Vista at KSU, Administration Issues
Gary Lewis, October 11, 2004

Status

In 2003 we operated Vista 2.0 as a test installation on our server. For Fall 2004 we are operating Vista 3.0 on our server with about 20 actual KSU courses. We have also worked with a KSU institutional site on the USG server operated by GSU. (Note - both at KSU and on the USG system, Vista requires multiple servers, but the singular is used here.)

Issue - High level of user support required.
1. User reaction is mixed, with some people requiring extensive support in learning to use the interface.
2. Restrictions currently built into "template" model force a different model (higher support) for course development than is used by most faculty members.
3. Significant problems with browser compatibility and configuration.

Issue - Very high level of effort required for "Institutional Administration."
This is required whether we run on our server or on system server.
1. Moving course material from one term to the next requires significant administrative work for each section.
2. Loading students (other than one at a time), cannot be done at user or institutional level, leading to difficulties with fixing problems and setting up special courses.
3. Many functions that can be done at the admin (GUI) interface in WebCT CE can only be done at the system (command line) level in Vista, and often require writing your own scripts.

Issue - Serious questions about system administration
1. No control over, or visibility into, file space usage by users. One can talk about disk space being cheap, but this system requires high reliability and frequent backups, which drives up the disk cost.
2. Security/legal issue - apparently no capability for examining or modifying permissions on individual files of users in their file space.
3. Critical processes, such as backup and template manipulation, require enormous amounts of system resources and completely shut down other uses of a node. The system server has to have dedicated nodes for these admin tasks.
4. Apparently no practical way to provide recovery of individual courses from backup.
5. Multiple nodes must be started sequentially, resulting in long restart time for entire system on larger systems.
6. Useful information is largely missing from log files.

Issue - Load, stability and reliability.
1. The system server is probably carrying less than 10% of the current USG "WebCT Load." This is based on the fact that the largest user on the server is Georgia Perimeter with about 275 fall 2004 classes. KSU has over 880 fall 2004 classes on WebCT CE.
2. The system server has had problems with handling the existing load, in particular during spring of 2004.
3. It appears that Vista will require an enormous investment in additional hardware at the system or institution level.
4. We have seen flaky behavior in Vista 3.0 at KSU, including two shutdowns that had no apparent cause.

Summary
- We do not have, and are unlikely to get, the people resources to run Vista at KSU, either on our server or on the system server.
- The history of the system server, and our experience, leads us to question whether Vista is stable enough for use.
• The cost of hardware for Vista is unpredictable, but very large. Will Vista scale to meet the demand, and what will it cost?