptable since the purchase.

## The Solution

To preserve faculty investment in course management systems, we recommend moving to a highly regarded open community product, Moodle. The skills learned in using the WebCT products are transferable, and the Moodle community has worked hard to develop highly flexible and friendly interfaces for faculty and students. The Moodle platform's ease of use and support for collaborative learning has led to its implementation at a growing number of colleges and universities worldwide. In the United States, such highly selective colleges as Carleton, Macalester, and Smith and such national universities as Minnesota and UCLA have chosen Moodle to support curricular instruction and student learning. Faculty members at these institutions have found Moodle easy to use and have noted that it offers a quick and painless transition from other course management systems. One of the immediate advantages of Moodle is that it offers enriched features (wikis and blogs) that WebCT Vista does not.

## Learning and Teaching Technology Environment (LATTE) Based on Moodle

We have conceived a project to serve as an umbrella concept for creating a more robust and efficient learning environment, based on Moodle, for the Brandeis community. The goal of the first phase of the LATTE project is to offer faculty and students all of the functionality currently used in the WebCT Vista environment. Six project teams will take responsibility for the varied aspects of this project: Communications, Functionality, Outreach, Policies & Procedures, Technology, and Training & Support. Working with course instructors, LTS staff will move course content existing in the current WebCT system to the Moodle environment. Critical project milestones have been identified and detailed timelines are being established for each project component, as well as for the project as a whole. In recognition of the importance of learning the new Moodle environment, workshops for course instructors are scheduled from April onwards.

## The Transition from WebCT Vista to Moodle

Our goal and desire is to provide a smooth transition from our current course management system to Moodle. We will provide help and support by offering workshops and one-on-one sessions. The more courses created in Moodle, the easier it will be to focus energy on creating the more robust learning environment. Of course, we recognize that not every faculty member may be able to accommodate this aggressive timetable. We will continue to support WebCT Vista as required during the Fall and Spring semesters of the 2007-2008 Academic Year. Although we will extend every effort to keep WebCT Vista stable and accessible, we continue to remain deeply concerned that the WebCT Vista system may fail catastrophically. By focusing on moving the teaching community collectively to Moodle, together we can develop the best and most stable learning and teaching environment for Brandeis.

## Communication and Process

Problems related to WebCT Vista were brought to the attention of the LTS Advisory Committee early in 2006, when Blackboard was in the process of purchasing WebCT, and again in February 2007, when we determined that WebCT was no longer sustainable. In March 2007, we met with the Committee on the Support of Teaching and the Student IT Advisory Committee. In April, presentations are scheduled with the Faculty Chairs of Arts & Sciences and the Student Library Advisory Committee as well as at the Faculty meeting. We expect to launch a LATTE Project Web site in mid-April that contains information about the project, links to additional information specifically and generally about Moodle, how to sign up for workshops to learn more about Moodle, and how to obtain help in moving materials from WebCT to Moodle. Our goal is to communicate project developments early and often and to involve faculty, students, and other members of the Brandeis community.

For any questions about the project please do not hesitate to contact any member of the senior LTS leadership team:

Perry Hanson

Vice President and Vice Provost for Libraries and Information Technology

Anna Tomecka

Chief Technology Officer

Susan Wawrzaszek

Chief University Librarian