

Jumping into online learning: How to choose a learning management system

By L. ROXANNE RUSSELL

With the variety of structures, sizes, and missions of theological schools, there is no one-size-fits-all online learning solution. Each school faces complex decisions about how to design, develop, and deliver online education. And each of these decisions is dependent on the other. To help schools get started, one expert offers a jumping-off-point framework for the most practical part of this process: choosing a learning management system (LMS).



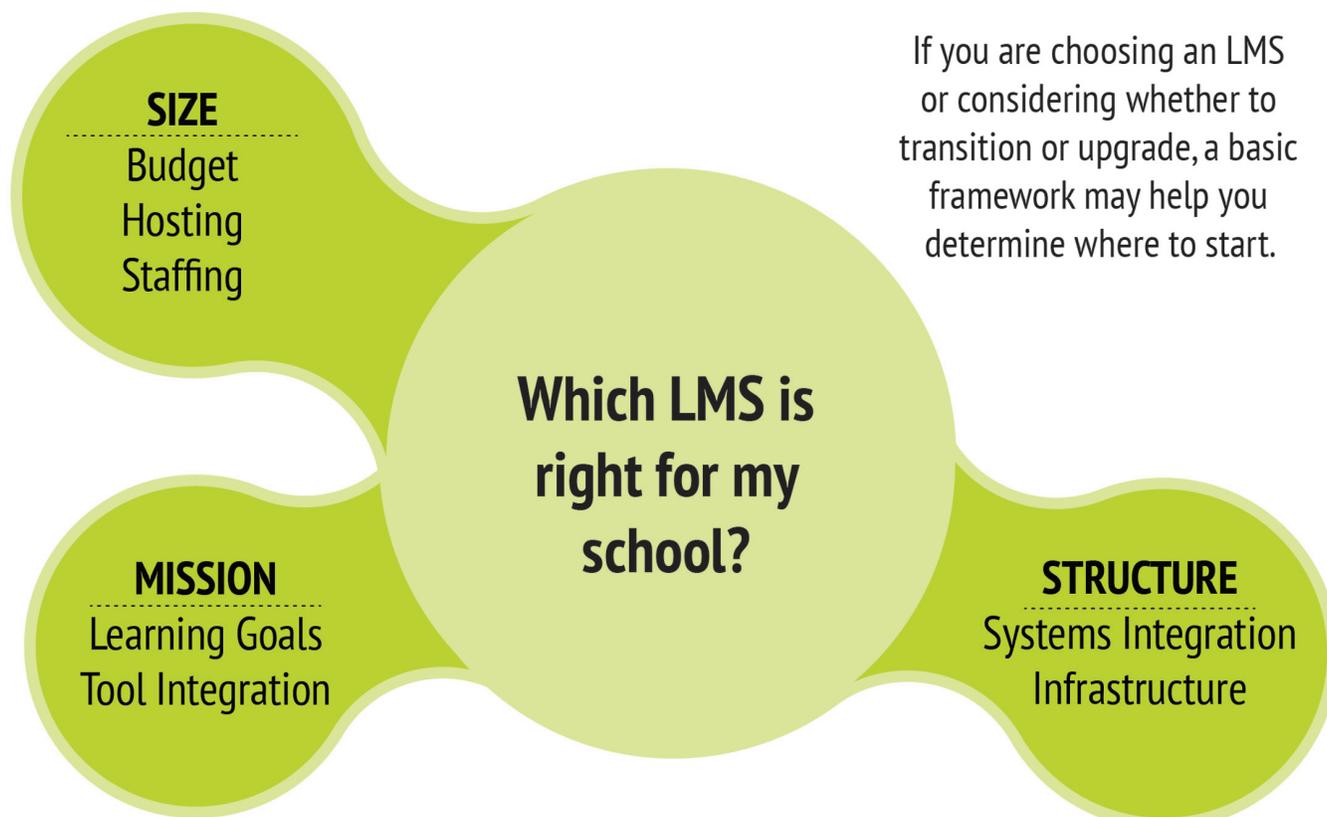
The learning management system you choose sets the parameters for how you will deliver online learning. You've heard praises and cautionary tales about all of the LMSs, so it's difficult to know what is right for your institution. Should you go with a full-service subscription solution like Blackboard, Desire 2 Learn, or Canvas? Or go the open-source route with popular tools such as Moodle or Sakai?

This system will be your administrative, faculty, and student interface and will determine the structure of much of the data associated with your online learning programs. From a pedagogical interface point of view, your best resources will be your faculty, students, and instructional designers. From the technology standpoint, your learning management system will need to be supported by IT staff

and hosted, either by your institution, a cloud-based host, or a specialized service provider.

Mission

The primary mission of your school or program may help to determine which LMS is an optimal choice. Your program may be geared toward practical training or primarily intended to offer theoretical foundations. Most theological programs value community building very highly, but some may emphasize individual, reflective growth. The purpose of courses will determine which tools outside of the LMS will work best to engage students and support their ability to accomplish learning goals. Though most LMSs share a common set of functionalities, some may have advanced



If you are choosing an LMS or considering whether to transition or upgrade, a basic framework may help you determine where to start.

© Chip Evans, Full Tilt Ahead, LLC. All rights reserved.

features for real-time interaction, like web conferencing, and others may have more social media integration. To consider what pedagogical features your school needs in an LMS, start by having your team (1) clearly articulate the learning goals of your online learning program, (2) explore how those goals translate into classroom activities, and (3) determine which tools are needed to support these activities. Then cross-reference these needs with the features available or easily integrated with the LMS you are considering.

Size

The size of your institution will primarily impact your budget, hosting requirements, and staffing needs. For the landscape of theological education, some of the information available doesn't help. For example, many reports begin their LMS price comparisons for schools with up to 500 users. There is a wide variety of school sizes within that space in theological education. Many schools are also interested in testing the waters of online education at the

level of individual programs—so the size and scope of the LMS need may be much smaller. Keeping future growth in mind, determine which solutions best fit your plans to scale.

You may have heard that you will save money with an open source solution like Moodle, but a free framework is not the same as a free engine. You will still have to meet budget requirements for hosting a Moodle environment and the staff needed to maintain and support the technology needs. Yet, this does not mean you need an expensive, enterprise-level subscription to support a small school or program. If you would like to take advantage of a subscription service, it is important to communicate to vendors that you understand the different levels of support required and negotiate a fair price for your needs. Consider asking for incremental distinctions within the scale up to 500. For larger implementations with the implied anticipation of growth, select an LMS that provides scaling at the technology level with little impact to the configuration of the LMS itself. A common industry

Hosting

Most LMS options will either give you the option of hosting it yourself in your own data center or cloud hosting where there are virtual servers that simulate your physical hardware. Some service providers specialize in hosting a specific LMS. For example, Moodlerooms, Inc. specializes in Moodle hosting and employs Moodle experts who may also help develop customized components for Moodle. Among hosting providers, regardless of whether the provider holds physical servers for you or you choose a cloud-based solution, there will be different levels of support—from a simple provision of servers that you configure and maintain yourself to a full-service option providing hosting, managed services, and possibly even some development of custom modules.

Hosting decisions will limit or expand your LMS choices and determine how much infrastructure and staff you require in house. It will naturally also impact the cost of your LMS implementation.

If you are just now choosing an LMS or your institution is already using an LMS and considering whether to transition or upgrade, a basic framework may help you determine where to start.

term used to describe this capability is *horizontal scaling*— the ability to simply add more servers to address increased capacity. Cloud-hosted solutions provide the greatest flexibility when expecting an increase in scale over a short period of time or when impact to students needs to be minimized.

Structure

Whether your theological school is freestanding or embedded in another institution will have a big impact on your LMS choice. Freestanding schools will have more flexibility in choosing an LMS. An embedded school is likely obligated or well-advised to use the LMS supported by the larger institution. In both freestanding and embedded schools, an existing LMS may be so entrenched that the case for a transition would need to be very compelling.

The primary concerns related to the structure of your school will be integrating the LMS with existing administration, registration, reporting, and content management systems at the institutional level. For example, if a student registers for a course, will the registration system be able to communicate with the LMS? If faculty members use an LMS to grade, will the grades be automatically reported to the registrar's system?

In many of the smaller freestanding schools, all system decisions may be made by the same group of decision makers so that streamlined planning for integration might be more feasible. Often in embedded institutions, a top-down IT structure or institutionalized norms may set predetermined parameters that restrict flexibility. The larger subscription service LMSs often have experience with system integration for ubiquitous tools and may offer technical support to assist with the integration. With open-source solutions, your in-house developers will have a heavier burden in customizing integration solutions, but they may also have more flexibility in creating custom features.

In either case, the IT infrastructure of your school will determine the resources and staff available to make sure systems are communicating and working

with each other. Is online learning support centralized campus-wide or at a school or program level? How are students and faculty supported for technical support? Is central IT already evaluating LMSs or planning an institutional purchase?

Other considerations with regard to technology include determining students' resources for accessing the classroom—equipment, bandwidth, and skills: How broad a range of these resources can be expected? How much of the necessary technology, both hardware or devices and software such as productivity tools, is your school expecting to provide to students?



L. Roxanne Russell has a PhD in Instructional Design and Technology and serves as both online learning instructional designer for Emory University's Candler School of Theology and as a consultant with Full Tilt Ahead, LLC, fulltiltahead.com.

Suggested Resources

How to Choose the Right Learning Management System, <http://www.edweek.org/dd/articles/2013/06/12/03lms-evaluation.h06.html>

7 Things You Should Know About: LMS Evaluation, <http://www.educause.edu/library/resources/7-things-you-should-know-about-lms-evaluation>

Duke's eLearning Roadmap and the Sakai Transition, <http://www.slideshare.net/shawnj55/dukes-elearning-roadmap-and-the-sakai-transition>

Key Points

- To consider what pedagogical features your school needs in an LMS, start by having your team (1) clearly articulate the learning goals of your online learning program, (2) explore how those goals translate into classroom activities, and (3) determine which tools are needed to support these activities.
- Keep the size of your school or the scope of your program in mind when considering the budget, hosting requirements, and staffing needs.
- The structure of your school—freestanding or embedded—will impact technology systems integration and the infrastructure of support for the LMS you choose.