

## Learning Management Systems | Viewpoint

# Why We Switched to Sakai

By Timothy M. Chester • 10/06/10

Pepperdine University has made the decision to adopt Sakai as the single, university-wide learning management system (LMS), effective Jan. 1, 2011. This decision is the culmination of a yearlong engagement with our faculty and students, facilitated through our technology and learning center, which provided our IT organization the opportunity to lead on an issue that is critical to university-wide teaching and learning functions. As well, because of the significant cost savings that will accrue as a result of this adoption, our decision highlights an approach for proactively dealing with the economic uncertainty arising from the "new normal" that now affects all higher education institutions.

Although the LMS often comprises the "third rail" of our technology services, a very large majority of our faculty and students not only support this change, but are applauding it. Discontent with our current LMS is only part of the story, however. What we have learned is that software designed by higher education, built by higher education, and supported by higher education is more in tune with the needs of our faculty and students. Our successful transition to Sakai is directly attributable to an open and inclusive planning process that is driven both by end user needs and by an outcomes-based approach to assessment.

Five findings led to our decision:

***The LMS is important, but is no longer transformative***. Our research suggests that the potential of the LMS to transform teaching and learning is diminishing quickly. While the LMS is vitally important, in the same sense that commodity services such as e-mail, bandwidth, and disk storage are, the LMS by itself can no longer be considered strategic. Rather, it is the mash-up of different types of collaborative technologies, such as blogs, tweets, wikis, social networking sites, online media, and document sharing systems, together with the LMS, that appears to have the greater potential to transform our technology and learning practices. Collaborative networks, such as GLEAN at our Graziadio School of Business and Management, are proving to be better aligned with the needs of our faculty and the expectations of our students. Given the commodity nature of the LMS, our expectations for LMS performance are centered less on year-to-year technological innovation and more on responsiveness, reliability, consistency, predictability, and cost effectiveness. What we need is an LMS that lends itself to more effective integration into diverse ecosystems through an open architecture, extensible and accessible programming interfaces, and a broad community for support. In this regard, Sakai has proved to be a superior match for our needs.

***Students prefer Sakai*** . As a part of our planning process, beginning in the summer of 2009, Pepperdine began running Sakai in parallel with our existing LMS. Forty-four faculty members, primarily those who had worked closely with IT in the past, were invited to use Sakai for their coursework. Faculty participation was broadened substantially each successive semester; consequently, so was the number of students using Sakai. In the spring of 2010, our technology and learning team surveyed students who had used Sakai and obtained 291 student responses to the survey. Greater numbers of student respondents preferred Sakai over our current LMS when comparing the following features: announcements, assignments, gradebooks, resources (course materials), forums, calendars, quizzes and tests, dropboxes, and blogs. When responding to the question "Would you recommend that Pepperdine discontinue the use of its current LMS and adopt Sakai?" 75 percent of the 264 students answered with "yes" or "yes, with comments."

***So do our faculty*** . Early in our research, our biggest problem was supporting the large number of faculty who, unbeknownst to our staff, were adopting Sakai independent of our pilot study and pointing their students to Sakai courses. By the end of our study, 94 faculty members (approximately 25 percent of our faculty) had used Sakai. This group of faculty members was also surveyed in the spring of 2010 and 35 responded to the survey. Faculty respondents preferred Sakai to our current LMS when comparing the following features: assignments, gradebooks, resources (course materials), forums, calendars, and dropboxes. When responding to the question "Would you recommend that Pepperdine discontinue the use of its current LMS and adopt Sakai?" 91 percent of the 35 faculty members answered with "yes" or "yes, with comments."

***Our IT staff members find Sakai much easier to support*** . Our strategy presumes that the LMS is just one part of a larger toolbox provided to faculty for use in teaching and learning activities. Integration of the LMS into an infrastructure with other tools must be both easy and cost-effective. Two years ago, Pepperdine migrated its entire single sign-on infrastructure to the open Central Authentication Service (CAS), a system that has been widely adopted across higher education. Customizing our current LMS to support CAS integration was quoted at five figures, an amount approximately equal to one full scholarship in our undergraduate college. The same integration for Sakai was supported out of the box. We have had the same positive experience with other third-party integrations. Overall, our IT staff finds that supporting Sakai is a remarkable improvement over our current LMS.

***The financial savings is equivalent to the salaries of two faculty members*** . Because Sakai is designed, developed, and supported on an open-source basis by the higher education community, our costs for Sakai are a fraction of those incurred for our current LMS. In the "new normal," cost effectiveness has taken on a new sense of urgency, particularly for commodity services that are important but not necessarily strategic. We have less need for a monolithic LMS that attempts to include every possible new technological bell and whistle with every major or minor software update. While cost has not driven our decision-making, the effect of swapping a six-figure annual maintenance bill for a much lower five-figure annual maintenance bill cannot be overlooked. This savings will provide us with a greater pool of discretionary resources to support other technology and learning programs across the institution.

We are very proud of the fact that this transition has provided our IT staff another opportunity to play a broader consultative and advisory role to our faculty and campus leaders on an issue of critical importance to the institution at large. This project was not undertaken upon the request of those outside IT, but was an opportunity that was conceived, executed, and led by our technology and learning staff. Our planning process involved the participation of hundreds of faculty and students, required presentations at dozens of meetings, and necessitated buy-in from our faculty and approval by the provost and deans. Serving as a change advocate regarding the effective delivery and use of technology, particularly in the technology and learning space, is an increasingly important role for our IT organization. In this regard, our staff has performed magnificently.

Reconsidering the mission, purpose, and role of the learning management system provides IT organizations with the opportunity to play an enhanced leadership role that goes beyond that of technology mechanics. My words of advice for other IT leaders contemplating similar initiatives include the following:

***Don't shy away from this type of challenge: Lead*** . Although touching the LMS is often fraught with peril, you can have success with this type of transition, if it results from an inclusive process that is open, transparent, driven by data and analysis, and characterized by strong communication with faculty and students.

***Let faculty be your advocates*** . Early on, we reached out to those faculty members who were known to be early adopters of technology services and brought them on board with the pilot project. Over the course of a year, we invested in this group by sending them to both training and conferences. As we neared the completion of our pilot phase, these faculty members became our most important advocates as we began discussing our recommendations with our faculty. Early and ongoing faculty participation from the inception of a project such as this is critical.

***Use data to break the ice with difficult change initiatives*** . While relying exclusively on quantitative data is often counterproductive, resistance to LMS change efforts is often based on closely held myths that sometimes fall apart under scrutiny. Properly used benchmarks and other measures are effective tools in any change initiative.

As we complete the transition to Sakai, our institution now benefits from a tool that is more aligned with the needs of our institution--one that provides a better user experience for our faculty and students, is easier to administer and support, and is far more cost effective. Most importantly, though, we have learned that even the toughest change initiatives can be accomplished when we work together, communicate openly and transparently, and confidently engage the prospects that arise. Through prudent and inclusive planning, IT organizations can boldly confront opportunities at the heart of the educational enterprise.