The Sakai Project: Community Source Software for Academic Institutions

- Kimberly Peterson

As higher education has become increasingly dependent on information technology, more and more colleges and universities are seeking the significant economies of scale possible through collaborative initiatives. The University Committee on Information Technology and Telecommunications Policy (ITTP) has been monitoring one such collaborative effort, the Sakai Project, and its potential benefit to the University of California and its faculty. Five UC campuses are currently involved...(cont. from page 2) to varying degrees in this international collaboration to develop a collection of open-source software for the higher education community.

Sakai Project
The Sakai Project is a $6.8 million community source software development project founded by the University of Michigan, Indiana University, MIT, Stanford, and the uPortal Consortium with the support of the Mellon and Hewlett Foundations. The Sakai Project seeks to develop a pre-integrated collection of open-source Collaborative Learning Environment software for the higher education community, including course management and assessment tools and a research support collaboration system. The first version of Sakai software, Sakai 1.0, was released in October 2004. Subsequent releases, scheduled for early 2005 and June 2005, will include a number of improvements and additional interoperable tools.

Historically, colleges and universities have had to either develop “homegrown” software applications or rely on costly proprietary software that lacks interoperability with other systems and the flexibility to meet an institution’s unique needs. According to the Sakai Project, two major technical barriers have impeded efforts to pool higher education software investments that could leverage obvious economies of scale:
• Unique local technical architectures have prevented moving software from one institution to another even when the software was available as no-fee and open source.
• Inter-institutional timing differences have impeded the pooling of requirements and resources in synergistic ways, leading to fragmented and often competing efforts.

The Sakai Project aims to overcome these barriers in part by establishing a standard Technology Portability Profile that outlines the essential elements for code mobility. At the same time, the cost of putting into operation a major system and connecting it to other homegrown legacy systems can be significant and thus presents another impediment.

The Sakai Project takes a community source approach to software development, which is defined as “…a model for the purposeful coordinating of work in a community. It is based on many of the principles of open source development efforts, but community source efforts rely more explicitly on defined roles, responsibilities, and funded commitments by community members.
than some open source development models.” This approach involves the collective efforts of Sakai’s Educational Partners Program institutions, which include the Berkeley, Davis, Los Angeles, Merced and Santa Barbara campuses. IT staff and developers, as well as faculty members, are part of the Sakai-related efforts occurring on these UC campuses:

- UC Berkeley is contributing a newly-developed online grade book module to the Sakai project. The campus is also currently working on its Sakai implementation design and campus integration issues. Plans include releasing a preview of the Sakai software to a controlled number of users in fall 2005.

- UC Davis is currently evaluating the Sakai system as a potential replacement for its homegrown course management system, MyUCDavis. Developers at UC Davis are also leading a project to integrate the Sharable Courseware Object Reference Model (SCORM) engine into the Sakai environment. SCORM is a suite of technical standards that enable web-based learning systems to find, import, share, reuse, and export learning content in a standardized way.

- The UC Los Angeles Faculty Committee on Educational Technology is initiating a pilot project to examine the value of the Sakai Collaborative Learning Environment system for potential use by its academic units. The pilot project is intended to develop and test the functionality of Sakai to support teaching and collaborative groups, as well as to understand the operational IT support requirements, including the integration of Sakai with existing core systems and instructional tools.

- As UC Merced welcomes its inaugural class in fall 2005, the campus will launch the Sakai Collaborative Learning Environment system as its sole course management system. This will allow the campus to create a seamless experience for users to navigate between various systems and applications.

- UC Santa Barbara recently joined Sakai’s Educational Partners Program. Although the UCSB campus does not currently have a standard course management system, it is evaluating the Sakai software as a possible option.

For further information on the Sakai Project, please consult the Sakai Project website at http://www.sakaiproject.org

To become involved in Sakai Project-related activities on your campus, please contact:

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