

Blackboard Problems Leave Vista on Double-Secret Probation

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On college campuses, Microsoft's Vista operating system may be in danger of failing courses that use Blackboard, a key software program for communication between teachers and students.

Some campuses in the U.S. and elsewhere using Blackboard are discovering that the software and some of its functionality is being hindered as students and teachers begin to update their systems with Microsoft Vista.

While most of the problems seem to have at least workarounds or temporary fixes, some academic IT departments are starting to recommend that students and administrators hold back on installing Vista until the issues have been sorted out.

According to Blackboard, the company's popular e-learning software has now made its way onto 85 percent of PC Magazine and The Princeton Review's Top 20 Wired Colleges within the U.S., with approximately half of those institutions relying on both the company's Academic and Commerce suites.

Indeed, the Washington D.C.-based company has grown exponentially since it was first formed in 1997 (Blackboard went public in June 2004), and now develops and licenses software applications for more than 2200 educational institutions in more than 60 countries.

Blackboard develops software that lets colleges and universities create Internet-based virtual learning environments, allowing teachers, students, parents, and even Web administrators to communicate with each other via the Web. Students can view and turn in assignments through Blackboard, use it as a portal to a particular class Web site, or as an online collaboration tool to talk with other classmates. On the instructor side, the software also assists with course administration and includes a content management system for professors to create and manage digital coursework.

Problems with the software's announcement feature have been reported on some campuses where users with Vista installed are not able to compose any kind of a message with Blackboard at all. Furthermore, there are known compatibility problems with Blackboard and student PCs that use a combination of Vista and IE7.

In particular, the Visual Text Box Editor - which offers controls for entering and formatting text, equations, and multimedia files - in the Discussion Board and other areas of Blackboard does not work properly for those with Vista and IE7 in some cases. Many academic IT departments are suggesting that students and teachers either use an alternative browser such as FireFox or Opera, or disable the feature

altogether.

University advisories

"Although we aren't requiring our students and faculty to avoid Windows Vista at home, it is important to understand the issues you will face if you choose to do so," the IT department at Virginia's Regent College advises . "Our recommendation is to avoid upgrading to Vista until Blackboard remedies Vista incompatibilities."

Ohio University has a dedicated Vista support page , complete with notes on the various applications that run on Vista with no problems, ones that require modifications, and applications that currently do not, such as Novell software. The university recommends that students swap Internet Explorer for Firefox for use with Blackboard.

According to Jessica Finnefrock, vice president of product development for Blackboard, part of the problem has been the sheer dearth of Blackboard versions in the academic arena. Continued...

"There's not just one monolithic version of Blackboard," Finnefrock said, "...We have multiple versions of our blackboard software that are in the field. "Whenever we have a new end user operating system - whether it's a new browser or, in this case, a new browser with a new underlying operating system - we actually run all of our versions against it to try to suss out what's working well and where there might be issues," she added.

Finnefrock said that Blackboard is concluding those tests this week and will be making all of that information available to its clients on Friday, March 30.

"The way that we update clients is that we actually have communication

paths through their system administrators on all the individual campuses," Finnefrock said. "So they'll be receiving knowledge-based articles and a quick reference guide that will say: for this particular version of the product, these two things are behaving a little bit strangely and all these other things are fine."

But Finnefrock emphasized that the problems encountered can be different based on each individual release of the product. "There are core components in the application and sometimes when we have a new version of something - a new version that's built with a slightly difference technology - that is or isn't being affected by the changes on the Microsoft side."

Blackboard claims that all the issues that it has encountered thus far have been very small. "They aren't widely impacting the ability for students to do the core thing that they need to do from a teaching and learning perspective," Finnefrock said, while admitting that, in some cases, they can be frustrating it.

And while Blackboard will be working to correct certain issues on its own side, the company also says that some of the issues are also specific to Microsoft. Finnefrock said Microsoft would be making those changes in an upcoming service pack release. When asked about this, Microsoft officials would not confirm this, however.

In fact, Microsoft did not address any of PC Magazine 's specific questions about Blackboard compatibility, and would only say that with each evolution of the platform, a "healthy dialogue" within the industry tends to spring up around innovation vs. backwards compatibility.

"We take exhaustive steps both internally, and by working directly with the ecosystem, to remove any speed bumps that innovation - from us or our partners - may cause, long before customers experience them," said

Dave Wascha, director of Windows Client Partner Marketing at Microsoft, in an e-mail. "That runs the gamut from 35 thousand tests per week of the top consumer and enterprise applications, to deep engineering engagement with our partners on Microsoft campuses around the world, to gathering feedback on this issue alone from more than 2 million beta testers."

Wascha said that collaborative work takes care of the vast majority of compatibility issues with devices and applications, which, according to Microsoft, were resolved before Windows Vista shipped.

On its own behalf, Finnefrock said that Blackboard will be promising all of its clients that it will be addressing the 'critical issues' inherent to Blackboard in time for the summer session.

"While some students right now are getting new laptops and they have Vista already installed, the expectation is that certainly by the fall a large new wave of freshmen are going to be coming, and they're going to be having Vista on their systems, and we want to be able to do that for the next semester," Finnefrock said.

"We're treating this like we would normally treat a security issue where we would go back and patch existing versions of the products that are in the field because we don't want to...we don't expect their administrators are going to make a larger change simply just to get fixes for this issue," Finnefrock said.

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