

WebCT: An Endorsement

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WebCT seems the most cost effective and reasonable choice of the course management software options for the campus of the University of Montana Western. From a user/interface frame it seems as though the cost-benefit ratio lands heavily on the side of WebCT. The data entry method that WebCT uses seems slightly behind their nearest competitor, BlackBoard, yet these products are all remarkably fluid in terms of design and template development. The “wizards,” templates, and interface progressions in any of these tools do not seem unique to a single product, but rather an evolving set of conventions that improve from iteration to iteration. If one vendor has a slightly more user-friendly product one week it seems as though vendor B will have similar affordances the following week. With this stated then it seems that instead of finding the most advanced and progressive tool, we should instead choose the most reliable vendor. This reliability goes to longevity, professional standards, and candid representation of immediate and distant costs. Ultimately the legitimate concern about hidden costs and future licenses price increases has driven most of the conclusions drawn within this introduction.

The balance of this document will sketch briefly the tools and interface included in the WebCT 3.8 application. If this goes forward we would actually be purchasing WebCT 4.0 as it comes online in Beta this coming January and is adopted throughout this summer.

A campus that uses WebCT may offer a single point of entry for each of its students, on campus or off. This is a URL, which may be used as their home page. It has a look that will be designed to be Western specific and may include links to Banner, UMW's



The screenshot shows a WebCT user interface. At the top, there is a header with the WebCT logo, the user's name "myWebCT: Kevin Kvalvik", and the date "December 5, 2002". Below the header are navigation links: "Global Calendar", "Personal Settings", "Preferences", "Entry Page", "Logout", and "Help". The main content area is divided into several sections: "Courses" with a link to "Biology Fundamentals", instructor information "Instructor: Dr. C", "My Role: Student", and a message "There is no news for this course." with "Add course" and "Remove course" buttons; "WebCT" with a link to "WebCT.com" and text "Resources and communities for teaching and learning online."; "Announcements" with the text "There are no announcements."; and "Bookmarks" with a link to "Manage Bookmarks". The "Bookmarks" section is further divided into "Institutional Bookmarks" with links to "Add Dr. C", "Subscribe to a free WebCT newsletter", "Instructors: Find ready-made content for your WebCT course", and "Access WebCT online support"; and "Personal Bookmarks" with links to "Purchase Student Access Codes" and "Find WebCT Student Resources".

home page, etc... It welcomes the user by name and gives them an opportunity to see immediately see current campus announcements. It provides links to the individual student's calendar and to the individual courses to which the student is subscribed.

The calendar component represents a very important tool for the undergraduate student in particular. It takes all of the assignments that each of the student's professors has put in their syllabi/calendars and these are seen in the student's unique calendar. These assignments and this information may be assigned hyperlinks to allow the student to then click the information and immediately see the details of the test, assignment or activity. For the new student who has problems with time and assignment management will find a strong scaffolding mechanism built into this system. Faculty will also find that tedious tasks of establishing accountability and verifying communication will be served by this and several other productivity tools.



Each course that a student has can be accessed on line if the participating



faculty member has opted to submit the data through the faculty data-entry wizard/spread sheet.

The individual courses are accessed through a hyperlink on the entry page, which brings them to the intro to each specific course. These interfaces are all customizable so that the needs or extent of use may be dictated by the instructor and their own

best practice. Adjacent, the image of a sample page serves to show a standard look for course pages. This serves as the entry port for all the course specific information, by area.