

Seeking solutions in Open Source Software

The Case for Open Source

Community colleges often lack the resources and facilities of larger, four-year colleges and universities. The cost of software tends to be a significant burden, both for these cash-strapped institutions as well for their largely non-traditional student base. To help overcome these shortcomings, many community colleges are looking to *open source software* as a flexible and extremely cost effective alternative to expensive, commercially licensed applications.

Unlike traditional closed source software, open source tools are freely available without license or restrictions, typically at no cost to the user. This flexibility and cost savings make OSS ideal for community colleges. An open source product like Open Office, for example, offers many of the same functionality of Microsoft Office without the \$300 price tag. Another open source program, Sakai, is a course management system that can be modified for the needs of teachers and students. Sakai was the focus of a recent \$600,000 grant for the Foothill-DeAnza Community College District in California.

Open Source Software (OSS) in colleges today

Foothill-DeAnza, a high profile school with a progressive reputation, was in many ways ahead of the game in 2004 when they received their grant to extend the use of open source technology into their system. They are hardly alone, however as research universities and community colleges around the country, including Indiana, have also begun to experiment with open source software. As reported in a 2003 article in *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, a biweekly publication written for leaders in higher education, these institutions increasingly view open source as a viable alternative to commercial software products.

Not only has open source software been widely implemented in colleges, it has also seen success in K-12 education. The Beacon School in New York, a science and technology school for students who exceed the standards of the New York State Regents, has found great success using open source in their classrooms. Chris Lehmann, technology coordinator at The Beacon School, in his 1999 article "Open Source and Education" writes, "We use Linux as a cross-platform file server, web server, email server, IRC server, mailing-list server, etc., and it's allowed us the ability to do more than we ever dreamed of. To be able to do the same amount of technology infusion without open source would have been prohibitively expensive."

While open source is increasingly used in academic environments, its use is presently confined mostly to well-funded institutions that deal mainly with technology students. Still, there are ranges of open source applications that are highly suited for use throughout the community college system. We will explore some of these options in detail in the following section.

