Transcript of Statement on Sakai Project Participation

From presentation by Maurice Matiz at Sakai Project briefing to Columbia IT departments
July 26th, 2004

1 -- We are very intrigued by the Sakai project. CCNMTL was a primary advocate for the Prometheus installation that became CourseWorks at Columbia, therefore this project is of primary interest. CCNMTL performs a lot of its work within the course management system and, obviously, improvements are always welcomed. CCNMTL is pleased to be one of the three departments contributing to the SEP program along with AcIS and AIS.

2 -- That being said, we are looking at the Sakai developments with skepticism rather than reverence. We note the enormity of the effort and what will be many competing needs. We note how immature the project is compared to what we have now. We note the difference between this effort and successful open source efforts such as Apache and Linux where the altruistic individual is king, not politicized organizations.

3 -- Closer to home, realizing the promise of Sakai will require more support not less as Sakai becomes a portal, a course management system, and an application framework. We must understand that the more customizable the application, the harder to set up, maintain and support. We must understand that open source software places greater demands on staff and greater stress on departmental relationships. We need to make the case for and insure the necessary support in budget requests. Those requests must include a bubble for the transition period.

4 -- What will Sakai mean to the faculty, our clients? Not much for a while. Faculty will want and expect to receive the same support and service that they have received to date. The one thing we mustn't do is regress. Nor can we change the metaphors used by the current CMS dramatically. The change must be transparent or demonstrably better.

Key issues include:
Performance: including major improvements in workflow for common tasks.
Prompt resolution to problems: gains trusts and faith in system.
Transparency of systems: data feeds [in and out] have to be transparent to faculty and students. [Explanations about lack of transparency become excuses after a while.] The uPortal component will make this more obvious and clear. For example, there will be grades in SIS and CourseWorks.

5 -- Lastly, Sakai as a learning management tool. It is our view that far too much emphasis is on content presentation and not on learning objectives and tools of engagement necessary to foster a constuctivist approach. In a recent discussion on learning design standards, we noted how activities of engagement in one standard are left to the reader. If Sakai becomes an application framework for tools of engagement, then generic, simple tools can become the norm, not the exception.

At CCNMTL, we have been talking about a CU Educational Operating System as a collection of these tools, seamlessly working to improve teaching and learning. The question becomes whether Sakai can be adapted to be the Swiss Army knife, or are we better off with a core set of services within Sakai complemented by streamlined external utilities?