# Course software could be replaced

By ERIC CHEN
*February 20, 2006*

The Blackboard Learning System could be replaced as the University's primary course software in the near future.

Officials are preparing to upgrade software infrastructure and have taken interest in an endeavor called the Sakai Project, Penn Courseware Manager John Kiser said.

Launched in 2004, Sakai is a joint effort by universities across the nation to create a complete course management service much like Blackboard.

But unlike Blackboard -- which costs more than half a million dollars a year to operate, according to Sandra Kerbel, director of public services for the Van Pelt Library, and is owned by Blackboard Inc. -- Sakai is free to use.

Among Sakai's advantages is that it is open-source, meaning that administrators can customize the site to meet the school's needs and design tools without charge.

Penn's Blackboard site stopped functioning without warning on several occasions. The Web site last suffered a series of crashes in October.

Though Sakai's potential has caught the eye of Penn staff members, there are currently no concrete plans to switch to a completely new platform. Therefore, the University will likely continue to use Blackboard to some extent, Kerbel said.

"We're not seeking to replace Blackboard so much as we're looking to enhance and provide more teaching opportunities," said Kiser, adding that Penn is working on a test installation of Sakai that may run as soon as this summer.

Officials currently purchase Blackboard add-ons to upgrade the University's software. However, Penn could conceivably install Sakai features too, Kiser said.

Some schools, including Yale University, have switched to the platform completely.

There are several hidden costs involved in the move, however.

The University pays Blackboard Inc. to ensure that it runs properly, but it would have to create these services from scratch with a program like Sakai -- and the costs can be substantial, Kerbel said.

And Blackboard representatives doubt that Sakai can match Blackboard's resources in terms of technical support because it's a program, not a commercial enterprise.

"Course-management systems need 24/7 support," said Melissa Chotiner, a Blackboard spokeswoman. "We question if open-source is something that a school can rely on."

Yale junior Zack Dugan said Sakai is more user-friendly and visually pleasing than Blackboard.

"We used Blackboard in high school and classes. [Yale's version of Sakai] is much better," he said. "It is easier to navigate and is more stable. It looks much better."