

# NYU Upgrades to Blackboard 8.0

## Insights and Feedback About the System

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After several months of diligent work, NYU's primary Learning Management System (LMS), Blackboard, was upgraded to the latest version of the software and went live for the NYU community on December 1, 2008, ready for use in the spring 2009 term. An LMS, such as Blackboard, is typically used to provide online supplementation to in-class coursework and offer such web-based functionalities as electronic distribution of course materials and handouts; enhanced group communication through discussion boards, announcements, and email; student assignment submissions; and online testing, quizzing, assessment, and grading. Here at NYU, Blackboard is currently used by over 75 percent of our faculty and students each semester.

ITS undertook the upgrade of this integral system to provide NYU with an LMS that has the most up-to-date functionality, the best possible performance, and the most current vendor support. As part of the upgrade, numerous improvements were made to the system and several new training and support initiatives were put in place. This project entailed coordinating input from several University divisions including their faculty and students. So far, community reaction to these enhancements has been positive, and faculty, students, and staff seem to be looking forward to exploring the system's new features over the coming semesters.

### System & Functionality Enhancements

Some of the benefits of Blackboard 8.0 include greater cross-browser compatibility, overall stability and performance, as well as many completely new features. These new features include Self & Peer Assessment for assignments, Adaptive Release for content items,

and the Early Warning System and Performance Dashboard to track student progress. Along with new functionality, there are enhancements to existing tools such as a completely redesigned Grade Center, improvements to the Discussion Board (including subscriptions and grading) and email notifications for Announcements. With cross-browser and cross-system compatibility, it is now possible to use a powerful WYSIWYG ("What You See Is What You Get") web page editor when adding content to your course site. This allows faculty members to design a more interactive learning experience in the content areas, complete with active text links, full formatting, and embedded multimedia.

Self & Peer Assessment makes it possible to create assignments and then allow students to evaluate and give feedback on each other's work. It is also possible to better track each student's progress through the online portion of the course material and set up notifications when a particular student is either excelling or falling behind, via the Adaptive Release and Early Warning System features.

With the additional enhancements to the Grade Center, instructors can now email students directly from the Grade Center display, views can be customized to focus on groups of students or groups of assignments, and specific grading schemes, bonus points, and question exemptions for individual grade items can be set. With the Discussion Board enhancements, course members can now elect to receive new forum posts via email, and instructors can grade student participation in a forum. Email notifications for Announcements allow instructors to alert students of new additions to a Blackboard course by emailing students the text of announcements displayed on the front page of the course.

In addition to the direct enhancements that were achieved through the upgrade, a number of improvements were made to the Blackboard access method through NYUHome. First, the course list was split into four tabs for “Current,” “Past,” “Other,” and “Favorite.” A “News & Alerts” section was added, which displays current announcements regarding the Blackboard system and is a place to look for indications of new features, problems, and resolutions that affect the system. A new “Help & Support” section was also added to the NYUHome Blackboard channel. This section allows users to search a comprehensive knowledgebase of Blackboard support information and contact the Blackboard support team to report any specific problems.

Behind the scenes, a number of more technical accomplishments were also made. These include extensive system performance testing and tuning, database reconfiguration, new security measures, and a new Single Sign-On login system that can accommodate access to multiple NYU systems

using just one user name and password credential.

### Training & Support Improvements

As part of the upgrade, ITS also implemented a number of initiatives aimed at improving training and support for those using Blackboard. One of these involved converting over 500 individual web pages with Blackboard support documentation into the Ask ITS searchable knowledgebase. Not only is the knowledgebase more user friendly, with a simple search box and a drop-down list of categories to make finding the appropriate information easier, but the knowledgebase information is more comprehensive, up to date, and easier to maintain. As a dynamic knowledgebase solution, the quality of the information and its ease of use promises only to get better over time particularly as responses to individual questions in turn become new Ask ITS knowledgebase articles that benefit the community at large. Each knowledgebase article becomes a permanent URL link location that

can be bookmarked, organized, and shared in email or on the web — many of which contain screenshots, images, and video tutorials that walk through specific how-to instructions.

Another large initiative of the upgrade was enhancing in-person training. Realizing that the new functionality in Blackboard 8.0 would create increased and diverse training needs, ITS, led by ITS’ Faculty Technology Services, responded with a suite of new in-person training offerings. The standard “Getting Started” session was augmented during the Blackboard upgrade with the introduction of several new session topics from which to choose, repeated twice weekly over a six-month period. Preview sessions gave informational demonstrations of selected new features, while topic-specific hands-on sessions helped participants accomplish specific tasks in their own courses related to either initial set up, content display, communication and collaboration, or student submissions. The Grade Center Walk-in Clinic allowed participants to sit down

## Top 5 Things to Know About Blackboard 8.0:

- **The basics have not changed.** Communicating with your students and uploading content is as easy as ever.
- **Enhanced discussion board.** Notice the new user-friendly interface and try out additional features such as student rating of posts and email subscriptions.
- **Gradebook vs. Grade Center.** The Grade Center has changed significantly and incorporates much added functionality and an improved grading experience.
- **Where is the Digital Dropbox?** The Digital Dropbox is no longer available and has been replaced by the Assignment tool, which is easier to use, better organized, and links submissions directly to the Grade Center for easy viewing and bulk downloading.
- **New Features.** Search the ITS Knowledgebase (at the bottom of the Blackboard Courses Channel in NYU Home or directly at [www.nyu.edu/blackboard/help](http://www.nyu.edu/blackboard/help) for step-by-step instructions and video tutorials. Explore the Self & Peer Assessment Tool, the Performance Dashboard, the Early Warning System, and many other brand new or improved items.

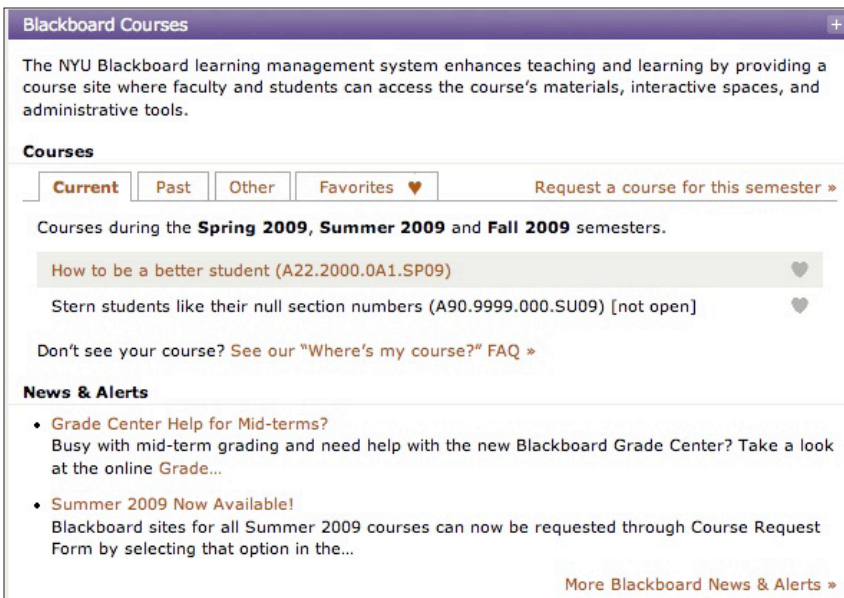
with a Blackboard support expert to troubleshoot issues regarding the newly redesigned Grade Center. This extensive schedule of diverse training options allowed ITS to meet several hundred people face to face and help them take advantage of the new version of Blackboard.

ITS implemented another training and support initiative aimed at better coordinating with the many people from school and department administrations who are engaged in supporting Blackboard at a more local level. Called the Blackboard Liaisons program, this initiative has coordinated with approximately 70 people to date from many University schools and programs and several global sites. The program provides them with focused training and information about the Blackboard 8.0 features, materials to run their own local training initiatives, a forum to discuss issues pertaining to their school or department, and a dedicated support system allowing them more direct and rapid access to support. So far, the program has been a success and promises to grow in coming semesters.

These new initiatives were coupled with several important behind-the-scenes accomplishments to effect more efficient distribution of Blackboard support staff, greater fluidity of information sharing and documentation between various support groups, and more rapid problem analysis to ensure that issues can be identified, reported, and solved as quickly as possible with as little disruption to those using the system.

### Communication & Coordination Process

The Blackboard upgrade would impact virtually all NYU schools and programs. Because of this, coordinating the upgrade was a complex and important task. ITS started communicating its inten-



*The Blackboard 8.0 channel on NYUHome (instructor's view)*

tions to upgrade the system in March 2008 and established a blog to allow the community to track the progress of the work. ITS also started meeting with specific constituencies at the University who had special requirements or whose Blackboard usage was particularly extensive. Through these meetings, ITS was able to draw up a project plan that allowed it to achieve a system upgrade for the overall University, while still accommodating the special needs of some individual schools and programs.

Before releasing a new system version for the entire community, however, ITS wanted to get some direct feedback from faculty and students interacting with the system. In order to do so, ITS conducted a beta test in which 13 faculty members, representing most schools and an abroad site, utilized the new version of the software in their live courses for the fall semester. They received special training and were asked to provide feedback on the new functionality and various support protocols, which helped ITS fine-tune its preparations for the more general release to the community.

One of the more difficult activities to coordinate was the migration of several semesters of prior course content to the new system. Early on, a primary concern for faculty was uninterrupted access to content in their Blackboard course sites. Many sites contain extensive course materials, compiled over many semesters, which would be difficult and time-consuming to re-create from scratch. Another early request from the administration was that, due to the "mission-critical" nature of the Blackboard system, the upgrade should have minimal to no downtime. The most effective way to accommodate both of these needs was to build a brand new system on fresh hardware while the previous system version was still in use and then to slowly migrate or copy the course sites from the old system to the new system behind the scenes. By the end of the upgrade, ITS had migrated over 19,000 Blackboard sites and used a massive communication effort to ensure that the new system was ready for the start of the spring semester. §