

The Real Vision Behind the New Blackboard



By Brian Fleming, Senior Analyst

Look out, world—[Blackboard](#) is back. *Or is it?*

Coming on the heels of last week’s annual BbWorld conference in DC, the world’s largest and most recognizable ed-tech provider—now calling itself the “new” Blackboard—unveiled its ambitious plan to realign its company vision and core products to better suit the needs and expectations of a rapidly changing educational landscape. Not a minor move for a company of its size and scope, and one analysts like us have been feverishly trying to make sense of over the past week.

But now, nearly a week later, news breaks that Blackboard will possibly be going up for sale with a price tag of \$3 billion. WHAT?! When? To whom? Why? **What does this mean?**

The ^{New}

Blackboard®

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What You Need to Know

First, let's clarify a few things we know about the “new” Blackboard. Here is a rundown of the basic narrative to date:

- **A new image focused on outcomes.** Blackboard has been around for a long time and has, like many longstanding players in a changing market, faced its share of ups and downs in its efforts to stay relevant and engaged with the needs of its customers. In recent years, Bb began to reposition itself largely through acquisitions and investments in all things social, mobile, and data-rich. These investments helped align Bb with that of a broader national push to improve learning outcomes, which is the pressing need all its clients now face. Bb's efforts, however, while impressive were becoming somewhat elusive without a compelling new product. This, in fact, was becoming a real problem for the company—until now.
- **A new product in the Ultra Experience.** This brings us to Ultra, the

latest and greatest in what Bb has to offer. Rolled out officially at BbWorld, Ultra consists of an integration of three core products (Learn, Collaborate, and Mobile) into one coherent, responsive, and immersive platform. It includes a radically improved user experience (UX) and a number of improved workflows, including drag-and-drop capabilities, embedded grading tools, mobile communication features, and expanded analytics. Ultra proved once and for all that Blackboard can deliver a best of breed product that is on par, if not prepared to outmatch, its most agile competitors (ahem, Canvas).

- **A new direction with analytics.** But even Ultra, impressive as it may be, is hardly enough to push Bb further into the work of improving outcomes. Like many of its competitors (see our coverage of [D2L's Brightspace Insights](#)), Bb also realized that its real value in the market is the analytics its platform produces. Follow that with Bb's recent certification as compliant with the IMS Caliper Standards, as well as its acquisition of [X-Ray Analytics](#), Bb now has the foundation it needs to develop a comprehensive learning analytics platform unlike anything the education world has seen. This is good for education and good for Bb.

Our Take

Its head is in the game

Bb has made a strong showing with Ultra and has proven that its head in the game with its focus on analytics. It has also demonstrated that it is a valuable company, probably not to the tune of \$3 billion but hardly much less, which may have driven its investors to want to capitalize on lofty ed-tech spending and speculation, or may not. In any case, what is clear to us (and what is important to you) is that:

- **Bb is back.** With such heavy investment in developing out such a

comprehensive product roadmap, Bb has started down a path that will push this company forward and in the right direction. This, coupled with Bb's already widespread install base and vast global presence, are but obvious reminders that it will only grow stronger and more strategic over time, provided it can keep its head in the game with unparalleled customer service, agile product development, and competitive pricing the market can bear.

- **Bb will increasingly roll out new analytics capabilities.** With Ultra up and running, all Bb needs to do now is fine-tune its platform and open it up to new product integrations and partnerships. So long as all data flows back to them in a consistent, standardized way, Bb's analytics will only grow stronger and more comprehensive over time, meaning with the right pieces in place Bb will literally dominate the market with a core offering its clients not only want, but desperately need. This, by the way, will be the de facto strategy for most major LMS providers moving forward, which will usher in a new era of competition Bb will be more than prepared to handle.
- **Any acquisition should be committed to this current product strategy.** On rumors of purchase, fret not. Any potential suitor (another investor, Oracle, SAP, Ellucian?) will bring a constructive rather than destructive vision to the new Bb, and will only seek to capitalize on the momentum Bb has already established for itself rather than detract from it. Their focus will also be on how to accelerate growth in a vastly expanding ed-tech marketplace Blackboard already has more than a foothold within.