ELEARNING PLATFORM REVIEW

TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION
PRESENTED OCTOBER 30, 2020

ELEARNING PLATFORM REVIEW TASK FORCE
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following a year-long review of eLearning Platforms, the consensus of the Task Force is to transition from Blackboard Learn to Canvas by Instructure in a phased approach. In making the recommendation, the group considered data collected from survey results, vendor webinars, exploration in a virtual sandbox, findings from an eLearning Platform RFP process, and conversations among Task Force members. At the end of the process, the Task Force concluded Canvas Learning Management System (LMS) is easier to use from both instructor and student perspectives. It is also more suited for meeting evolving learning and technology challenges over the next three to five years, as expressed from the Task Force member quote.

> *"From the sandboxing and review the technical prospectus, Canvas appeared to have the best user-friendly design to customize a course site compared to others. Also, the ability to quickly change and update settings for assessments, posts will enable us to uniformly serve student needs."-Task Force Member Quote*

The work of the committee informs the eLearning Task Force recommendation to migrate over 18 months from Blackboard Learn to Canvas by Instructure. The Canvas platform will provide:

- Strong support for Framingham State's pedagogical requirements and educational outcomes.
- A clean, consistent, modern, and intuitive interface for easy navigation on mobile devices and computers.
- A cloud-based, mobile-friendly, open platform that integrates with existing and custom tools and adapts to learning challenges.
- Embedded tools to assist faculty in creating opportunities for student collaboration, facilitating deeper learning, and building communities beyond the classroom.

BACKGROUND

The eLearning Platform Review project was initiated in fall 2019 to ensure the University's eLearning platform evolves in ways that enrich our students' educational experience, deliver engaging online programs, enhance course design, inform ongoing assessments, and support accreditations. The June 30, 2022 expiration of the multi-year contractual agreement with Blackboard for the software as a service subscription to their suite of applications and integration solution drove the project timeline. As a result, a team of people from Academic Affairs, Finance, Administration, and Technology worked with members of the faculty to recommend whether

- the University renews the University's contractual agreement with Blackboard (and migrate to their "Ultra" solution) or
- enter into a new agreement with an alternative supplier (and convert to a different eLearning platform).

At the end of the process, in October 2020, the Task Force concluded that Canvas features make it notably easier to use over the other candidates. While most systems offer a significant improvement over our current LMS, Canvas stood out from the competitors. Specifically, in several subcategories of usability, Canvas showcased more intuitive course design tools, clearer and consistent navigation, seamless collaboration tools, integrated video, and helpful analytics. The group's consensus is well-captured in the following:

"The user interface, features, and functionality within Canvas provides a more intuitive and easier to use platform for teaching and learning. Canvas' adoption is growing at a faster rate than alternatives, and it already has been adopted by about as many institutions as Blackboard."-Task Force Member Quote

The review process details are described in the following pages of the report.

Project Overview

Despite COVID19, the volunteer Task Force met regularly, leveraging two previous review processes to research, analyze, and compare vendor solutions with a focus towards:

- anticipated learning and technology changes that would take place at the University over the next 3-5 years
- vendor responses to both an RFI and RFP
- exploration of vendor sandboxes (Blackboard Ultra, Canvas, Brightspace)
- data collection and analysis of community member satisfaction and comments related to the current LMS system

Timeline

The initial timeline was interrupted in March 2020, but Task Force members worked through the summer to complete the planned eight-month process and complete the outlined tasks.

30 Nov.	Complete "pre-flight" work to frame assessment criteria, use cases
31 Dec.	Assess current opinion among faculty and students to inform RFI
31 Jan.	Assemble an eLearning platform review team to refine RFI guidelines
29 Feb.	Schedule vendor demos in response to RFI
31 Mar.	Draft RFP based on Review Team recommendations; publish RFP
30 Apr.	Review RFP responses
31 May	Schedule in-person demos; Review finalist responses to RFP
June 30 - Present	Present eLearning platform team recommendation to Executive Staff, Deans and ITS Leadership

Needs Analysis

The Needs Analysis considered faculty and student perception of the current environment, vendor answers to voiced challenges, and desired updates and gaps in the existing LMS and offered opportunities for anyone with a Blackboard account to "play" in the vendor sandboxes. Data were collected between January and September 2020 and reviewed in the form of[1]:

- Faculty and Student surveys
- Response to a Request for Information (RFI)
- Vendor Presentations (online) on the Learn platforms and Assessment tools
- Response to a formal Request for Proposal (RFP)
- Technical and Pricing Reviews

Analysis of the data and collected written comments informed the committee recommendation to make a change, and to come to a conclusion that Canvas by Instructure and not Blackboard Ultra is better suited to meet the needs of an evolving teaching and learning environment at Framingham State University.

What Did We Learn?

Ease of use, collaboration tools, and mobile-friendly was at the core of many comments from both students and faculty. Faculty were also seeking a more intuitive framework for grading student work and providing feedback to support their pedagogical approaches to teaching.

From the **student survey**, we heard,

> *"I have used Blackboard for 3 years at this school and others and Canvas for 2 years, I would 10/10 use Canvas over Blackboard. The ease of use has an immense improvement and things are much easier to communicate and navigate. Please do not go Blackboard again. Use Canvas and the students will be very very glad you did."*

Watching the **vendor presentations**, one faculty shared,

> *"Of the three vendors, I found Canvas the most impressive. That could be in part because their presentation stuck directly to the use-case scenarios while managing to cover a lot of ground. The tools seem relatively intuitive and are more suited to teaching students transferrable technology skills than Blackboard."*

Vendor **Sandbox Comments from students** shared a common theme.

> *"I find this one to be the most visually appealing and logically organized of all three platforms. The gradebook is much easier to use than Blackboard, and I like how connected everything is within the course."*

And some **faculty playing in the sandbox** echoed the Canvas experience,

> *"I found the Canvas interface clear and easy to navigate. I could perform all the tasks I do in Blackboard, but there are opportunities for new functionalities, like creating mixed-media pages that integrate content and assignments."*

Evaluating eLearning Platform Options

The eLearning Platform Request for Proposal (RFP), posted July 23, 2020, requested that vendors respond by August 21. Upon receipt of the proposal, the committee spent three weeks evaluating the four qualified vendor responses from Magic Software, Blackboard Inc., Instructure, and D2L. The team eliminated Magic Software after scoring the proposal as Magic is not an LMS, but rather a content management system and did not meet our minimum qualifications. The LMS course software must be comprehensive, reliable, flexible, accessible, and secure. Of the three remaining vendors, Canvas scored highest on the RFP technical review criteria, although pricing came in slightly higher than its competitors.

Technical Review

The technical review evaluated each vendor response to 52 criteria listed in the eLearning Platform RFP. Task Force members were eligible to score the proposals using the rating system of Highly Advantageous, Advantageous, and Not Advantageous, as defined below.

CATEGORY	Highly Advantageous (HA)	Advantageous (A)	Not Advantageous
General Criteria Teaching and Learning System Administration, Configuration, and Integration Strategies	Solution is native to the product and is fully documented and supported by the vendor	Solution is native to the product and is documented and supported by the vendor, or a well-documented integrated third-party solution for missing pieces is supported	Solution is not native to the tool, and no third-party integrated solution is recommended
Professional Services	Expertise in platform migrations, including integrated tools and external systems that are well documented and supported	Experience in eLearning Platform migrations for native solutions that are well documented and supported	Minimal experience in eLearning Platform migrations

NOTE: RESPONSE RATES ACROSS PLATFORMS ARE UNEVEN, BUT CLOSE ENOUGH TO CONSIDER THE EVALUATION SCORES.

- 11 EVALUATORS FOR BLACKBOARD,
- 9 EVALUATORS FOR BRIGHTSPACE, AND
- 10 EVALUATORS FOR CANVAS.

Worth noting in the Teaching and Learning category, Task Force reviewers scored Canvas as "highly advantageous" a total of 174 times versus 116 for Blackboard 135 for Brightspace as referenced in the table below.

CATEGORY	Blackboard			Brightspace			Canvas		
	HA	A	NA	HA	A	NA	HA	A	NA
General Criteria	68	51	6	72	17	8	94	28	0
Teaching And Learning	**116**	96	6	**135**	35	9	**174**	37	1
System Administration	89	43	1	89	9	2	102	14	0
Professional Services	5	3	0	5	2	1	8	1	0
Total Score	278	193	13	301	63	20	378	80	1

Initial Pricing Comparison

At first glance, if we include Add-on services, Canvas pricing is higher than the other two competitors. The goal is to negotiate pricing for recurring costs to be approximately the same or lower as compared to current annual expenditures for Blackboard Learn, and to reduce the cost of the one-time expenses associated with migrating to the extent possible. Canvas' "add-on" services need to be further scrutinized, described in the Appendices folder[1]. The fiscal year impacts also need to be revisited based on a sensible migration over time rather than a conversation where there is a single cutover date from the current system to a new one.

CATEGORY	Blackboard	Canvas	Brightspace
Learn Environment	$130,748	$108,103	$108,000
Migration Services	$19,200	$33,700	$54,600
Add-on Services*	$0	$38,464	$16,200
Fiscal Year 2021-2022	$149,948.00	$180,268.00	$147,750.00

Category	Blackboard	Canvas	Brightspace
Fiscal Year 2022-2023	$115,100.00	$152,457.43	$127,926.00
Fiscal Year 2023-2024	$116,400.00	$157,009.68	$164,163.78

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[1] *Pricing assumes we purchase Add-on Services. The pricing proposals are included in the Appendices folder on OneDrive.

Why Canvas?

In making the recommendation, the Task Force also noted that Canvas has a strong reputation among users at other schools. The platform integrates with existing LTI tools, Banner, and publisher content and provides new opportunities for teaching and learning. By incorporating features like built-in video recording throughout the system, straightforward content sharing between courses, and student performance data at both the course and system level, Canvas also addresses shortfalls with the current Blackboard environment is described in this section.

The Canvas environment offers strong support for Framingham State's pedagogical requirements and educational outcomes.

- Communication and Collaboration

  This category of usability is critical for effective teaching and learning, and again, Canvas demonstrated superiority over its competitors with built-in collaboration and virtual conferencing tools, messaging, chat, and even had a solution for Peer Review, an area of collaborative learning that we currently duct-tape together with a variety of external tools and which requires additional management by the faculty member. When faculty were asked about a task they would like the ability to do in a new LMS, Peer Review was explicitly mentioned: "It would be great if students could grade peer submissions using the assignment rubric - and I could make their grades count for a portion of the total grade for the assignment." Canvas has a built-in workflow for student peer review; the other two LMS' and our current version of Blackboard do not.

- Video Creation

  Another area of usability where Canvas demonstrated superiority is in its integrated video/audio creation capabilities. Video is available everywhere in Canvas because the ability to create an accessible video is available in the rich text editor that appears throughout the system, meaning you can just as easily make content that is text, video, or audio. In the sandbox review, one professor reported, "One feature that I would use heavily is the ability to record and embed audio or video right in the LMS easily. I tried that in discussions and loved that students can reply with audio, video, or text. This is UDL in action." Since video creation is available to students for assignments and discussions, submissions can easily be graded and tracked through student engagement and performance metrics.

- Analytics

  The final subset of usability where Canvas came out on top was in analytics. Out of the box, Canvas's course-based reports demonstrated the ability for instructors to monitor student performance and manage engagement, and with the added layer of course outcomes, instructors and departments can easily track performance against measured goals.

  At the system level, Canvas provides administrators with a robust understanding of the system's use, supporting adoption efforts and triage efforts, and these are readily available without the need to request support.

A clean, consistent, modern, and intuitive interface for easy navigation on mobile devices and computers meets the needs of students, faculty, and staff.

With an ever-present menu, quick access to the categories of tools that are most frequently used, and easy-to-see buttons to control what is hidden and what is visible to students, the system supports parity in course design across courses, making it easier for students to find their materials and self-monitor their performance in their classes. In addition to basic navigation, controls are simple to understand and labeled clearly, which aids in supporting new and veteran users working with the platform.

According to a faculty member who tested the sandboxes,

> *"I felt that of the three, this platform [Canvas] is by far the most streamlined, clear, and intuitive. Everything I looked to figure out how to do seemed to be at my fingertips, visuals were clear. Organization was the best of the three."*

Canvas Infrastructure is a cloud-based, mobile-friendly, open platform that integrates with existing and custom tools and adapts to learning challenges.

It was created by Instructure for educational institutions. "Developed in 2011, Canvas is built on an open API, meaning users have access to our software. This allows you to integrate custom tools, extract your usage data, and discover new and exciting ways to use Canvas. Canvas integrates with most SISs (Student Information Systems), and we work with 100+ like-minded partners to ensure you have access to the technology, tools, and services that can help you build your ideal learning ecosystem."[2]

Canvas embedded tools assist faculty in creating opportunities for student collaboration, facilitating deeper learning, and building communities beyond the classroom.

Canvas supports teaching and learning by providing a simple and consistent interface developed on top of a modern platform. The system supports effective modular design; setting up a course is easy to figure out without the need for explicit instruction. The environment supports faculty course design creativity without compromising the clarity of the organization. The system allows faculty to opt-in to tools they want to use in their course without cluttering the interface for students.

In response to our Sandbox experience, one faculty member shared the following impression.

> *"I found the Canvas interface clear and easy to navigate. I could perform all the tasks I do in Blackboard, but there are opportunities for new functionalities, like creating mixed-media pages that integrate content and assignments." - Faculty Canvas Sandbox Review response*

In addition to supporting effective design and pedagogy for faculty in their course, Canvas also provides a solution for sharing course material, which is currently a process managed by request through ETO. In Canvas, Faculty have direct control over sharing their course materials in Canvas; this is achieved through the "Canvas Commons," which acts as a shared space that faculty can use to widely share course materials with the rest of the University. Separately, they can quickly share pieces of their course directly with specific colleagues. Currently, faculty who want to share materials with colleagues need additional assistance from IT to manage further access to courses and support complex sharing permissions.

Task Force Conclusion

Change at any time is challenging, but with disruption comes opportunity, as highlighted in the quote below. With more faculty using the current Learning Management System, we expect not everyone will embrace the change. Still, more faculty will be ready to adopt a more seamless, feature-rich system.

"Regardless of which LMS is chosen, it will be new, as Blackboard has completely redesigned its system. They need to service two different systems, the current and the one they have switched to, questioning its ability to meet our needs, where the other LMS systems use just the one system and provide service to that one LMS system. Canvas provides additional means to reach students, with more streamlined means to do so. Harvard made the switch to Canvas, and Dartmouth moved from Blackboard to Canvas this past spring 2020, which contributes to seeing the writing on the wall that if we are to keep current, we need to use a provider of our LMS which is capable of providing new avenues to communicate with students, especially with the increase of online teaching due to Covid-19. The Canvas by Instructure app is the mobile version of Canvas that helps you stay current with your courses anywhere you go. The ITS Department has done its homework and due diligence in examining all the capabilities of the many LMS systems and have provided solid evidence that Canvas will not only meet our current needs but will be capable and supportive of continuing to add elements of the learning system that will provide student access to the material, both visual and in documents, to meet learning goals and assessment requirements." - Task Force Member Quote

Next Steps

With approval from executive staff, the plan is to pilot a few courses in spring 2021. Volunteers are already signing up to make the change. The experience of the faculty volunteers and advice from our Canvas migration experts, will inform how we move forward over the next 18 months from a Blackboard legacy system to a cloud-hosted, feature rich platform to meet the needs of an evolving teaching and learning environment at Framingham State University.

Meanwhile, the other work to be done includes but is not limited to the following:

- Revisit the scope and timing of "add-on services" and whether or not they are needed, and if so to what extent and when they should be adopted.

- Determine a sensible migration over time, and the anticipated rate of adoption during that timeframe, leading to the ultimate date for the final cutover from Blackboard Learn to Canvas. (This will provide the basis for negotiating lower costs based on FTE usage initially that are associated with the FTE making it easier to absorb the one-time costs associated with "migration services").

- Closely examine Instructure's definition of "FTE" and then revisit the current and anticipated FTE count for Framingham State University given the pandemic and projected enrollments. (The annual recurring costs of Canvas are priced based on FTE count, and therefore pivotal to arriving at an agreed upon cost – and potential decreases in FTE will not lower costs in the out years).

- The annual increase for Canvas quoted by Instructure is 3% compounding year over year. The goal is to get his reduced to 1% if possible. (While 3% is historically low as compared to most agreements which include 5% to 7% annual compounding increases, there have been reports the Europe is considering negative interest rates).

- Based on the shared information, finalize negotiations on pricing and contractual agreements.

- Determine the fiscal impact on the annual operating budget allocation for ITS and determine the source of funding (through cost reductions, cost savings, and/or re-allocations).

- Submit a project proposal for review and consideration as an added initiative for inclusion with the University's portfolio of IT projects. If approved, finalized the project charter and formally kick-off the project beginning January 2021.

Notes

[1] Summary reports and resource information are linked from a shared Appendices folder on OneDrive.

[2] Source: https://www.instructure.com/canvas/higher-education/platform/open