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## Next Step for Blackboard and Open Source

Although Blackboard remains the course management system of choice for colleges, a small but flourishing community of developers still attracts growing interest in open-source alternatives among some institutions and individual departments.

While open source advocates tend to view Blackboard's for-profit, license-based model with disdain, the company has responded with a public commitment to embrace free sharing of code when possible. Its first effort to that end, earlier this year, was a partnership with Syracuse University to develop a free software plug-in that would bridge the divide between the Blackboard interface and data from Sakai, one of the main open-source course management packages.

Today, at the annual conference of Educause, the higher education information technology group, Blackboard is announcing a similar project to integrate with Moodle, the other primary open source alternative. Although it was previously known that Moodle would be next, the announcement revealed that Iowa State University would develop the plug-in with support from Blackboard.

The company hopes that once students and faculty members can import their data from either platform, they will be able to access all of their course information from one portal.

"Many institutions have standardized on Blackboard as their main course management system provider because they want a scalable system, with an advanced feature set, an open API set, and commercial vendor support and professional services," Michael L. Chasen, Blackboard's president and CEO, said in an e-mail.

"However, there may be an individual professor or small department that is using a home-grown or open-source solution on the campus as well. Blackboard opened up the course API so that those institutions that have standardized on Blackboard could give their users a single URL and a single login where they could access all of their courses — both Blackboard and courses on other systems. That is what this release is about — giving faculty and students a new level of freedom and control. We think these kinds of efforts will only enhance our position in the long term."

Some open-source advocates are worried that Blackboard's focus on integration would further push users to centralize course management functions and marginalize Moodle and Sakai. Others are cautiously optimistic, noting that Blackboard data could presumably be exported to open-source platforms and that embracing alternatives could expand possibilities.

Like the Sakai plug-in — one of what Blackboard calls “Building Blocks” that third-party developers can create to extend functionality — the Moodle Connector, when finished, will be available as an open-source tool for the company’s next release, which will combine functionality from its acquisition of WebCT and is billed as a major upgrade. The project attracted interest at Iowa State, a Blackboard customer with some individual departments and professors who have adopted Moodle for their classes.

“It’d be nice for the students to have one place to log in,” said Randy Dalhoff, assistant director of academic technologies at the university.

He said that he doesn’t see a clear trend toward or away from open source in course management software, but that the choice depends on factors at specific institutions. “It’s almost like the culture of the university dictates where we’re going.”

**— Andy Guess**