Blackboard 5
Customization

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OVERVIEW

Blackboard 5™ is a comprehensive and flexible e-Learning software platform that delivers a customizable course management system, institution-wide portals, online communities, and an advanced architecture that allows for Web-based integration with multiple administrative systems. Building on the success of Blackboard’s award-winning course management system, Blackboard 5 meets the growing needs of academic institutions and organizations by providing a seamless migration path from online courses, to courses and communities, to entire online campuses centered around the core activities of teaching and learning.

The high levels of customization available with Blackboard 5 offer institutions and users the flexibility they need to meet all of their business objectives. From providing an easy-to-use and easy-to-access interface, to attracting new students, brand management, and meeting security requirements, Blackboard 5’s customization tools help you create, modify, and define the user’s experience with your online teaching and learning environment.*

DEFINING AND PRIORITIZING BUSINESS GOALS

Before developing a customization strategy, an institution must clearly define and prioritize the business goals it plans to reach by adopting Blackboard 5. Representatives from each user and administrator population should participate in the goal-defining process to ensure that all needs are addressed. Prioritization is extremely important, as resource availability may conflict with one or more defined goals, and decisions should be made according to previously-defined priorities.

For most institutions, business goals can be divided into two categories: Pedagogical Goals and Marketing Goals.

Pedagogical Goals may include:

- Providing an easy-to-use interface so students and instructors get the most out of their online educational experience;
- Developing an online community with institution-specific resources for staff, students, and other constituencies; and
- Offering access to subject- and discipline-specific external resources.

Marketing Goals might include:

- Attracting new students;
- Promoting the institution’s brand and mission to a wider audience; and
- Meeting security requirements.

*Some customization options are not available with Levels One and Two of Blackboard 5.
This list represents only a sampling of the possible goals an institution may establish. Blackboard 5’s flexibility allows for refining and retooling of a variety of modules should your institution’s goals change in the future.

MEETING PEDAGOGICAL GOALS

USER INTERFACE DESIGN
The User Interface (UI) design is especially critical for meeting pedagogical goals. If the interface is difficult to use, and doesn’t offer users the tools they need to teach and learn effectively online, then an institution’s investment in online education will be wasted. Blackboard 5 offers a high level of customization within the UI design, so your institution can preserve its unique look and feel. Figure 1 depicts the various areas of the Blackboard environment, and shows the major paths between the different areas. It also contains a deeper explanation of the UI design process.

With so many customization options available, it may be difficult to make the initial decisions necessary to begin the UI design process. To jump-start the process, you should determine the areas in which the user experience can be customized from the point at which the user logs in to the point at which they log out. For example:

- How does a user access Blackboard?
- What are the different login options?
- What can a user customize for him/herself?
- What features should be available from each user’s My Institution page?
- What features should be customized within the teaching and learning environment?
- What features should the online communities have, and for which group of users?
- How can you promote your brand to the various user constituencies?
- How much access should you offer to your institution’s distinct Web-enabled services, and for which users?

These questions should be asked for each group of users, since the answers will be different depending on the needs and goals of each group. One possible way to aggregate and analyze this information would be to develop a matrix of users and their needs.
CUSTOMIZABLE HOME PAGES

Each Blackboard user at your institution has a customizable home page called the My Institution page. The My Institution page features institutional branding and direct access to personal, course-specific, and institutional tools. All of this functionality is provided in one place, and depending on the level of institutional control over the Master Module list, the My Institution page may also offer a high level of user customization. Users may be able to add information modules like sports team schedules, institution-related news, weather forecasts, wire service reports, and stock tickers. Institutions may also offer custom modules.

One of Blackboard 5’s strengths is the user’s ability to customize the My Institution page in a way that combines the best of your institution’s existing Internet/Intranet/ extranet resources with the best of Blackboard. For example, your institution may already have an online course catalog; however, you may prefer the interface provided by Blackboard. If you want to keep the look and feel of your already-existing catalog, you have that option as well.
CUSTOMIZE THE TEACHING AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Blackboard 5 administrators at your institution can define the user’s experience in a number of ways. One of the easiest is to develop custom templates for courses or organizations. Creating custom templates offers an opportunity for your institution to “brand” its course offerings, as well as providing a consistent look and feel for all courses offered - within a department or institution-wide. Administrators can enable or disable certain buttons, tools, and functionality across all courses and organizations, or just certain courses.

Using administrative options, an institution can also differentiate between guest users and enrolled users. Privileges for guest users may be limited in scope, with the goal of encouraging them to register and participate fully in your institution’s online community. Deciding how to customize the user experience across your institution involves examining the business processes of your institution and how Blackboard 5 integrates with those processes for each user.

Many instructors want control over the functionality of their course Web sites, and with Blackboard 5, offering this control is dependent only upon the privileges established for them during the business-process examination. Within a single course Web site, instructors may be able to:

* Create groups within the course enrollment (i.e. workgroups)
* Set up discussion forums and control student participation
* Set up online office hours
* Modify the tools and buttons (i.e. file sharing, email options) available to students

Most institutions offer these controls to their instructors, as few institutions can assign dedicated personnel to undertake these modifications for every instructor in their community.
Table 1 shows examples of course roles and privilege settings available with Blackboard 5.

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role Description</th>
<th>Instructor</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Guest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>View Course Information</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowed to email students taking course</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowed to email instructor</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowed to modify role of enrolled student</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowed to disable/enable specific course tools</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowed to enroll a student in the course</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CUSTOMIZE THE COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT**

In addition to the teaching and learning environment, Blackboard 5 provides the means to develop an entire online community and access a variety of campus services through the Blackboard portal. Previous versions of Blackboard limited this access to Organizations; however, Blackboard 5 extends its reach to encompass nearly all of an institution’s own online resources, and even those beyond the institution itself.

**ORGANIZATIONS**

Just as instructors may want a high degree of control over the appearance and functionality of their course Web sites, Organization Coordinators may want to customize their Organizations’ sites as well. Blackboard-enabled institutions can customize the roles and access for Organizations in much the same way as they do for courses.

**INSTITUTIONAL SERVICES**

Blackboard 5’s ability to integrate seamlessly with your institution’s administrative systems means that users can access multiple institutional resources through one portal. Current students can pay bills, check availability of research materials at campus libraries, and investigate new sources of financial aid, among other services. Alumni can check the status of a pledge in the development office or access the on-campus career center.
USER PROFILES
Each Blackboard 5 user creates a User Profile upon registration. Within each user profile is stored personal information like on- and off-campus contact info, birthdays, major areas of study, etc. Within the User Profile each user has multiple privacy options to control the amount of personal information seen by other users within the system. Users can also create basic Home Pages that include more information; these Home Pages may also be privacy-protected.

Blackboard 5 allows User Profiles to be edited either by users themselves or only by administrators. Your institution will want to examine its own needs and rules regarding access to personal information to determine how best to manage User Profile access.

ACCESS TO EXTERNAL RESOURCES
One of the biggest benefits of online education is that it provides the means to access resources outside the physical plant of an institution. However, institutions have a responsibility to ensure that the resources to which they provide access are worthwhile. Blackboard 5 offers institutions an enormous degree of customization in this area.

All Blackboard users have access to Blackboard Resource Center. Blackboard Resource Center is a center for Blackboard users that provides discipline- or course-specific material that is relevant, timely, and academically sound. Examples of materials users can access from Blackboard Resource Center include:

- Current news from local, national, and international newspapers, magazines and journals organized according to academic discipline.
- A research center containing thousands of articles organized into discipline-specific topics, along with a user-friendly browsing system and keyword search.
- Featured links to relevant and high-quality external Web sites, researched and summarized by our editorial staff.
- Instructor and student communities (chat and message boards), organized according to academic categories.
Instructors can customize Blackboard Resource Center by including or excluding information from specific sources when students access Blackboard Resource Center from their course Web sites. For instance, an instructor teaching an undergraduate cell biology course can edit resources displayed to students to include only undergraduate-level resources related specifically to cell biology (as opposed to all branches of biology).

Users can also access Blackboard Resources from their My Institution pages.

MEETING MARKETING GOALS

Education is a highly competitive business; in recent years, more and more institutions have undertaken significant efforts to market themselves to prospective students. Blackboard 5 provides several ways that you can integrate your institution’s online education into your overall marketing strategy.

ATTRACTION NEW STUDENTS AND MARKET COURSES TO THEM
One mechanism for attracting new students is to incorporate Blackboard 5 into your existing Web course catalog. Prospective students browsing through the course catalog can click on a course title and “preview” the course. The amount of course material available for preview is completely customizable. For example, you may make the syllabus and sample course materials available, but not allow preview users to participate in discussion fora or quizzes.

Another means for marketing your institution and course offerings is to allow visitors to establish Blackboard accounts at your institution and participate in the community life features offered through Blackboard, but not register for courses. Based on the activities in which they participate and the courses they preview, it is possible to market specific courses or degree programs to them in the future.

Finally, your institution may choose to offer a few key courses through Blackboard.com, the free course-hosting site. Courses on Blackboard.com may be seen and accessed by millions of Blackboard.com users, expanding your reach to an even larger potential user base.

PROMOTE YOUR INSTITUTION’S BRAND AND MISSION
One way to promote your institution to a larger audience is to provide a seamless look, feel, and transition between your institution’s Web properties and Blackboard 5. When a user registers for a Blackboard 5 course at your institution, every aspect of their online teaching and learning experience will reflect your institution’s brand.
elements. The higher the level of coordination between the look and feel of both environments, the more likely the user is to view the Blackboard teaching and learning environment as an integral part of their educational experience with your institution.

Interface design coordination is especially important in cases where users from multiple institutions will have access to the same Blackboard 5 environment (i.e. a consortium of colleges or an entire state university system). With care, the Blackboard 5 environment can be customized to coordinate with elements of each institutions Intra/Internet design.

The primary area for promoting your brand and mission is the “My Institution” page. Similarly, individual course Web sites can be customized to include your logo and brand into banners, headers and footers, and backgrounds. Pages for organizations and services can also be customized to include elements of your institution’s brand and mission.

**PROVIDE EASY ACCESS TO BLACKBOARD AT YOUR INSTITUTION**

Easy access is a critical aspect of your institution’s marketing strategy. If users and guests can’t find Blackboard, or must use many steps to access courses or services, many will simply choose not to use it. Providing a seamless or single login from your Internet/Intranet to Blackboard is one way to avoid this problem – when users login to your existing online properties, they are also logged in to Blackboard at your institution. Providing multiple login paths is another way to ensure that users can get from your Web site or Intranet directly to Blackboard course Web sites. Easy access to Blackboard 5 may be as simple as providing a login dialog on your institution’s home page or online course catalog.

**MEET YOUR SECURITY REQUIREMENTS**

The security of your online content and networks should always be of paramount importance, especially if you plan to allow outside access to your institution’s online education environment. Login, logout, and timeout options within Blackboard 5 are designed to customize with your institution’s need to offer easy access to the online environment without compromising security.

**LOGIN**

Your institution may elect to use the default authentication (login) scheme offered with Blackboard 5, or work with Blackboard’s Technical Consulting Services team to design a custom authentication solution.
Using the default authentication scheme is easy and meets the needs of most institutions. There are advantages and disadvantages to using the default authentication scheme—advantages include the opportunity for users to change their password without going through a central password management system. The disadvantage is that without central password management, a user can accumulate multiple username and password pairs, which may ultimately cause security problems for the institution. Blackboard 5’s default authentication scheme can be customized to integrate with an institution’s existing password-management system. Blackboard’s Technical Consulting Services team will work with your institution’s network and account security teams to determine the appropriate login solution for your institution.

LOGOUT
Managing the user logout process is also important. An institution must decide where to direct users upon logout. Users can be redirected to any other online resource upon logout, and may also be offered the option to log back in cases of accidental logout. Determining logout options is another way to meet some of your marketing goals by redirecting users to a particular area of your site that you wish to promote—this redirect can be changed as the institution desires.

SESSION TIMEOUT
Blackboard 5 times out after 15 minutes of inactivity. Users who try to access their accounts after 15 minutes of inactivity must log back into the system. Session timeouts are particularly useful in situations where computers are shared (i.e. a library) and users may walk away without shutting down terminals or closing the browser they used to access Blackboard. Timeouts can be customized according to the institution’s need to balance ease-of-use with security issues.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION
Blackboard has developed a variety of custom solutions to ease your institution’s transition from a multiple-interface, multiple-login environment to a seamless, integrated online community. Designing a coherent, appealing user experience is possible with Blackboard 5, and requires nothing more than an institution’s willingness to analyze both its own needs and those of its user base. Blackboard 5 offers your institution the opportunity to streamline its online presence, and meet important business goals at the same time. From pedagogical imperatives to marketing objectives to security concerns, Blackboard 5 is the customizable solution to all of your online education needs.
For more information regarding Blackboard’s products and services, please contact us at 1.800.424.9299 or visit www.blackboard.com