Memorandum

To: Teaching & Learning Domain Committee
From: Jason Crandall and Emily W. Thompson, Co-Chairs, LMS Review Committee
Subject: Early Learning Management System (LMS) Recommendations

Based on the data gathered in the Fall 2017 LMS pilot, we recommend the selection of Canvas over Schoology. Faculty, staff, and students generally preferred both systems to Blackboard, and between these two systems, Canvas was favored in each measure where a statistically significant difference existed. While we plan to submit a full report in late February, we are providing these recommendations in advance of the final report to promote discussion, facilitate decision-making, and support the proposed implementation timeline.

An Industry-Leading Teaching & Learning Solution

The time is right to identify and implement an alternative LMS which will bring our system up to the level of our peers and aspirants and fully support the advancement of teaching and learning at Washington University in St. Louis. Our existing LMS, Blackboard Learn, is an outdated product, set to be replaced in Fall 2019. In addition to strong dissatisfaction with Blackboard in faculty feedback, support staff members have found Blackboard's support to be less than responsive in addressing bugs and problems. Combined with a previous failed pilot of Blackboard’s replacement product (Ultra), the campus has lost confidence in Blackboard.

A robust Learning Management System is required to satisfy the high expectations of students and faculty. We do not believe Blackboard represents this industry-leading solution—especially in light of recent high-profile adoptions of Canvas including Harvard, Penn, Stanford, Yale, Brown, Georgetown, and our own MD Program. Brown noted seven reasons for switching to Canvas including ease of use, mobile friendliness, integration options, and accessibility.

Recommendations

1. A University-Wide LMS

IT leadership has expressed concern about the recent proliferation of Learning Management Systems across campus. Given the shortcomings of Blackboard, this trend is expected to continue unless we move to an industry-leading, next generation, university-wide LMS. In addition to the increased cost for licensing of multiple systems, the lack of a university-wide LMS results in a degradation of service quality and increased cost, as limited staff resources are spread across multiple systems. Also, multiple systems add unnecessary complexity and overhead to the teaching and learning experience, particularly for students in interdisciplinary degrees and programs.

While a cost comparison between systems was not within the scope of our charge, the proposed Canvas contract would put base licensing costs on par with what the university pays for Blackboard Learn. The full contract will be presented to and considered by IT executive and governance committees prior to a final determination.
2. Required Third Party Integrations

Some Blackboard users are relying on Blackboard's ability to integrate with third party services for additional in-LMS functionality. We recommend that the implementation team for a next generation LMS carefully consider all of the third-party integrations currently in use, review their degree of support with the new LMS, select possible substitutes where needed or desirable, and solicit the input of stakeholders on campus. Two key decision points for third party integrations will be: (1) the replacement of Blackboard's built-in SafeAssign tool with an industry-leading solution like TurnItIn, and (2) possible licensing of an external web conferencing tool based on adoption levels, costs, and a comparison with built-in web conferencing tools.

3. The Need for LMS Governance and Support

We acknowledge leadership concerns regarding the fractured and incomplete nature of institutional support for our current LMS. A sub-committee of the Teaching & Learning Domain Committee has been tasked with producing support recommendations for a new LMS by Feb. 2018. Our recommendation to the sub-committee, based on the pilot and feedback from other institutions, is to institute a standing LMS support and governance structure going forward. We also recommend outsourcing 24/7 LMS support service to the vendor as a complement to institutional staffing. Additional staffing recommendations, such as the hiring of a dedicated system administrator and/or possible temporary staffing during the implementation phase, will be made by the LMS support sub-committee.

4. Phased Adoption

Based on best practices for LMS migration in the higher education industry, we recommend a phased adoption approach. A possible timeline could be:

1. procurement of the new LMS in early Spring 2018,
2. implementation during Spring/Summer 2018,
3. Early Adopter Phase I where faculty may opt in to teach with the new LMS in Fall 2018,
4. Early Adopter Phase II for remaining faculty to opt into the new LMS in Spring 2019,
5. mandatory transition from Blackboard to the new LMS in Fall 2019.

5. The Choice of Canvas

We recommend Canvas as the next generation LMS to replace Blackboard. This recommendation is consistent with recent trends and pilot programs at other campuses. As of March 2017, edutechnica reported that, while Blackboard was still in first place with 33% of LMS market share, institutions have recently been adopting Canvas at an accelerated pace and with 100% customer retention since 2007.

While our final report will include a review of all data sources as well as representative comments from faculty respondents, an early recommendation of Canvas can be made based on clear evidence from four primary data sources. These data sources include: (A) in-depth LMS Evaluation Program surveys of about 50 faculty and 600+ student pilot participants, (B) use case testing, (C) attendee feedback from vendor demos, and (D) a small focus group with "power users" (faculty and staff who used both systems). Key results from these four data sources are presented below.
A. **Faculty and student surveys.** As shown in Figures 1 and 2 below, both students and faculty were significantly more likely to agree that they would like Canvas to be the standard LMS than Schoology. The preference was particularly clear among faculty users, with 24 out of 26 respondents [92%] favorably inclined toward the proposed selection of Canvas as compared to only 9 out of 21 Schoology faculty [43%] who expressed similar opinions toward Schoology. The results were similar for other items on the survey, as ease of use and effectiveness ratings from Canvas users were higher than those from Schoology users, and Canvas users were more likely to prefer it to Blackboard than were Schoology users. Although the study was not designed to facilitate head-to-head comparisons between the two systems, the relative ratings for each system over Blackboard favored Canvas.

![Figure 1](image1.png)  
**Figure 1.** Student responses to survey question regarding LMS preference.

![Figure 2](image2.png)  
**Figure 2.** Faculty responses to survey question regarding LMS preference.

B. **Use Case Testing:** Use cases represent a set of 97 commonly performed instructional tasks derived from previously conducted faculty surveys (e.g., "I need to post an assignment for my students."). Canvas was also successful at significantly more use cases than Schoology and had slightly higher average ratings for ease of use per use case.
C. **Vendor Demo Feedback:** Attendees at the vendor demos were generally confident that either system could serve their learning and teaching needs. No clear preference between Schoology or Canvas was evident from these data.

D. **Power User Focus Group:** Three of the six users in the focus group expressed an unambiguous preference for Canvas, while the remaining three users had some reservations about both systems but were comfortable recommending either to replace Blackboard. All members noted some shortcomings with both systems, but the most serious concerns were certain missing features from Schoology, to the extent that one user felt she could not adequately teach with Schoology.

Based on these data, we are confident that the recommendation of Canvas is consistent with the feedback and the experiences of faculty, staff, and students who participated in this pilot. We look forward to answering any questions the committee members may have about these early recommendations.