

## **Chapter II**

# **Coordinating a Distance Learning Software Rollout with the Needs and Visions of a Mature Test Organization: Political and Technical Lessons Learned**

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### **Abstract**

*As online education programs expand across the country, many universities are adopting course management software (CMS) such as Blackboard or WebCT. Although these out-of-the-box solutions may simplify the administration of online classes, they do not comprehensively meet the needs of mature testing organizations. This chapter describes the process that has led Weber State University to reconsider whether an out-of-the-box implementation of WebCT actually is a sensible strategy.*

*It looks at both the political and technical issues involved in choosing a test technology, examining how institutions can best balance and meet the needs of both distance-learning organizations and testing centers.*

## **Introduction**

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University administrators who are contemplating or presently engaged in rolling out learning management systems (LMSs) face ponderous technological and political logistics. Weber State University is currently one year into its LMS rollout and plans on having the LMS implementation completed by the spring of 2005. In most respects, this rollout has been successful and has moved forward relatively smoothly. However, in respect to online assessments, the LMS initiative continues to experience problems. These problems have resulted from incomplete knowledge about assessment needs on the part of the organizations initiating the rollout, a lack of dialogue between the distance learning organizations and test organizations, and inchoate approaches for achieving consensus on test related issues.

This chapter elaborates on these problems, broaches the main questions that should have been tackled by the initiative in order to forward a smoother rollout, and lists some strategies that may be worth implementing in order to build consensus on assessment issues as the rollout moves into its concluding stages. In doing so, it seeks to offer a model for how other institutions may coordinate distance learning software with the needs of a mature test organization.

## **Background**

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At Weber State University, over 110,000 departmental tests are delivered each semester through a home grown, Web-enabled assessment tool. This tool has evolved over the years in close coordination with the expanding needs of Weber's testing centers and faculty. The technologies and organizational structures that deliver departmental testing at Weber State have grown in such close concert that they appear at times almost inextricably attached. The needs of the testing centers are served by the software, and the policies and practices that give expression to a testing center's identity are in turn defined by what the software can and cannot do.

Although this organic relationship has been in place for over five years, it has recently been challenged by Weber State's burgeoning, and very profitable, distance learning organization, which has purchased and begun implementing Vista-WebCT's most advanced distance learning software. The Vista product has a built-in assessment tool, and the distance learning organization has signaled that its ultimate goal has been to replace the home grown solution with the Vista product in the interest of promoting efficiency, system integration, and standardization. The WebCT product promises to realize many of these goals because:

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