OAK Faculty Advisory Committee
Minutes of Tuesday, September 16, 2014

1. Update on OAK performance issues – now known colloquially as "the OAK crisis." On Monday evening, Nursing had to stop a test for 211 students—63 couldn't get on at all. Nursing sent a mass e-mail to all nursing students and faculty; today Nursing cancelled another large test.

- Our first message to users: "Be noisy, give feedback." We need help from the end users in getting reports that help us to diagnose what is actually happening. We know that the variety of platforms and user environments impacts the response time, and it helps to know what that experience looks like "on the ground."
- The Blackboard representative arrived and started working on-site on Wednesday (9/10/14)
  - Timeline of progress:
    - Wednesday 9/10: They worked on a patch.
    - Friday night 9/12: Deployed the patch.
    - Weekend 9/13-9/14: Kept an eye on things.
    - After Monday 9/15: OAK is worse, definitely not better. We had significant disruption to service Monday evening around 8p.m. which interrupted an examination in the School of Nursing.

Questions from committee:

a) Are the issues load-based? ANSWER: We don't believe that the issue relates to load, but on the weekend, performance was fine, but when Monday came, there were significant issues.
- Relatively consistent noise level—we can see that for <u>most</u> users, we are getting response times that still aren't ideal, but are they are not bad enough to stop work from happening. (VUIT displayed a chart of response times.)
- Monday (9/14) looked just as bad as a week or so ago.
- Students are having the same frustrating experience, and we show the same scattered distribution, with some students able to move about and do their work, but outliers being completely unable to function within the OAK /Blackboard environment.
- Volume isn't the problem—though volume is exacerbating the number of users experiencing an issue.
- What's challenging is that the server shows no stress. CPU is stabilized—if there was a load-issue from users, it would be different than it is now.
- Blackboard is using "appdynamics" which is like microscope, watching what the app is doing and where it's spinning. We still can't pin-point where the issue is, but can see that it is spending time on certain operations.
- However, the patch didn't work— we are going to start again.

b) Who is working to fix this? ANSWER: VUIT is broadly mobilized, including the Director of Network and Director of Security. Short version: ALL VUIT leaders we can find are in the room trying to fix this problem.
- Blackboard resource is on-site through the end of the day tomorrow and we expect to keep him as long as we need to.

c) Is this a server issue? ANSWER We know this is not a server issue, but we know it is impacted by the number of people trying to get in and do things.

2. Discussion of potential radical solutions:
- VU PETSA- going to pull our compliance module out of OAK if the next patch doesn't work.
- Considering moving a school (likely Nursing) to a hosted solution. Note that we are all planning on moving to manage hosting in January, but we don't have our metrics yet.
    1. We don't have the technological response time.
    2. We have tech people investigating this, and expect a response from Fran tomorrow.
    3. General Counsel is aware that this may become urgent, and is prepared to help.
- Questions/ comments from committee:
  1. Do we take people out of Blackboard who aren't doing pedagogy? Pedagogy is our mission. ANSWER: It's possible, but we don't yet know what would be impacted. Certainly PETSA is on the table. Further research is underway.
  2. Since we don't know what the problem is, we are concerned with radical changes that may or not fix things because we don't know what's broken.
      - We are not eliminating servers completely, but we don't know yet. We've been at this hard for 2 weeks; teams have been working lots of hours, but we still can't isolate what the issue is; however, we have started to eliminate things that CAN'T be the issue. We did not change hosting—we don't know if that it is the issue.
      - As we were looking at manage hosting and talking to other schools who are heavy users for Blackboard, they have been satisfied with Blackboard and its response times. But we also believe it is a leap of faith to move to manage hosting because we don't know if that's the issue.
    3. Do we change Nursing to manage hosting? If that solves manage hosting issue, then go ahead and move everyone into that.
      - Biggest risk= we move everything to manage hosting and then it doesn't work. Also, we don't know how quickly Blackboard can move to manage hosting because they originally said they need 45-90 days.
      - We will ask Blackboard—can we get Nursing moved ASAP?
    4. When speaking with other universities, are we behind them with Blackboard?
      - Yes, we are one release behind. We have not updated to the newest release because it is drastically different from the one we have now. We were going to move to manage hosting in January, get the word out, then go to the latest version of Blackboard during the June timeframe we have traditionally upgraded. Blackboard does not believe that this is an issue of what version we are on – the current instance at Vanderbilt is still fully supported.
      - Other institutions aren't having issues—its not in *The Chronicle* yet.
    5. Testing environment with the patch— Can we take one subset as "guinea pigs" to try to compare it internally?
      - Since the data is already set up within Blackboard, when you add a lot of joins, it can slow down the system if you move that same data set up.
      - Database server is working fine—its returning things, even under load.
      - We spent the first week and a half of the issue eliminating hardware issues.
      - We've tried to make our environments as "plain vanilla" as the Blackboard model as possible.
      - In short, though we might do this for diagnostic purposes, it is unlikely to provide a fix for the problems that ail us now.

3. The Future of Blackboard at Vanderbilt:
- Blackboard understands that their future at VU is unclear. We want them to know that their performance is unacceptable. We need to check if the contract has been breached.
- Questions from committee:
1. If Blackboard is working well with other universities, then are we sure is it a Blackboard issue? ANSWER: We believe the issue stems in part from the hodge-podge of upgrades; responsibility for the program has migrated and involves MIS, the Library, ITS, VUIT… There's no one source of information for what we've done to customize it over time.
2. Can we have something that is a more fresh, off-the-shelf version of Blackboard for Nursing?
    - Should be able to get it up quickly if we chose that.
    - What is the rationale for not doing this?
        o Fear that things will be worse
        o The logistics of a transfer
        o Whether Blackboard can accommodate this request
        o Challenge: Limited knowledge of Blackboard server because it has been passed around VU. If we wanted to create a new Blackboard for Nursing, Blackboard would need to come on-site and build Blackboard for VU.
3. It seems from this conversation that there needs to be an OAK- Blackboard team. Have they been hired? Yes and no.
    - Library person who worked with OAK historically took another position last spring.
    - In fact, this OAK Faculty Advisory Committee is part of that process; our idea was to get 4-5 different committees to re-think the support structure and processes for handling our Learning Management System here at Vanderbilt. This committee is supposed to help with that discussion around configuration of support as needed by faculty – but we've been sidetracked by these more urgent issues.
    - Parallel to this faculty group is the OAK interim team within VUIT, many of whom were former "Tier 1" support who are providing support to users who need it. They were formed in April as an interim assignment, but they are is still active. They monitor the OAK@vanderbilt.edu email address, and trouble-shoot the log-in issues, website problems, and the like.
    - Then Jason's team within VUIT is working on the crisis situation directly, serving as the link for all the other areas of VUIT who are involved in figuring out the problem -- and you've heard his reports.
    - Also at work is the forward-looking OAK steering committee, and many of them have been also drawn into the crisis work around Blackboard as Fall semester has unfolded.
    - To be clear, we haven't settled on our permanent configuration for OAK support – but that will need to be different than the current crisis-based response. There's a plan to hire faculty-facing staff who will work with the faculty (and students) about what our Learning Management System can do – but to do that, we need to be in a more stable environment! Some elements of that new configuration are likely to be:
        - EMOS (Enrollment Management): Intersects with student records team and is responsible for other "backbone" administrative systems (like registration, student records, and so on)
        - Some ongoing technical perspective within VUIT – even if we move to managed hosting.

- Ownership of app lives within the Provost arena, but likely to shift to the Center for Teaching—Derek would have the communication.
  - Conversation that would stay housed in "academic need" for faculty.
  - VUIT would have a smaller footprint, but they would have the articulation with people who have the best technological information.
  - The faculty-facing part of that needs to be larger than it is now.
  - VUIT spoke about a support model with a lot of schools and asked what their support models look like.

4. Moving Forward with OAK:
- The Provost is briefed daily.
- We are most concerned about Nursing. Of course, this issue is broader than nursing: the entire university has tests going on, but Nursing relies on OAK/Blackboard because of its distance students.
- Question: How long ago was it that Owen and Nursing were decommissioned and re-merged? 18 months -- but going back to those instances is no longer an option.
- We will make a decision about which radical decision should be tried—Thursday we will be having conversations about which mode of crisis mode will be tried.
- Would there be a non-Blackboard testing product that we can spin out faster?
  - We reached out about Kaltura. If we pulled all content out of Blackboard and put it into Kaltura, would this work? ANSWER: No, Kaltura handles streaming media, but doesn't have all of the features of an LMS.
  - What about Moodle in the School of Medicine? Place to throw things? ANSWER: It would take time because people need to weigh in on it. We would likely do this in a way that's similar to the PETSA solution – with the goal of taking load off of the system.
- We intend to work in parallel on several possible solutions.

5. Update on the Kaltura contract:
- There is a hold-up in the Kaltura contract relating to if the university can warrantee that we own all media in Blackboard.
- If we end up being in breach of copyright, we must make sure that Kaltura is not liable.
- The change was made in the contract and call was made to Kaltura today—we are hoping they will accept and we can move forward.

6. Implementation of Update on messaging strategy: "Performance box" and "Tips box"
- Performance box: It is at the top of OAK and the "Help box" is below that.
- Performance box is where we will update people about what is going on.
- Now that the patch didn't work, we will update OAK Performance box on a daily basis.
- Faculty and student feedback is very important.
- Suggestion from committee:
  - Apology e-mail should go out.
  - Change OAK message—should update the message every day—put a DATE on it and write "your feedback is helping us solve this." Appreciating people's patience and encouraging them to report issues is very important.