

New Brunswick Faculty Council Resolution on Keeping and Supporting Sakai April 2017

Background

Rumors began circulating late in the fall 2016 semester that the Rutgers administration was considering adopting Canvas as the sole learning management system (LMS) supported by the University. This rumor gained some credibility when an e-mail was sent to all faculty members urging them to attend one of a series of workshops on Canvas. Soon a number of IT staff members began to tell faculty members off the record that they had been told that the decision had already been made to adopt Canvas and eliminate support for Sakai and Blackboard. One IT staff member is reported to have advised a faculty member not to set up a new Sakai site because “Sakai will be gone by the fall.” These rumors caused an outcry of alarm from faculty members, particularly New Brunswick users of Sakai. Perhaps as a response - at least in part - to this outcry, Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs Barbara Lee appointed a predominantly faculty *ad-hoc* committee, chaired by Prof. Doug Blair, and charged it with recommending the best LMS for Rutgers. The charge seems subsequently to have been modified to include recommending if it is practical to reduce the numbers of LMSs used in the University to only one. The *ad-hoc* committee, henceforth called the Blair committee, continues to meet and its recommendations are not expected until the fall. One of the purposes of the present NBFC brief report and resolution is to provide input to the Blair committee.

Members of the New Brunswick Faculty Council (NBFC) and the faculty members they represent are strongly opposed to the elimination of Sakai as a fully supported Rutgers University platform for a number of compelling reasons.

1. Sakai, unlike Canvas and Blackboard, is more than a learning management system: it is used for a wide variety of important research and administrative purposes beyond its use as an LMS. In response to a request to New Brunswick faculty for information about the uses of Sakai, the NBFC Chair, Tom Stephens, received several hundred e-mails detailing how faculty members, departments, and schools use Sakai for other than course management. A few of these non-LMS uses can be summarized as follows.
 - Many faculty members use Sakai project sites in collaborative research projects with other faculty at Rutgers and other institutions, including preparation of joint grant proposals.
 - A number of academic departments and schools use Sakai to prepare grant proposals, departmental reports, and promotion packets.
 - A number of Graduate Programs use Sakai to administer Masters and doctoral qualifying examinations and to analyze and archive the results.
 - The Writing Program in New Brunswick uses Sakai as the principal medium of communication and discussion among the many instructors participating in the course.
 - A large number of departmental, school, and New Brunswick-wide committees have active Sakai sites for sharing of information and ideas.
2. A substantial majority of all Rutgers faculty are at Rutgers - New Brunswick and many of them are heavily invested in Sakai. Asking all those faculty members to switch their course sites to Canvas and finding them other suitable venues for their Sakai project sites would entail an enormous commitment of time and resources that could better be spent in improving academic programs.

3. Sakai is open source, an attribute that many faculty members find very appealing both philosophically and practically. Any faculty member with a Rutgers net ID can set up a Sakai site without obtaining permission from anyone or signing a contract with a commercial LMS provider. Faculty members have the academic freedom to decide what to post on their course sites without worrying that a commercial LMS provider will find some material offensive. Faculty using Sakai in traditional on-campus courses also greatly value the speed and ease with which they can set up and modify a course site.

For all the above reasons, the NBFC will recommend most emphatically that Sakai be retained and fully supported.

Members of the NBFC are also disturbed by the process used to consider the adoption of Canvas. Clearly the choice of an LMS is of great importance to the teaching faculty and faculty should surely play a leading role in considering a change in the instructional technology they can use in their classes. In this case, however, faculty were apparently excluded from the initial discussions of changes in the learning management systems. Only when rumors surfaced that the administration was about to adopt Canvas as the sole Rutgers LMS, causing an uproar, was the faculty belatedly given a seat at the table via the appointment of the Blair committee. This is, unfortunately, a repeat of a familiar process of faculty exclusion from initial policy discussions in which they should play a leading role.

Finally, members of the NBFC are also disturbed by the recent decision to have the instructional staff that supports Sakai report to the Director of the Division of Continuing Studies. While we understand the desirability of increasing efficiency in Rutgers' rather scattered IT efforts, we fear that the change in reporting relations will result in the needs of Continuing Studies having disproportionate weight in decisions concerning learning management systems and other instructional technology. Having the needs of Continuing Studies take precedence over the needs of our traditional undergraduate and graduate programs would be a case of the proverbial tail wagging the dog.

Resolution

Be it resolved that the New Brunswick Faculty Council

1. very strongly recommends that Sakai be retained and fully supported as a Rutgers University learning and project management platform, at least in New Brunswick.
2. asks that faculty teaching Rutgers courses be involved from the beginning in discussions of future changes to instructional technology and course support.
3. asks the Rutgers administration to take great care to ensure that the instructional technology needs of the Division of Continuing Studies does not take precedence over the needs of our traditional undergraduate and graduate programs.