

January 24, 2011

Robert Powell, Chair
Davis Division of the Academic Senate

Subject: SmartSite Course Management Functionality

Dear Professor Powell,

The College of Letters and Science Executive Committee wishes to express its concern with the accessibility and relative ease of use of a number of the course management functions provided to faculty and students by the campus SmartSite application during Fall Quarter 2010.

As you may be aware, the most useful course management tools previously available through the campus MyUCDavis portal were terminated in September 2010, with the requirement that faculty and students use similar options available via SmartSite. While many of the new functions are both useful and easily accessible, the same could not be said for the new GradeBook, which was developed by UC Davis programmers.

During Fall Quarter, faculty found that despite three to four years of work, the GradeBook feature in SmartSite was poorly documented, portions did not work, and it failed to meet the minimal (but quite useful) standards that the MyUCDavis GradeBook software offered. As a key means for students to view and check grades, this was unacceptable.

Repeated inquiries during the summer and fall of 2010 from individual faculty to the IET representatives responsible for SmartSite had not resulted in significant progress in addressing the issues they and their students were experiencing with the GradeBook. The Executive Committee appreciates that budget exigencies can affect the rate of progress in refining and testing the software, but this is an element of the campus information infrastructure that is essential to one of our core missions – instruction. If the system was not sufficiently developed to be able to provide the course management tools to efficiently and effectively support the teaching mission, it should not have been deployed.

When questioned about the problems with the SmartSite GradeBook, faculty were told by IET representatives that they either had no time or funding to fix the problem, or were still working on the problems. This is not an acceptable response for software developed by UCD and implemented over three years ago, particularly when no alternative is available. If the goal of the SmartSite GradeBook was class grade transparency and ease of use, it fell far short of what the much older MyUCDavis GradeBook accomplished.

The attached document provides greater detail on some of the identified inadequacies in the functionality of the SmartSite GradeBook during Fall Quarter. This is simply an anecdotal synopsis, collected by talking with faculty about their experiences, not a systematic or exhaustive assessment.

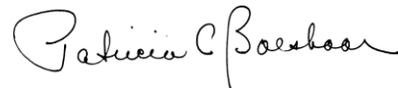
The Executive Committee recently learned that remedies for several of the indicated problems with the SmartSite GradeBook were implemented in late Fall Quarter, or are planned to be put in place over the next few months. While those are positive steps, the fact remains

that this has been far from an optimal model for introducing to the campus an essential, general-use information technology application. Further exacerbating the difficulties was the absence of effective communication between those responsible for deploying the software and providing user support, and the faculty, students and academic support personnel for whom the application was of critical importance.

Accordingly, the Executive Committee recommends that the Undergraduate Council or another appropriate Davis Division committee be asked to investigate this situation with the goal of ensuring that future distributions of IET applications to the campus are properly vetted, thoroughly tested and effectively communicated *prior* placing them in production. This is particularly important when no alternatives to the new or revised software are provided or permitted.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Patricia C. Boeshaar".

Patricia C. Boeshaar, Chair
Executive Committee
College of Letters and Science

Att.

cc: D. Trask, Assistant Dean

Attachment 1: Some Reported Problems with the SmartSite GradeBook

- The HELP instructions did not correspond to the format layout of the GradeBook. It took many calls to IT Express to find out what did and did not work.
- The grade view screen was very inconvenient, i.e., all of the grades for a student follow in one long line independent of item, whether it be homework, exams, papers, etc. One was required to delete columns to enter new grades next to a name, and then restore the columns. This is rather onerous compared to the simple MyUCDavis format. MyUCDavis broke the grades into item sections, in which the grade was entered per each individual item, and then combined automatically in a separate category screen. Currently, the only way to see such a screen is to download the data to an Excel spreadsheet and write your own instructions.
- Often, when entering a grade, the grade failed to be registered unless one goes to another grade already entered. Scroll down did not work.
- Nothing was printable from the SmartSite GradeBook, including the statistics. The grade distribution was presented in a compressed, simplistic format. On December 13, 2010, so many people were attempting to utilize the statistics package that SmartSite was forced off-line for several hours. Furthermore, the students were unable to view the statistics, as the software is currently inoperable, even though there such an option was listed. This was not true in the MyUCDavis GradeBook. Every portion was printable, with a well presented statistics view screen.
- The upload option did not work properly. For example, you couldn't upload ANYTHING into the GradeBook if the GradeBook was configured to track percentages rather than points. Worse, once it was configured to track percentages, you couldn't change it back to points. Worse still, at the time you chose to track percentages, there was no warning about any of this.
- Right clicking on a student's name entered a comment, which promptly disappeared when viewed later.
- One could not reuse an established SmartSite GradeBook format; one must start from scratch, making it unnecessarily onerous for new T.A.'s teaching labs and recitations.
- Calculating grades by hand indicated that there could be more than a 1 point discrepancy with SmartSite in some final grades, depending on the structure of the course and the grade-weighting method used. Apparently this had to do with rounding-off in the calculated grade of each section. For this reason the Registrar was forced to use a separate verification process for all grades originally calculated using the SmartSite GradeBook in Fall 2010 when the instructors used the "equal weighting" option. The rounding error also was apparently the source of 14 incorrect grades being assigned in a course during UCD Summer Sessions 2010.
- There was no ability to grade different sections of a class separately if one desired to set up a page to send messages via Resources to the entire class. All sections were combined into one list.