Choosing the Right LMS for Your Institution

Seven Key Factors to Consider

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As the core instructional platform for a college or university, a learning management system is fundamental to supporting high-quality teaching and learning—and therefore it's critical that higher-education leaders choose the right solution.

We talked with officials from several colleges and universities who recently evaluated learning management systems for use at their institutions. The lessons they learned can help others who are going through a similar process.

Here are seven important factors to consider.

❶ CHOOSE AN EXPERIENCED COMPANY WITH A PROVEN TRACK RECORD

Rolling out an LMS requires a significant investment in time and resources. To protect this investment, colleges and universities should make sure they choose a stable and experienced provider that can support their needs for the long term.

Here are some key questions to ask:

- How long has the company been in business? How established is it in the LMS space? Does the provider have customers you can speak with who have been using its product for at least three years, so you can get real, substantive feedback about their experience?

- How financially stable is the provider? Is the company profitable? Does it have a solid business model and a track record of supporting a broad customer base?

❷ MAKE SURE THE UNDERLYING TECHNOLOGY IS STABLE, SECURE, AND MOBILE READY

The technology that powers the LMS also is critical, and campus leaders should make sure it meets their institution's requirements.

For example, students and faculty are increasingly mobile, said LaMetrius Daniels, director of online learning at Trevecca Nazarene University—and they require a system that is "mobile ready."

Here are some issues to think about:

- Does the provider's solution take advantage of modern capabilities? Is it built on a stable platform, and does it incorporate the latest technologies to support the privacy and security of information?

- Can the LMS be deployed in a variety of ways, including through the cloud—giving institutions the flexibility to choose a deployment model that best meets their needs?

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- Does the technology scale easily? Is it flexible enough to support a rapidly growing user base, and to meet your needs well into the future?

- Does the system support mobile users who are logging in from a smart phone or tablet? Does it feature a responsive design that provides the same experience for users, regardless of their device?

❸ CONSIDER THE SYSTEM'S FEATURES AND CAPABILITIES

The concept of an LMS has expanded well beyond traditional capabilities, such as hosting content and delivering grades and assignments. The LMS of today is also a tool for enhancing collaboration, driving engagement, and supporting student success.

When evaluating feature sets, here are some additional capabilities to consider:

- *Collaboration:* Students want to be able to participate in class discussions and activities from wherever they are, without having to gather at the same physical location. Does the solution offer secure, browser-based conferencing for virtual office hours, tutoring, or study groups? Does it include whiteboard applications for sharing and annotating content on the fly? Does it promote class participation through easy-to-use chats and discussion boards?

- *Flipped learning:* A growing number of institutions are discovering the benefits of recording lectures for students to watch outside of class and review as many times as they need. Does the solution include easy-to-use tools for recording class sessions and sharing this content in a mobile-friendly format?

- *Learning analytics:* Student success is enhanced when faculty, staff, and students themselves have access to reliable, actionable data about their performance. But pulling this information together and making sense of it all can be a challenge. Does the solution use powerful learning analytics that present the data in an easy-to-understand format? Can it help you identify at-risk student populations for early intervention based on a variety of factors, both predefined and customizable? Can you set up the system to send out automated alerts when certain trigger behaviors occur?

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4 CHOOSE AN LMS THAT IS EASY TO USE

Colleges and universities won't see widespread adoption unless the system is easy to use. To move the needle on adoption, an LMS must appeal not only to an institution's heaviest users but also to those who are new to the technology.

"For us, simple is better," said Peter Pruefer, director of academic technology and online learning for the College of St. Scholastica. "We have a lot of people every term who are using an LMS for the first time; we're heavily populated with adjunct faculty as we expand sections and add new programs."

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Campus leaders should not take it for granted that students will know how to use the system, either. "Many of our students are returning professionals," Pruefer said, "so we have a lot of people who haven't been in school for a long time. They don't want to spend a lot of time thinking about the LMS— (and) it shouldn't get in the way of what they need to do."

In looking for a system that is easy to use, here are some questions to guide you:

• How easily can faculty accomplish the tasks they will be looking to do? Is it intuitive to create and post assignments, share feedback with students, launch discussions, or set up virtual office hours? How much training will these tasks require?

• Does the LMS put the user at the center of the experience, rather than presenting information in a rigid, course-based structure? Does it provide actionable information that is contextual for each user?

Think of the design of popular social media services such as Facebook. When you log in, you see a stream of the most recent news, information, and alerts that are relevant to you, and you can click on individual items within this stream for more information. An LMS should operate the same way.

"We want users to be able to log in and see right away: Here are the six things I need to do now," Pruefer said. Students don't want to have to click on a course link to know there is an assignment due, he said; they want to see that information at the top of their stream.

5 LOOK BEYOND THE SURFACE WHEN COMPARING COSTS

Campus leaders should consider not only the up-front cost of an LMS, but also the cost over time. Here are some key pricing questions to consider:

• Is the provider willing to guarantee a maximum cost increase from year to year? Some providers quote only a first-year price, which could force institutions to absorb a major price increase or consider a new solution after only a few years.

• Are there any hidden costs you should be aware of? These might include training, integration, or other services necessary to roll out the system.

⑥ MAKE SURE THE SYSTEM INTEGRATES WITH YOUR OTHER SOFTWARE

The LMS you choose must be able to integrate with your student information system, enterprise resource planning system, instructional software, and other third-party software you might use.

To ensure seamless integration with these systems, consider:

- Does the LMS support the Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI) Framework and other industry standards published and maintained by the IMS Global Learning Consortium, such as Common Cartridge and the Caliper Analytics Framework?

- Does integration extend to all features, and not just the core functionality? For example, do the system's web conferencing capabilities work with third-party conferencing software you are using, such as Microsoft Lync?

- Has the provider built an extensive network of partners who have developed compatible software programs, add-ons, and extensions for the LMS? What resources does the provider make available to software developers to help with integration? Can you to extend the capability of the LMS with third-party tools, content, or even your own homegrown solutions?

⑦ CHOOSE A PROVIDER THAT OFFERS ROBUST SERVICES AND SUPPORT

The level of support you receive is integral to the success of your LMS initiative—and it should be a key factor in your decision. In evaluating services and support, consider:

- Does the provider include support for both end users and system administrators as part of its solution? How is this support offered—through phone, text-based chat, or other means? Is staff training available as well? How much training and support are included in the cost of the system, and which services cost extra?

- When you buy an LMS, you're not just getting the technology; you're getting the entire knowledge base of its users. Does the provider offer online communities of practice to support new users? How easily can you connect with other users to share ideas and best practices?

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Four Steps to Choosing an LMS

Evaluating a learning management system can be challenging, but here are four steps to help you make the right choice for your institution.

1. Identify your goals

What are you looking to accomplish with an LMS? The answer to this question will drive your search for the right solution.

When LaMetrius Daniels became the director of online learning at Trevecca Nazarene University in 2013, the university was looking for a more robust LMS that better met students' 21st-century needs.

"Our goals were to engage students more fully, to build a high-performing culture, and to improve the way we deliver instruction," she said. Those goals became the guiding force behind the university's evaluation process.

For instance, to help drive student engagement, Daniels and her staff looked for an LMS with features that would enable users to continue academic conversations outside the classroom, such as discussion boards and collaboration tools. They also wanted a solution that would allow students, professors, and academic advisors to receive automated alerts when students were struggling or exhibited other warning signs.

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2. Determine the features that are most important to you

The learning management systems you are evaluating might contain dozens of features, but choosing a system that is right for your institution will be easier if you can hone in on the key features that are essential to you.

Knowing what you hope to accomplish with an LMS will help you create your list of must-have features. For Trevecca Nazarene University, this included robust collaboration tools and early warning systems; for the College of St. Scholastica, it was the basics—an easy-to-use workflow for submitting and grading assignments, communicating with students, and knowing what assignments were due and what actions to take.

"Figure out what options you really need, and then evaluate systems based on these," recommended Peter Pruefer, director of academic technology and online learning for the College of St. Scholastica. "There might be 500 different features, but you'll probably only use 20 of them."

3. Include a wide range of stakeholder perspectives

To evaluate learning management systems, Trevecca Nazarene formed a task force consisting of faculty, students, deans, program directors, and members of its Information Technology Services department.

"You need a variety of people from across your campus to help with the evaluation," Daniels said. "We chose our heaviest LMS users, but also some who were not heavy users, because we wanted to see how difficult it would be for them to adapt to the new system."

Including a variety of people not only provides a wide range of user perspectives; it also helps you get buy-in from your stakeholders. "Once you get buy-in, you can adopt the system a lot quicker," said Daniels, "and that happens when you have more than just one person or a small group of people making the decision."

Before Trevecca Nazarene began its evaluation, officials sent out an email message to faculty, asking them to describe the limitations of the university's current LMS and what they hoped the new system would accomplish. "We included those items in the checklist we put together for our evaluation process," Daniels said.

The ultimate goal of any college or university is the success of its students—and yet student opinions are often overlooked when evaluating an LMS.

St. Scholastica surveyed its students and learned something very important: "80% said they were satisfied with our LMS as a tool for learning," Pruefer noted. "What they really wanted was for our instructors to start using it differently." Based on these survey results, St. Scholastica recommitted to training faculty and increasing their LMS adoption.

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4. Test various solutions

The only way to know how well a system works is to try it out. "I think a pilot [test] is crucial," said Pruefer.

St. Scholastica ran a six-month pilot test with another system, involving about 50 courses and more than 300 students. "It did not cost us that much to run a pilot," Pruefer said. "We picked a few representative classes and built the courses for faculty in the LMS that we were evaluating." Ultimately, the college decided to use Blackboard as its LMS.

Trevecca Nazarene narrowed its choice to Blackboard and Canvas and invited representatives from those companies to the university for a Digital Learning Day. During the event, faculty throughout the university had a chance to test each system.

In addition, task force members were given a "sandbox," or a blank shell of each system, to try out during the three-month evaluation process. Both of these experiences were critical in making the right decision, Daniels said.

At the end of the evaluation period, Trevecca Nazarene polled faculty and "Blackboard was the overwhelming choice," she said.

FINAL THOUGHTS

LMS technology has evolved rapidly in the last few years. No longer just a repository for storing, managing, and delivering course materials, today's modern LMS is a fully featured platform designed to increase student engagement and retention.

Campus leaders should choose an LMS that is designed with the needs of learners in mind, and one that connects each step in the learning experience from start to finish.

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