



California
Community
Colleges

California Virtual Campus –
Online Education Initiative

Common Learning Management System Case Study

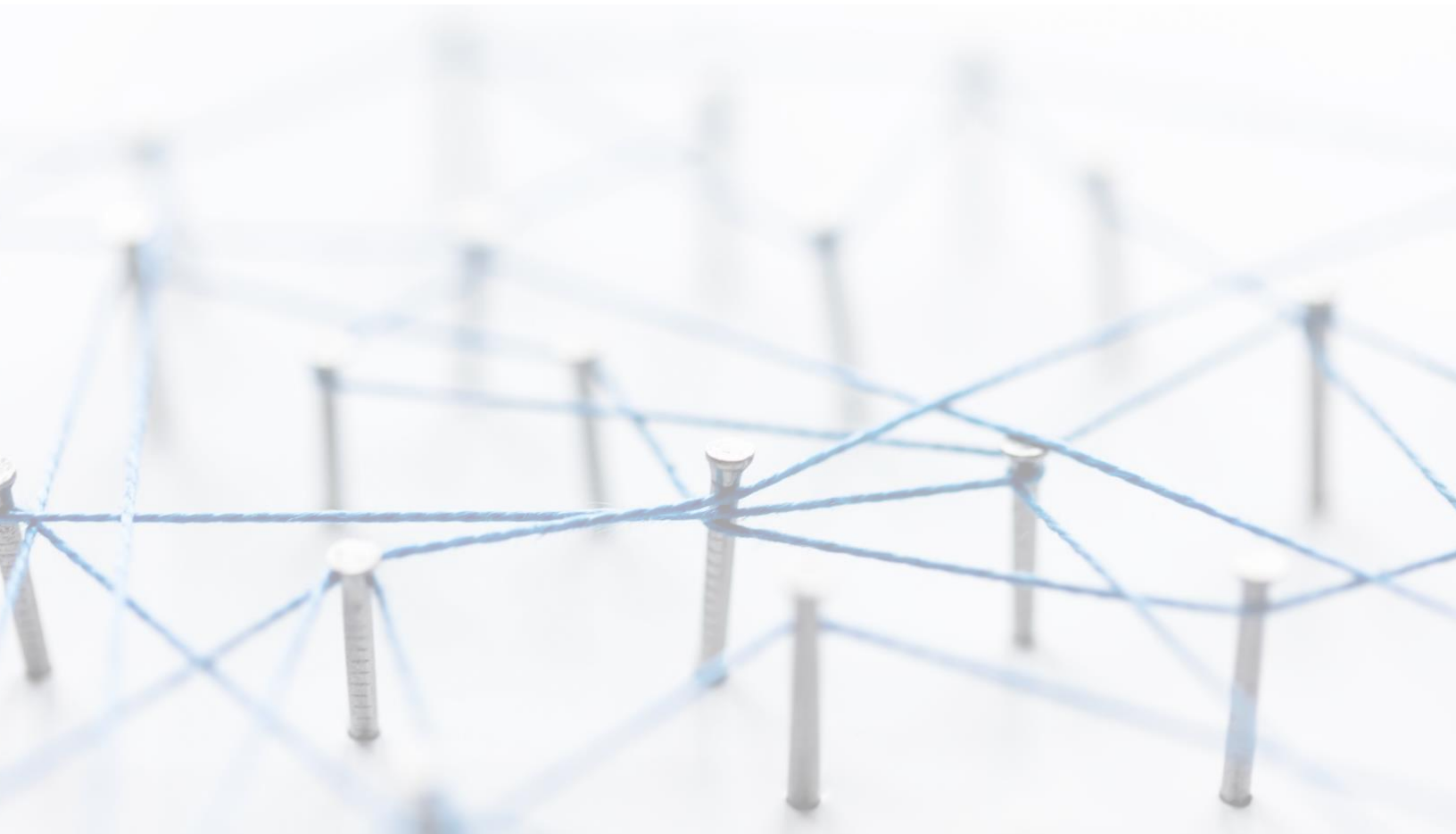


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Introduction: Background and Purpose

Launched in 2014, the California Virtual Campus - Online Education Initiative (CVC-OEI)¹ is a collaborative effort to enable community college students across the state to reach their educational goals by increasing access to high quality online courses and providing support systems to foster success in those courses. One early component of the CVC-OEI was the implementation of a common learning management system (LMS) that would be centrally supported and employed to offer courses and services that would ultimately be available system-wide.

The CVC-OEI Common LMS initiative² led to what is arguably the largest Canvas client worldwide, with all 114 schools within the California Community Colleges (CCC) System as of 2015 *choosing* to adopt this platform, and it represents the largest systemwide LMS initiative in the country³. Today, there are an increasing number of systemwide initiatives focused on collaborative academic technology, both in California and throughout the country.

Setting the Stage: Origins of CVC-OEI

By 2013, the CCC Chancellor's Office publicly identified the need to improve completion rates and achievement gaps for college students both at the course and program levels. Spurred by state funding driven by the economic downturn three years earlier, this viewpoint coalesced into [the system's Vision for Success goals](#). CVC-OEI was created to improve student success and to reduce time for student completions in the online space.

Since the time of the original California Virtual Campus two decades earlier, there was an acknowledged need for the system colleges to collaborate more effectively in online education. For this collaboration to really work, the individual campuses would need to be on the same LMS so that they could share course designs, plugin applications, professional development opportunities, lessons learned, data, and methods to improve course quality and instructor-student support. With the CVC-OEI initiative there was an opportunity to make progress on this concept of a shared systemwide LMS. There had been some ad hoc collaboration between colleges using the same LMS previous to this initiative, but nothing structured, fully supported, and systemwide.

¹ The initiative was known as OEI, and in 2019 the CVC brand was added. This report will use the CVC-OEI name throughout to improve readability.

² Within CCC the initiative was named the Common Course Management System (CCMS) which is not what vendors and the higher education community call this type of platform. This report will use the LMS nomenclature throughout to improve readability.

³ After the 2015 LMS adoption decision, CCC has added a nontraditional school - Calbright College – that does not use the Canvas Common LMS.

The Foothill-De Anza (FHDA) Community College district, working with the CCC Tech Center at Butte College, was awarded the CVC-OEI contract and began work in early 2014. One of the first initiatives was focused on selecting a potential Common LMS, and within a year Instructure, with its Canvas LMS, was awarded the contract for this new system.

Purpose of Case Study

This report will document the history of the CVC-OEI Common LMS initiative – who made the decision, how the decision was made, and why all districts within the system chose to migrate in a coalition-of-the-willing scenario that was far more successful than anyone expected. The purpose of this documentation is to inform other system wide initiatives, both in California and beyond, as to what lessons have been learned from the CVC-OEI Common LMS selection process.

Vendor Selection: Process and People

Initial Goals of CVC-OEI

From its inception, the CVC-OEI initiative has been focused on online collaboration - colleges working together, increasing online opportunities, increasing best practices, and increasing access for students to take the courses needed to complete a degree or certificate. It was understood that a common LMS would alleviate some of the cognitive load for students having to navigate multiple platforms, especially as they “swirled” between campuses. While the Common LMS provides the virtual space where the online courses are experienced by students and faculty, it is a means to an end. The platform provides capabilities to help achieve the collaborative goals and improve student access through online education. As stated by Pat James, the first Executive Director for CVC-OEI, in [a September 2014 blog post](#):

Almost two years back, I remember a discussion of the Telecommunications and Technology Advisory Committee (TTAC) about what was to become the OEI. We had a retreat in the East Bay Area and the talk centered around ideas to increase and improve our distance education offerings across the state. During that task force meeting, it became clear that a systemwide common course management system would be needed for the seamless deployment of resources for students, faculty and colleges. If we didn't have to spread our resources and professional development across six-plus separate course management systems, we could really maximize our efforts to improve access and success. Right now, that [Common LMS] is deep in the planning stages. It's more than just a dream!

*With the notion of a [Common LMS], there's been a focus on an “exchange” idea that will allow students to take online classes seamlessly from any college in the system that chooses to use it. We have been in planning efforts toward exchanging students so they can get the courses they need to complete their degrees and/or transfer. But we are now also considering the word “exchange” from a broader perspective. In the last few days, we've been talking about making the work of the OEI exchange a **REAL** exchange.*

The Common LMS was not the only component of this initiative, however. CVC-OEI created a shared ecosystem built around the LMS, including online tutoring and advising platforms, quality course design rubrics, and support services for a course exchange. The Common LMS acts as the hub of this ecosystem.

This positioning of the Common LMS as a means to an end should not be overlooked; nor should the positioning within the overall ecosystem. That shared view of the Common LMS in its place and not as a goal unto itself presents one of the key success factors explaining how the adoption of the system exceeded expectations.

In early 2014 the CVC-OEI executive team began working with various campuses and systemwide organizations to discuss and plan for the Common LMS and to ensure that there was a shared vision of the ultimate goals and rationale for the initiative. Through these initial discussions, the CVC-OEI launch team worked to set the tone that they wanted to hear what the colleges needed, and to work with college faculty, students and staff, but not necessarily to tell colleges and faculty groups what to do.

Who Made the Decision

Part of the way the CVC-OEI team sent this message was by working with various committees to develop a Request for Proposal (RFP) for the Common LMS. Various systemwide groups were asked to create requirements based on their perceived needs that would end up in the RFP document, and group meetings were used to discuss and revise these requirements.

The CCC Distance Education Coordinators group is made up of at least one representative from each college, comprised mostly of faculty members. A retreat for that group held in June 2014 was pivotal in helping CVC-OEI to develop requirements for a Common LMS. Additionally, faculty and student surveys provided useful information as to what they were hoping to get out of the chosen platform. Faculty also participated in an online discussion with a team of higher education distance education leaders which yielded meaningful insight. The RFP was then built from the input received from each of these events and was released in October of 2014.

The proposals were evaluated by a Selection Committee consisting of 55 members. The CCMS Workgroup (a subset of the CVC-OEI Steering Committee), members from the CVC-OEI Management Team, and members from the initial eight pilot colleges made up the CCMS Committee, which was actively involved and in charge of steering the decision-making process.

Student representatives were also involved in the decision-making process and provided valuable insight to the Selection Committee. The same five students recruited from the pilot colleges sat through all vendor demonstrations and final evaluation meetings.

During the on-site evaluation of the finalists, Phil Hill from MindWires acted as facilitator of the process to allow the Tech Center staff and CVC-OEI executive team to fully participate as evaluators.

How CVC-OEI Made the Decision

After the extensive discussions that helped gain buy-in, the Common LMS vendor selection process was fairly standard within higher education in its phases. The selection committee developed a scoring rubric based on the RFP requirements to guide the assessment of proposals, with six vendors responding. Using this structure, CVC-OEI selected the best three vendor proposals to move to an on-site evaluation held in February 2015.

The three finalists were Instructure with its Canvas LMS, Blackboard with its Learn LMS, and Remote Learner providing hosting and support services for the open-source Moodle LMS.

The RFP document itself was not viewed as a critical success factor in the initiative, as it ended up containing many detailed requirements that did not help differentiate vendors (a common challenge with RFPs in higher education). The *process* of creating the RFP, however, was widely recognized as a success factor. From the beginning of the initiative, faculty and staff working throughout the system began to view the RFP-based vendor selection as a group decision-making process where they were invested in the success of that selection. Further, the RFP and resultant vendor proposals were useful in selecting the finalist vendors. At that point, however, the RFP lost much of its usefulness.

Between the proposal evaluation and the on-site meetings, the Selection Committee conducted a series of reference checks on the three finalist vendors, using both references provided in the proposals and references based on the committee's own network. The internal reference checks included going to different colleges within CCC that were using the three LMSs under evaluation and meeting with faculty, staff, and students for interviews.

The on-site vendor evaluation meetings were held in Sacramento over three days, with one day per vendor. One of the biggest challenges was determining how the Selection Committee could work together, given its size and variety of perspectives. The on-site evaluation process was simplified so that committee members could focus on the important aspects of choosing an LMS - not just to understand some requirements, but to focus on strategically important factors such as which vendor would be an effective partner with CVC-OEI? Which company was most willing to listen and grow together with the colleges? What strategic differentiators exist between the vendors?

The meetings were structured to both allow vendors to present their company and LMS product on their own terms and to require vendors to follow a demonstration script that ensured the Selection Committee would see the functionality needed to support vendor selection. The agenda for each vendor's presentation and demonstration followed this script:

- 1. 20 minutes - Company overview and product overview, including a description of what makes your offering match the needs of Online Education Initiative*
- 2. ~1.5 hours – Product demo following general flow described below, to demonstrate the items listed below as well as additional relevant functionality; allow basic Q&A on the specific demonstration*
- 3. 30 minutes – Product roadmap and any appropriate glimpses into future functionality, user experience, and ability to support CVC-OEI's future goals*
- 4. 30 – 45 minutes – General Q&A period allowing general questions*

The meeting facilitator's role included keeping the meeting roughly on schedule, ensuring that committee members could ask questions, and providing his own follow-up questions to ensure the vendors directly answered the committee's questions.

The three vendors were also required to send technical representatives to meet with a subset of the Selection Committee to go over technical requirements, system architecture, platform integration, and system administration capabilities.

After the morning sessions with each vendor, the Selection Committee met in the afternoon to evaluate the new information. The committee used a streamlined scoring system to focus on each vendor's strengths, weaknesses, and open questions. The scoring sessions included individual evaluations and follow-up group discussions.

A crucial part of the process was having the Selection Committee hear feedback from the student representatives each day. This helped ensure that the process stayed grounded on issues faced by students and how they interpreted the experience of using each LMS.

At the end of the week, the Selection Committee met to make an overall evaluation and vendor selection. After initial discussion on the evaluations of each vendor, the group debated relative strengths and weaknesses. At that point the committee submitted anonymous rankings of the vendors followed by a group discussion and final vote. The goal was to first determine if there was a clear choice early on, while also allowing group debate and final voting.

The anonymous vote was nearly unanimous, with all but one committee member recommending Canvas. The one dissenting vote was for Blackboard Learn, but that member indicated during the final group voting that he understood the rationale for the overall group's decision and would support moving forward.

Why CVC-OEI Made the Decision to Adopt Canvas

The on-site vendor evaluations presented a pivotal moment for the initiative, particularly with a nearly unanimous decision coming from such a large committee and extensive set of stakeholders participating in the overall process. While the selection committee maintained a detailed vendor rubric throughout the proposal evaluation and on-site demonstrations, the decision to adopt Canvas as the Common LMS was strategic in nature and not complicated. In essence, there were four primary reasons that guided the committee decision.

The first reason was based on the **vendor's ability to handle the scale** of the California Community College System and its more than 2 million students. Canvas was the only system designed as a cloud-based platform, running on top of Amazon Web Services (AWS). That system was designed for scale and had a history of handling the ramp-up for clients at the beginning of a term and during finals week, the two most difficult periods for LMS support.

Blackboard had announced Learn Ultra, its next-generation user experience, along with Learn SaaS. Blackboard proposed using a combination of Learn Original and Learn Ultra due to the development schedule for the new cloud-based system. The committee, however, was looking for one clear platform for common usage to enable collaboration across the system and to avoid risks to deployment schedules for systems not fully developed. This viewpoint proved to be accurate, as Learn Ultra was not truly in production until 2019. Moodle, as hosted by Remote Learner, was not designed for cloud-based hosting and had no clients of CCC scale.

The second reason was based on the **need for a modern and intuitive user experience** with the Common LMS. There were two community colleges within the system that were already using Canvas, and one of these schools was used as an internal case study based on a site visit and verbal report to the committee. Team members from that school described that during the system migration to Canvas, the college had allocated significant staff support for both course migration and training of faculty to learn how to use the system. Once that college did the migration, almost no faculty expressed a need to use those resources. The faculty could figure the system out on their own based on its intuitive design. The college was able to reallocate the staff resources for pedagogical training - how to improve course designs using the platform and how to support students more effectively. This internal reference call was a major factor in the selection committee evaluation, and it aligned with student input on their view of the Canvas platform. The students on the selection committee reinforced this view of Canvas having a superior user experience.

The third reason was that the selection committee was looking for a company that was **willing to partner with CVC-OEI** in its growth and development. Instructure demonstrated through its presentation and responses to questions that the company could handle the scale of CCC and understood the strategic importance of this initiative, to both CCC and to Instructure. CVC-OEI proved to be the largest Canvas client in its history, and Instructure seemed to understand the importance of the CVC-OEI contract for the company. Culturally there appeared to be a strong fit between CVC-OEI and Instructure, as there was clear two-way communication throughout the sales process and beyond.

There were other factors involved, including each company's approach to an open ecosystem with standards-based integrations, but the three strategic differentiators were scale, intuitive design, and willingness to be a good partner.

Implementation: The Surprising Full Adoption of CCMS

From the program inception, the Common LMS was designed as an opt-in system with incentives. The idea was to give schools a reason to adopt and hope to get a reasonable percentage to use this common learning platform, but no one expected all campuses in the system to get on board.

As discussed earlier, the Common LMS was not intended to be an end in itself, but rather an enabler of collaboration to improve online education. The initial plans within CVC-OEI centered on a series of pilot programs based on 6 - 18 campuses working together on a set of objectives. These pilots ranged from offering shared online teacher training programs, to academic integrity programs, all the way to a “full pilot” implementing a course exchange where students from multiple campuses could take courses offered by another system college. The agreement was that any college participating within the pilots would have to use the Common LMS (while having free access to all ecosystem components), at least within the scope of the pilot. As the pilots expanded over time, there would be incentive for more and more usage of the Common LMS.

State Funding and Expectations

An important incentive established by CVC-OEI was that the pilot usage of the Common LMS would be funded by the state budget, thus providing a financial incentive for individual colleges and districts to adopt the new LMS. Based on the initial CVC-OEI budget, the funding of the Common LMS could be handled at the state level for roughly 18 months with the expectation that some amount of LMS funding would be covered in the future. In return, the expectation was that each college adopting the Common LMS would use the funds normally dedicated to covering the cost of an LMS towards professional development and course development support of online learning. In other words, benefit from state funding but invest in online education support.

Given this setup of pilots and initial state funding, the most aggressive expectations were that within the five-year funding for the CVC-OEI, just over half of the CCC campuses would adopt the new system - roughly 70 colleges.

2015 – 16: Pilots and Roadshows

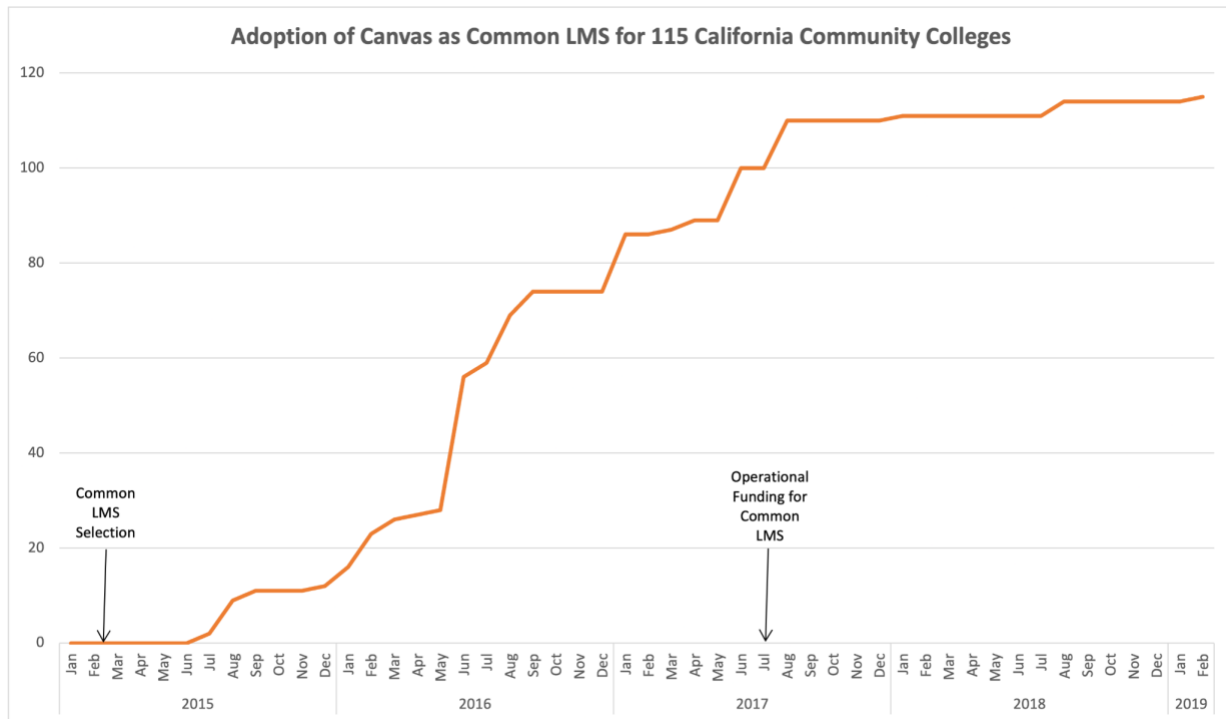
The full launch pilot of eight schools led to three immediately choosing campus-wide adoptions of the Common LMS (and not just for the course exchange), while another seven colleges beyond the pilot made this same decision. At this point in late 2015, word started to get out about the smooth LMS adoption and course migration process. The perceived risk of moving to the new LMS and collaborating with other colleges changed from a significant barrier to a manageable part of a migration process, and one that could benefit from many peer campuses moving the same direction with infrastructure to enable collaboration.

The CVC-OEI leadership team made an aggressive effort to meet with system colleges and address questions head on. There was a roadshow with meetings at more than 80 colleges in 2015 – 16. On these visits, the CVC-OEI team would meet with distance education coordinators, various faculty and student groups, and IT staff to answer questions and take input to further refine the initiative plans.

This momentum continued, both in the expansion of CVC-OEI pilot programs and colleges beyond the pilots both choosing campus wide migrations. Just over one year after the selection of Canvas as the Common LMS, more than half of California Community Colleges had already migrated or had made the formal decision to migrate.

In parallel with the CVC-OEI pilots, Instructure as a company was working with colleges that were considering the move and offering guidance and support. These meetings included not just sales staff but also executives in charge of higher education strategy. Like the CVC-OEI leadership team, Instructure staff met with faculty groups and discussed how to use the LMS to improve student success and faculty experience. Many of the system colleges conducted informal evaluations between the currently-used LMS and Canvas without being required to run formal RFP processes.

There were also a series of district level meetings across the state, where the vision for the Common LMS and its open architecture enabling integration through common standards with a range of learning applications was shared. The roadshows from CVC-OEI and Instructure, campus LMS evaluations, and district level strategic meetings all reinforced one another towards gaining broad buy-in from CCC campuses.



2017 and Beyond: Shift to Operational Funding

Once the Common LMS had already met initial expectations with more than half of all colleges adopting, it became clear that there was an opportunity for the state to lock in these wins and encourage long-term collaboration. The CVC-OEI management began lobbying the Chancellor's Office and state legislature to move funding for the Common LMS into an ongoing operational line item and away from short-term project funding. By Summer 2017, the state budget first included this ongoing operational line item.

By this point, the general perception of migrating to the Common LMS had moved from one of risk management to one of 'fear of missing out', along with a desire at the college level to be part of something larger. Faculty were increasingly hearing stories of their colleagues' satisfaction with the new system after easier-than-expected conversion processes. This perception was augmented by student feedback on satisfaction with the new system. Beyond the LMS usage itself, faculty perceived significant professional development opportunities with support communities built around this experience.

By Fall 2018, all 114 California Community Colleges had migrated to the Common LMS or made formal decisions for a full migration.

- October 2014: Common LMS RFP released
- February 2015: Canvas selected as Common LMS
- April 2016: More than half of campuses formally adopting Common LMS
- Summer 2017: State funding for Common LMS becomes operational
- Fall 2018: All campuses formally adopting Common LMS

Lessons Learned: Reflecting on Past Successes and Challenges

CVC-OEI remains a work-in-progress aiming at long-term changes in the system. Our goal with this report is not to declare victory and a completion of our efforts but rather to share our experiences and lessons learned to date. From a broad perspective, CVC-OEI has seen its best successes in shifting the focus in online education towards quality course design, professional development, and faculty and student support. Pedagogical improvements proved to be more important than technology improvements. At the same time, the initiative continues to work to expand the course exchange throughout the state.

The following are some of the key lessons learned by looking back at the Common LMS adoption across the nation's largest higher education system.

View as Opportunity to Focus on Effective Pedagogy

An interesting piece of advice CVC-OEI received from another consortium member was to take advantage of the opportunity to redesign most or all courses. As several Consortium members put it, it was time to “clean out” some of the outdated online teaching methods and use the migration to a common LMS as an opportunity to build engaging, student-centered courses.

In the end, the real opportunity when implementing a Common LMS paradoxically is to remove the focus from the LMS itself and to enable greater focus on improvements in teaching practices – better course design, better support for faculty and students, and more engaging use of technology to engage students and improve learning.

CVC-OEI has been an important part in the increased success of online courses within the California Community College system, as evidenced in [statewide data](#) leading into the pandemic. The Common LMS initiative has been at the center of this strategy.

Bridge Gap Between IT and EdTech Teams

One lesson has been the importance of bridging the gap between the information technology (IT) teams and the education technology teams at institutions and system. When kept in the loop, IT leaders can become allies and advocates with vendors, legislators, and stakeholders. These IT leaders often have responsibility for contracting and managing complementary systems and the more they know about learning platforms, the better positioned they are to choose systems that work well together.

Don't Let Technology Drive the Bus

CVC-OEI benefited most of all, however, by understanding that the real issue involves how systems and support structures are used in the service of teaching and learning. From the beginning, CVC-OEI worked directly with academic stakeholders in the evaluation and selection process for the Common LMS. A significant amount of the benefit in this approach is the development of a shared vision and an increase in trust with educators. It was crucial for CVC-OEI's success to have faculty members directly involved in the decision-making process.

End users of systems – students, faculty, distance education coordinators – need to have trust in the goals of a Common LMS initiative and a belief that the decision will address their teaching and learning needs directly. This group buy-in was the most important success factor to aim for in similar initiatives. Of course, choosing the best technology platform is crucial, but it should not be the primary concern.

Establish Consortium-Wide Committees

On the governance front, like many other statewide initiatives that predated CVC-OEI's Common LMS, we have seen the importance of setting up consortium-wide advisory groups to keep everyone informed, to solicit input, and to increase organizational buy-in. Rather than establishing committees based on functional areas, CVC-OEI created blended groups that forced people out of their comfort zones. This approach to consortium-wide committees ensured that stakeholders worked with and listened to groups that they might not normally encounter in their day-to-day work, and it enabled broad representation from the community.

This approach, however, would not have worked without the clear and transparent sharing of consortium goals and decision-making processes that listened to multiple perspectives but maintained forward progress.

Ensure Institutions Benefit from Lower Costs

CVC-OEI was fortunate to work within a state and a system that believes in funding its activities, and certainly the shifting of LMS costs to the system level has provided lower costs to its colleges and played an important role in the full adoption of the Common LMS. Not all states will be willing to provide this level and type of funding, but it is crucial that at the institution level there is a clear financial benefit for participating in a systemwide Common LMS initiative.

Based on internal budget studies by CVC-OEI staff, it is estimated that the system overall has saved more than \$10 million to date through the usage of a Common LMS. At the campus level, schools have been able to reinvest the money previously allocated for LMS services into program development and professional development and support for faculty.

Pick the Right Partner for the Long Term

It is obvious that a crucial aspect in selecting a Common LMS for any system is picking the right vendor partner. What CVC-OEI focused on in this vendor selection process was to emphasize the long-term nature of the partnership. While it was important that the chosen LMS had the right features and system architecture from day one, it was also important that both the product roadmap and corporate direction aligned with the needs of the system.

Build Critical Infrastructure to Increase System Resilience

Throughout the COVID closure, the colleges were able to leverage the Common LMS across campuses as they shared critical “boot camp” type training and actual course content. The Common LMS was the core of the online infrastructure that directly supported 115 campuses in Spring 2020 as they migrated to remote instruction within a matter of weeks. The Common LMS selection and adoption, along with the associated support structures and ecosystem of tools, paved the way for colleges to migrate online and avoid shutting down operations or having gaps in educational offerings. While no one had foreseen the disruptions coming with COVID-19, the Common LMS initiative paid off by increasing system and college resilience.

Conclusion

For CVC-OEI, the decision to select a Common LMS and the ability to gain system wide adoption has proven to be crucial in helping the initiative meet its objectives. Colleges are working together on pedagogical support, student outcomes are improving across the system for online course completion and online program expansion, and the state and its colleges have saved millions of dollars.

The lessons learned in this initiative go beyond LMS selection and adoption, however. Virtually any EdTech common system usage across a system should aim to gain buy-in at the collegiate level and crucially among faculty groups. With the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become increasingly obvious that colleges and universities need essential infrastructure in online platforms to survive and thrive.

We hope that sharing this description of the CVC-OEI Common LMS history and lessons learned can inform other initiatives.