

LMS Analysis & Recommendation
Center for innovation in Teaching, Assessment, and Learning
April, 2024

Introduction

The following report and recommendation are the result of Valparaiso University's desire to enhance teaching and learning for all students. Additionally, creating a support framework for faculty and staff to provide quality teaching and learning experiences is a foundational component of student recruitment and retention. After evaluating multiple Learning Management Systems (LMS), a cross-departmental committee has determined that the current LMS, Blackboard Learn (and its soon to be successor Learn Ultra), is not the best overall fit for the Valpo community moving forward. This report will provide background, supporting documentation, and survey results related to each system. It will conclude with the recommendation of the Canvas LMS.

Background

Beginning in January 2023 the University began evaluating our learning management system (LMS). This is one of the primarily tools that faculty use to host course lecture materials, submit assignments, conduct quizzes, and otherwise engage students through their academic learning. For many years the institution has used Blackboard, one of three main LMS platforms used within higher education. The past five years have seen tremendous innovations in these platforms to be more user friendly from a teaching and learning perspective (benefiting faculty and students), including being more mobile device friendly. As a result, our current LMS platform was releasing a new platform, allowing the university the opportunity to systematically review the platform options that would best serve our students and faculty moving forward.

Description of the Process

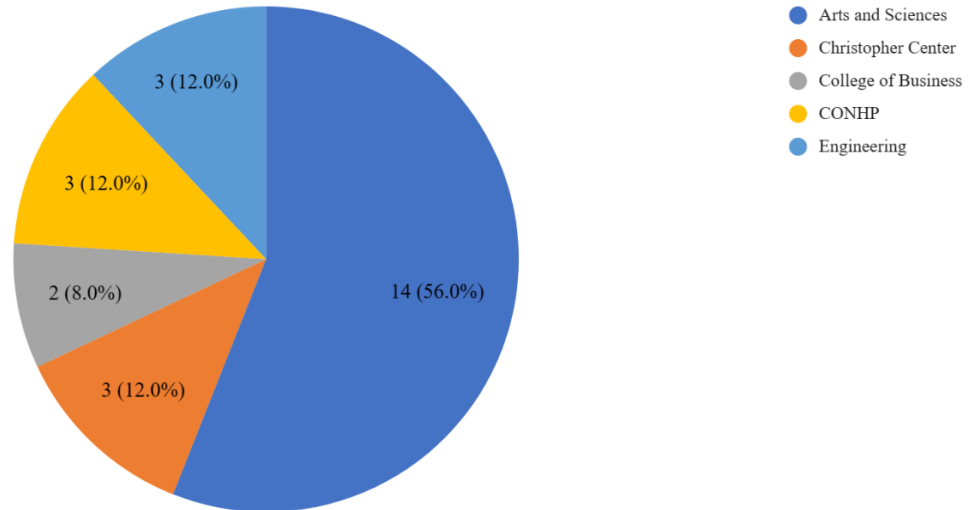
The review process has been led by a cross-functional team including participants from the Center for Innovation in Teaching, Assessment, and Learning (CITAL), the Office of information Technology (IT), and the Christopher Center for Library and Information Resources (CCLIR). The process was designed to include faculty, staff, and students to evaluate three systems and offer their insights and feedback.

Originally, it was expected to narrow the list to Blackboard Ultra and one other provider by March 2024, the goal being to pilot both systems in the 2024-2024 academic year. However, through this process it became clear that pivoting to a different LMS was in the best interests of the University and that the process should be accelerated.

A total of 25 faculty requested sandbox accounts. The following chart represents the breakdown of participants by academic unit:

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LMS Faculty Participation



There were additional resources provided to faculty throughout the sandbox phase, including updates from CITAL, communications from the vendors, and campus visits. The following is a list of resources, support, and information made available, as well as the timing:

Resource	Timing
LMS Sandboxes	Summer 2023 – Early Spring 2024
Dedicated Vendor Support Teams	Summer 2023 – Early Spring 2024
Real-Time Feedback Forms	October 2023 – Early Spring 2024
Online Open Office Hours (45 hours)	October 2023 – Early Spring 2024
On-Campus Visits (24 hours)	October 2023 – November 2023

Survey & Direct Feedback

Sandbox participants were asked to complete a survey to evaluate the sandbox experience. Three distinct surveys were created for the different interest groups involved. Below are the areas and related questions. For brevity, the beginning of the statements “Regarding ‘topic,’ it was easy to” has been eliminated:

Faculty Survey	
Area	Related Questions
Help & Support	Find online video resources Find online step by step written instructions Find support contact information Contact live support and issues were promptly addressed
Analytics	Access useful auto-generated reports Track overall student progress Track student engagement of material See individual student progress

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Faculty Survey	
Area	Related Questions
Grading	Grade assignments quickly Grade group assignments Customize the gradebook look and feel Set weighted grades
Communication	Create and customize announcements Access the roster and communicate directly with students Use the gradebook to remind students of upcoming assignments Setup notifications Communicate through the mobile app Communicate through a mobile device Communicate through a desktop/laptop computer
Other Tools	Add in collaboration tools (e.g., Google, Top Hat, Perusall) Easily edit and use the calendar
Creating Content	Create new content pages Add videos and other rich content to pages Create and add content folders Create and manage modules
Assignments & Quizzes	Create a new assignment Create a new quiz Create a group assignment Enter assignment feedback Review feedback (assignments and discussions)
Navigation	Find my courses Quickly find the most common tasks Customize menus to fit my needs Preview the course as a test student Create my account profile Install and configure the mobile app Navigate on a mobile device

Administrative Survey	
Area	Related Questions
Help & Support	Find online video resources Find online step by step written instructions Find support contact information Contact live support and issues were promptly addressed
Analytics	Auto-generate useful and accessible reports Create custom reports View and create student retention reports

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Administrative Survey	
Area	Related Questions
Functions	Add internal users to existing courses Add external users to existing courses Create, add, and assign user roles Create top-level templates Merge multiple course sections Import/Export courses Convert courses from Learn Original Archive courses Locate and install compatible LTI integrations
Navigation	Find my courses Navigate the user interface Quickly find most common tasks Install and configure the mobile app Navigate on a mobile device

Student Survey	
Area	Related Questions
Course Landing Page	The Course Landing Page was well organized and easy to navigate The Course Landing Page was the appropriate place to start
Navigation	Contact my instructor Find my courses Find announcements Find instructor information Create my account profile Quickly find the most common tasks Install and configure the mobile app Navigate on a mobile device
Assignments & Quizzes	Start a discussion Reply to a discussion Submit an assignment Review feedback (assignments and discussions)
Communication	Contact other students Setup notifications for assignments and messages Communicate through a mobile device Communicate through a desktop/laptop computer
Grading	View individual assignment grades View my overall grade Determine how I am doing in the course
Help & Support	Find online video resources Find online step by step written instructions Find support contact information

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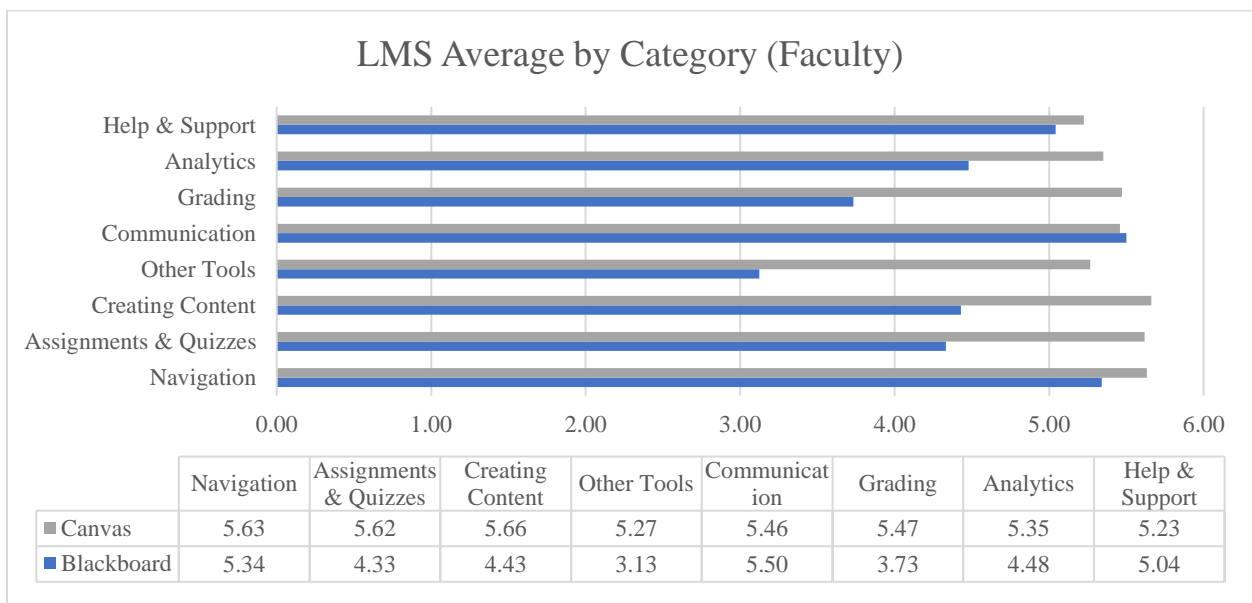
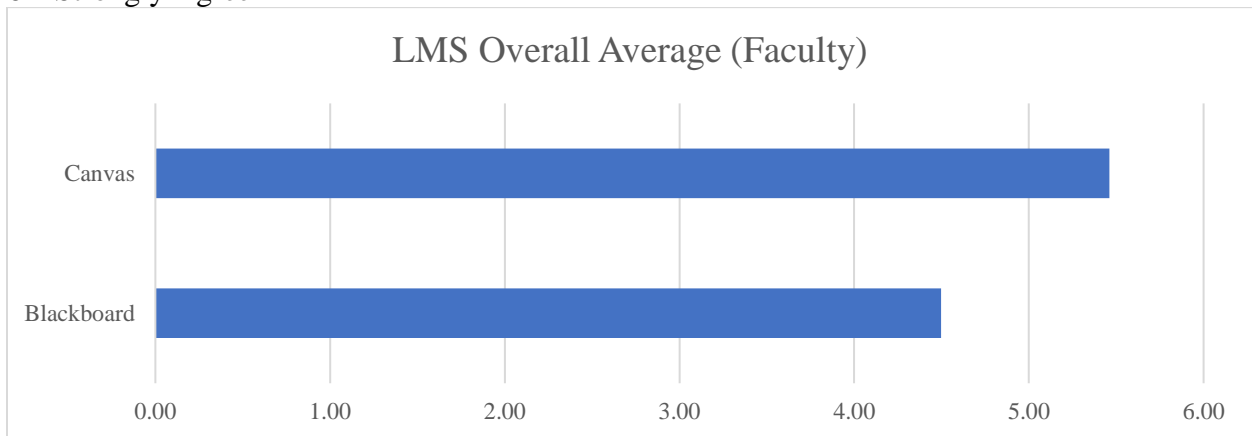
Faculty Feedback

Faculty were asked to provide feedback via survey for the different platforms. In total 16 responses (7-Blackboard, 2-Brightspace, and 7-Canvas) were submitted and analyzed via the different categories. Due to the low number of responses received for Brightspace and that many of the responses were NA, that information is not presented here for discussion. The remaining average responses are presented below:

Quantitative Responses

Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements using the following scale:

- 1 – Strongly Disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Slightly Disagree
- 4 – Slightly Agree
- 5 – Agree
- 6 – Strongly Agree



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Qualitative Responses

Faculty provided 30 comments regarding the different categories presented. Below are the responses of faculty in each category as well as overall comments.

Overall Comments – Blackboard Ultra

- Although the library currently uses blackboard, we have discovered that it doesn't actually matter what platform the University uses, we will be able to make it work for our student staff training
- It felt worse than our current Blackboard.
- Ultra appears to be a step backwards from the current Blackboard. I'm mystified about the choice that they've made. So many things are just hidden. It took me longer to find things than it did with Canvas, even with several years of using the current Blackboard. Its plain vanilla looking design is not enticing. While photos can be added to modules, its just dead looking. I really hope we dont' stick with Blackboard.

Overall Comments – Canvas

- I have made use of API access with Canvas for other courses. This allows me to create custom workflows that are not already supported. No API access puts me at the mercy of the current features only.
- The ability to adjust due dates by section and students were amazing! Something Blackboard is lacking.
- Canvas has a ton of quality-of-life improvements compared to what we are using now. I did not see any barriers that would stop me from doing things I do now and it would facilitate things that I currently have to introduce work arounds to do.

Analytics – Blackboard Ultra

- I liked that the gradebook could be filtered by student

Analytics – Canvas

- I like the ability to add in extra credit, something that's difficult to do.

Grading – Blackboard

- Clunky

Grading – Canvas

- The grading tools were amazing!
- Everything about grading seems easier than current Blackboard

Communication – Blackboard

- I didn't try the interacting with students functions yet.

Communication – Canvas

- I really like the option to "message students who".

Other Tools – Canvas

- I use TopHat, but didn't try to get it into canvas.

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Creating Content – Blackboard

- Easy to create content.
- I really like that I can upload multiple files at once and it is easy to move them around.

Creating Content – Canvas

- It is easier to organize content in Canvas to match the progression of a course, and better for students to track
- The ability to create and to display modules or course parts graphically is really nice. Very nice ability to really keep a course organized. I like that there's a separate space to view all of the assignments apart from the modules.
- I like that files can be stored in an easy-to-find place and then put into modules as needed.

Assignments & Quizzes – Blackboard

- Its largely the same functionality as we currently have, which is underwhelming and a LOT of clicks to do anything.
- Looks like it is easy to create assignments, I am not sure about 3rd party assignments.

Assignments & Quizzes – Canvas

- Canvas makes dealing with student submissions 3x quicker than Blackboard, very nice.
- I really liked the way you could group assignments for categories that aligned with the syllabus.
- Quite a few improvements here in relation to Blackboard. I like the rubrics and the sliders. Much easier to use as a grader.

Navigation – Blackboard Ultra

- It is a better version of Blackboard.
- This is Blackboard Ultra's biggest weakness. It has not changed much from the original. If anything it has gotten worse. I'm not sure where to look when I get to the front page of the course. There are so many things going on. Things both I and students would use regularly are hidden behind multiple clicks.
- I see a lot of similarities to the Blackboard we are using now, with some improvements.

Navigation – Canvas

- I thought it was simple and easy to understand.
- Things seemed easier overall than Blackboard. It was easy to create hierarchies of information. It seems that students would have less problems finding things.
- I didn't try the mobile app.

Administrative Feedback by Category

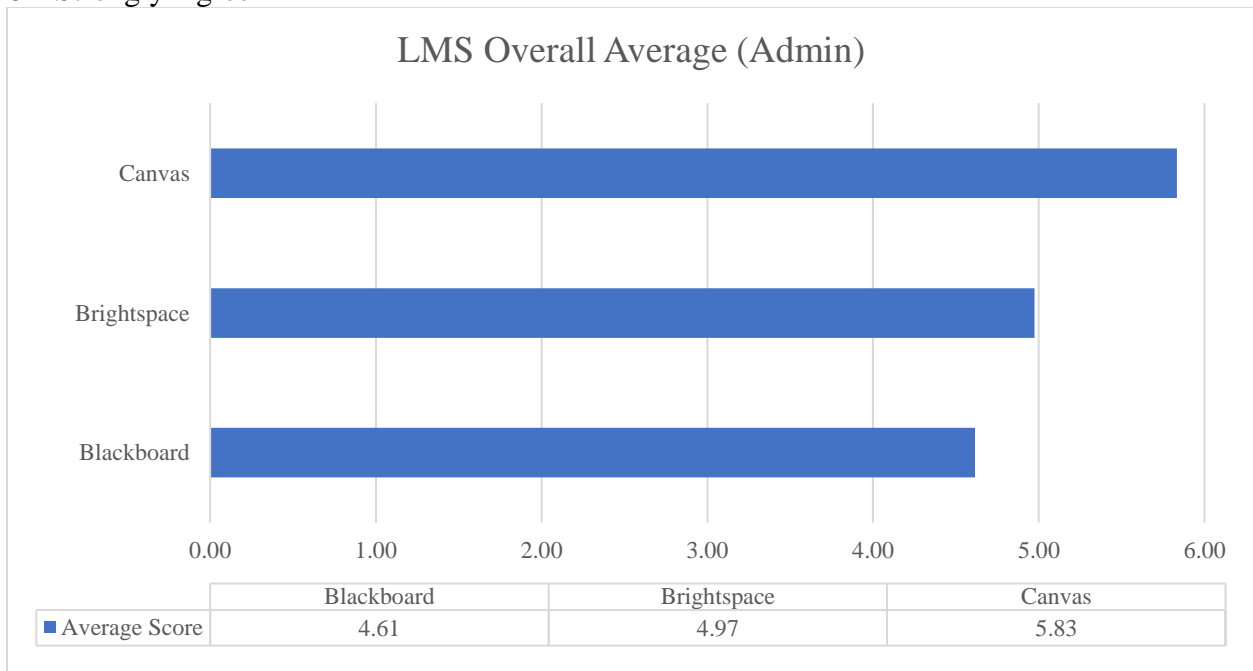
Administrators were asked to provide feedback via survey for the different platforms. In total 9 responses (3-Blackboard, 3-Brightspace, and 3-Canvas) were submitted and analyzed via the different categories. Since there was an equal number of responses for all three vendors, the results are presented below in total:

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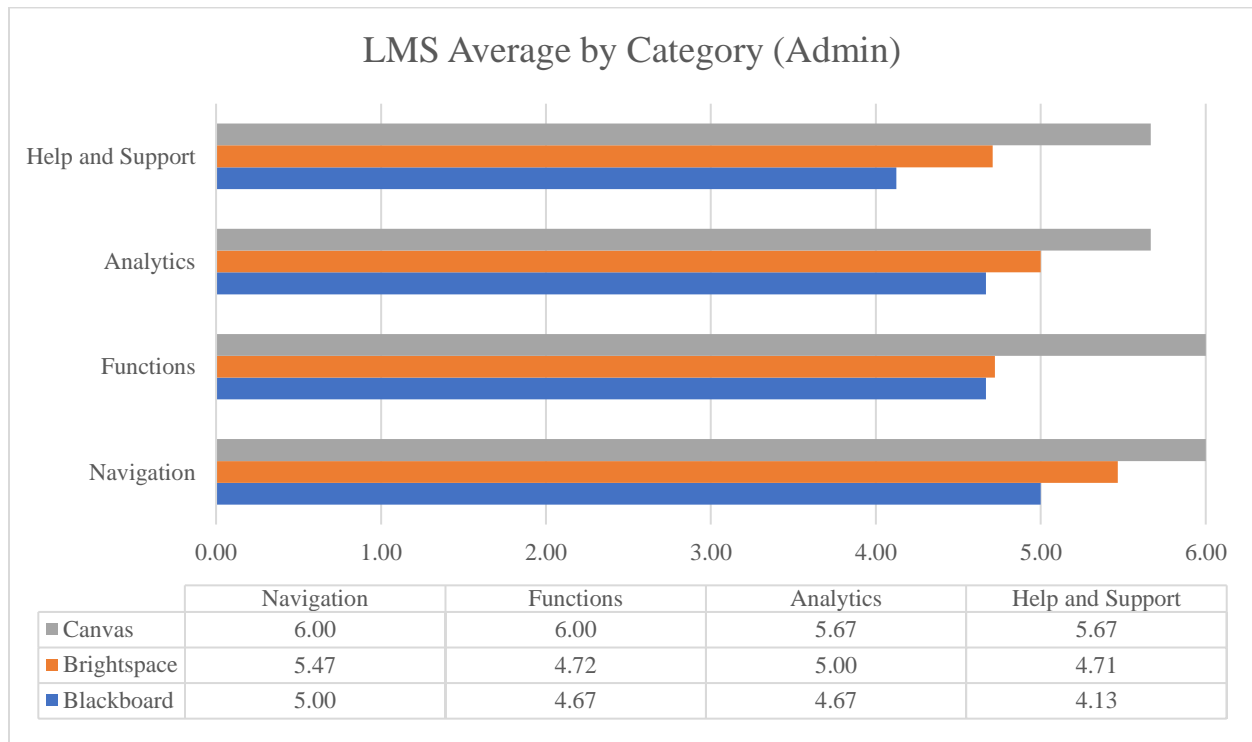
Quantitative Responses

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Qualitative Responses

Administrators provided 18 comments regarding the different categories presented. Below are the responses of Administrators in each category as well as overall comments.

Overall Comments – Blackboard

- There are real concerns about faculty losing flexibility in Ultra and even more so the conversion process from Original to Ultra. Courses seem to have more trouble coming from within the system than going to other LMS platforms under consideration. It really does not feel like the platform has a true integration with the previous product.

Overall Comments – Brightspace

- Overall, this is a powerful platform. The biggest issue is the learning curve to get it all implemented and the lack of clear structure for the administrative components. They are just thrown in there without a clear flow. It would be nice to have a dedicated Admin panel.

Overall Comments – Canvas

- Canvas is a very strong contender for an LMS from an administrative standpoint. Having used it at other institutions, there is a lot of flexibility and a well-developed support community.

Help & Support – Blackboard

- There are no links to Ultra help articles or videos within the course from Blackboard or in Base Navigation; Requested a help desk ticket through Behind the Blackboard at 11:10am, received a response at 12:02pm, received their resolution at 3:49 pm

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- The online documentation is good, but with both Ultra and Original running requires curation on our side. Additionally, there is no real tier one support included. Even at the admin level, Behind the Blackboard is not always responsive. That being said, the team dedicated to the sandboxes has been engaged and supportive.

Help & Support – Brightspace

- Submitted a help desk ticket a 1:22pm, received the automated email in 5 min, received resolution @ 5:15pm
- The support provided was not as easy to find or intuitive as I would have liked. Once located, the resources were good. It is hard to assess live support since we had a dedicated team who were awesome.

Help & Support - Canvas

- The canvas help guides are excellent for Admin, Instructors & Students; help topics were displayed in a side menu for every task attempted, Submitted a help desk ticket at 11:02am, received automated response at 11:22 am, received resolution by 1:16pm
- The amount of help available in the Canvas Guides is impressive. Not only do these include easy to follow written instructions, but also video tutorials that are short and easily digestible. The support questions are a little unique in this scenario since we were working with a dedicated team. Assessing Tier I support would require an active environment.

Analytics – Blackboard

- unable to create custom reports must request special access to the Anthology Illuminate system
- There are a lot of very useful reports and faculty who enable statistics tracking within their courses can see students progress. The harder thing is at the institutional level and allowing for a global view of the student. I do not see connected retention specific tools.

Analytics – Brightspace

- Instructions were hard to find or unclear for creating custom reports
- The reports available are very good, but not easy to locate. The Administrative dashboard is kind of just thrown in with everything else. That being said, the reports themselves are good enough keep this fairly high but there would be a learning curve.

Analytics – Canvas

- Very informative and easy to use from Admin and Instructor user levels
- There are a wide variety of reports and analytics available to faculty and administrators to help track student progress (on the admin and course dashboards).

Functions – Blackboard

- I exported a course from Original and imported to Ultra which resulted in 131 exceptions; 28 were related to assignments & tests, i.e., unsupported test options and questions were removed; audio, essay & listening journals produced errors,
- A lot of this functionality did not change from Original to Ultra. Creating top-level templates still is not as easy as it feels it should be. There is an extra step beyond

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designing the shell to have it pushed out to tall newly created courses. Merging sections is the same process as before and would benefit from allowing instructors to do this manually from within a course. Importing and exporting courses could be improved. Allowing instructors to import from directly within the receiving shell would be welcome. Also, converting from Original to Ultra caused a lot of exception errors and shoved everything into the "Content" area. LTI integrations were fine, but could be made easier to install.

Functions – Brightspace

- Not easy find instructions or they were unclear for example course merge: Help SIS Course Merge Not Found
- Overall, this is a functional system. The struggle is primarily with the top-level templates that seem to have to be done at the super administrative level with a batch file. Some kind of template that could be pushed out directly through the admin panel would be great. Also, when importing from Blackboard Learn, the structure coming from modules gets really jumbled with a lot of manual entry and cleanup required. Once courses were in the system or created in the system directly, they would be fine.

Functions – Canvas

- The exported and imported course from Blackboard was seamless
- Adding users to courses was very easy and intuitive, as were assigning roles. Importing courses was very easy when it came to coming from Blackboard. There was some expected cleanup but the process was straightforward and almost everything transferred over. LIT integration of Simple Syllabus was very easy.

Navigation – Blackboard

- Navigation was cumbersome; and the LMS would not allow customization of the menus to add, move or remove items; Ultra mobile was not compatible with my older phone, and it could not be installed
- Finding courses was not overly difficult, but the need to "favorite" them and still having them all show up on the same page can get distracting and confusing. That is a common issue now that all new courses populate at the end. Base navigation is familiar, however, the new course navigation is not as intuitive and lacks some options. The admin panel is the same. The mobile interface is very good and you can tell Ultra was developed mobile first.

Navigation – Brightspace

- I liked the drag and drop features within the course content and the ability to customize the menu; could not find how to delete a course; course copy & merge instructions were not very intuitive
- Overall, the user experience is very nice. It can get a little cluttered in the menus and widgets, but a lot of that would depend on design choices. There is a lot of flexibility for faculty.

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Navigation – Canvas

- Everything was so easy, and there were help topic side bars that display all along the way of testing, i.e., course copy was so easy
- Navigating Classes on the desktop and mobile are very easy. The menus are straightforward and intuitive. There would be a learning curve for new users but the left navigation style makes it feel familiar.

Recommendations

It is recommended that beginning in fall 2024 Valpo pilot the Canvas LMS alongside the last year of our contract with Blackboard with full implementation of the new LMS in fall 2025. There are a number of exciting features that come with this transition that will enhance the student experience and be easier to maintain from an administrative perspective.