This book is about consequences and possibilities. Some chapters report the results of the intentional and directed efforts of serious scholars, dreamers, and practitioners. Others describe outcomes of spontaneous creativity of faculty, students, technologists, vendors, administrators, designers, and visionaries. All have been working for a number of years now to shape and define the phenomenon that we know as a course management system (CMS).

Faculty members were motivated to learn how to use the CMS because they quickly realized that the tool provided time-saving capabilities and the functionality to make course materials, grades, and other resources available to students electronically. The CMS was attractive to college and university administrators because it provided a means of meeting students’ expectations regarding the electronic accessibility of course-related information and services. An unanticipated consequence of this facilitating technology was that faculty members and students began to use the CMS as a learning management tool. However, in pursuing functionality — indeed, in attempting to redefine the philosophy behind the CMS — faculty and student pioneers did face some frustration.

To surface the issues and to provide a vehicle to encourage rapid vendor response to the developing inadequacies of CMS, in 2003, the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI), formerly known as the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative (NLII), held a focus session on the topic of next-generation course management systems. Those who participated came away with a sense that there was a collective voice in articulating the desired features of new releases and that there was also a desire on the part of vendors to move the CMS toward LMS (learning management systems). The editors of this energetically pragmatic yet visionary volume, along with a number of the authors,
participated in that focus session. The chapters in this volume envision a new environment based on standards, creating anytime/anywhere access and ownership, and encouraging deep, meaningful learning. All of these characteristics surfaced at the focus session as essential components of the next-generation CMS.

Cynics focus on the limitations of course management systems, choosing to view the CMS as originally designed and intended to assist faculty in dealing with the burdens associated with the administrative details of managing their courses. It remains arguable whether the CMS/LMS is a tool for transformation in higher education. The next-generation CMS may serve as the model to provide a familiar context for adjusting to the destabilizing forces associated with the presence of the digital generation on campus. Owing to its widespread acceptance and use, the CMS could provide the foundation of a known and “safe” environment to ground and integrate the tools that afford the ability for faculty and students to manage learning.

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