

Canvas and Brown University

Students and faculty speak, Brown University listens: Canvas is the choice



BROWN

At a Glance

- Concern that its LMS technologies were falling behind market innovations drove Brown to review its strategy.
- Students and faculty drove the LMS selection process.
- Superior usability and look-and-feel tipped the decision in Canvas' favor.
- Brown also liked Canvas' integration with Google Apps and its mobile device support.

The Challenge

In summer 2010, marketplace innovations had Brown University re-evaluating its overall LMS strategy. Administrators were increasingly concerned that their current technologies were not keeping up. The university had used WebCT since 2004, and about half its courses resided there. Blackboard's decision to end WebCT support in 2013 presented an opportunity. "We saw it as the moment to look at the LMS space again," said Catherine Zabriskie, director of academic technology services at Brown.

The university's LMS review centered on the entire user community, including students, faculty and staff. Because users would be the ultimate beneficiaries of the LMS, Zabriskie ensured that they drove the selection process. Her team conducted student and faculty focus groups and extensive surveys, which narrowed a wide range of LMS options to four: Blackboard Learn 9.1, Canvas and two other open source LMSs—Sakai and Moodle. Each contender, Zabriskie said, offered good functionality and features. The challenge was selecting the one system that users trusted most to meet their long-term needs.

The Factors

Brown's main criteria were:

- Usability: a clean interface and ease of use that would appeal to students, faculty and staff
- Functional and technical fit with Brown's student-centered focus
- Interoperability and integration with mobile devices, Google Apps for education and the student information system

Brown Fun Facts

- 7th oldest college in the US
- Students from all 50 states and 100 countries
- Over 140 undergraduate and graduate degrees
- 2010 Princeton Review's #1 College in America for Happiest Students

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— Catherine Zabriskie
Dir. of Academic Technology Services
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In addition to the users, feedback came from executive sponsors representing major campus stakeholders, including a standing academic technology steering committee. The project team itself was faculty- and student-heavy, reflecting Brown's emphasis on student input. Users tested the program by following scripts as they moved through the LMS.

Student participation was integral throughout the selection process. Students took advantage of “sandboxes” to visit a showcase site and use the product in a sample setting. They also interacted with the technology steering committee and with executive sponsors.

The Decision

After all the research, the Brown team chose Canvas.

“What attracted us most to Canvas, if I had to boil it down, is the overall look and feel,” Zabriskie said. “The students feel comfortable because Canvas looks and feels much more like the tools they spend time in.”

One appealing feature that set Canvas apart from other options and made it a particularly good fit for Brown, Zabriskie noted, is a design that integrates teaching and learning. While instructors and students have different roles as they use the product, they are part of the same environment.

“That feeling is very much a part of Canvas,” Zabriskie said, “and it echoes a philosophy at the university. The integration in the design is in line with the way we think at Brown—we very much value the perspective of our students.”

The focus on ease of use also highlighted Canvas' tight integration with Google Apps because Brown uses Google for email, calendaring services and some collaborative tools. Evaluators were also impressed with out-of-the-box support for mobile devices and integration with video and live chat. Instructure's open APIs were also important—an interested Brown student could build an app adding specific functionality to Canvas.

Involving the user community in the selection process for Canvas means that Brown's investment in the success of its LMS is shared between administrators, faculty and students.