

Learning Management System Update

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As part of Seneca's agreement with Blackboard, the provider of our learning management system (LMS), we have access to upgrades at no additional cost. For those of you who have been around for some time, there has been little if any change to the layout and functionality of Blackboard, with the following exceptions:

- A couple of years ago, the Educational Technology Advisory Committee (ETAC) made recommendations to Academic College Council regarding the standardization of the course menu in order to provide a consistent look and feel for students.
- In 2018, Seneca elected to move from hosting Blackboard on-premises and switched to the cloud, which reduced downtime.

In spring of 2018, Blackboard demonstrated their new LMS environment, Blackboard Ultra, to ETAC. Mindful of the implications across the institution, the group provided feedback, including how we might be able to implement the new environment in a flexible manner. Also noted was the added complexity in that Seneca uses Blackboard as its internal portal and it was not feasible to run both environments simultaneously.

Fast forward to March 2020. What has changed? First, Seneca is undertaking a huge intranet project that will replace the existing My.Seneca front page, thus addressing one of the challenges identified in 2018. Second, Blackboard has made significant changes to its Ultra product (we'll call it Ultra 2.0) which addresses our need for flexibility in terms of adoption.

As a first introduction, Blackboard demonstrated the new Ultra to Deans and Chairs on February 4, fielding questions around benefits, transition, flexibility, and tools. We learned that **faculty may continue to use the current Blackboard until they are comfortable with moving to Ultra**. The one change that is mandatory for everyone is a change to the new course menu (Blackboard refers to this as the navigation pane). You can see an example here:

help.blackboard.com/Learn/Administrator/SaaS/User_Interface_Options/Ultra_Experience/Base_Navigation.

Blackboard also demonstrated what courses look like from a faculty and student perspective in the Ultra environment under various conditions: our current Blackboard look and feel, a course with some old Blackboard elements and some new Ultra elements, and then a course that is fully Ultra. In this demo, we saw significant improvements to the gradebook as well as other features.

We conducted a post-session survey with the Deans and Chairs, and there was overwhelming support for moving toward implementation, with the majority feeling comfortable with **a September 2020 implementation for the new course menu**.

Blackboard conducted a virtual presentation to ETAC on March 11 and will conduct another one to Academic College Council. We will look for other opportunities, such as the coordinators forum, to introduce the product and gather feedback and questions. In the meantime, we are drafting an implementation roadmap that will identify plans and responsibilities for testing, communication, and training. ETAC will assist by gathering a group of faculty from across the college to pilot Ultra on a test site. Jennifer Peters is the Chair of ETAC. Send her [an email](#) if you are interested in using Blackboard Ultra within a test environment. We will make use of Blackboard's significant training collateral, including webinars and videos geared for various audiences. These will be supplemented by Seneca-specific materials and training.

We will be using the Academic Newsletter as well as other means to provide updates on the project.

View the [March 2020 issue of the Academic Newsletter](#).

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