SoftChalk Cloud – FERPA

We are often asked how SoftChalk Cloud conforms to FERPA standards. The following information is provided to help institutions understand the relationship between SoftChalk Cloud and the Learning Management System and the impact of FERPA requirements.

How SoftChalk Cloud Inter-Operates with an LMS

SoftChalk Cloud integrates with Learning Management Systems such as Blackboard, Moodle, Canvas, and Desire2Learn (among others) via an industry standard communications protocol called IMS Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI). Through this interoperability standard SoftChalk Cloud is able to:

- deliver SoftChalk Cloud content through the LMS
- track detailed student score results for a SoftChalk Cloud content item
- pass a final student score for a content item attempt into the LMS gradebook

How LTI (Learning Tools Interoperability) Works

SoftChalk Cloud's interoperability with industry learning management systems (LMS) was built specifically for use with LTI and is an LTI certified service. SoftChalk Cloud is fully compliant with LTI v1.0 and LTI v1.1, and supports transactions with either version of the standard.

All requests between an LMS and SoftChalk Cloud are SSL encrypted https requests. In addition to the security provided by the SSL encryption, the LTI specification requires all incoming and outgoing transactions to use the OAuth authorization standard. Using OAuth allows for much more secure exchange of information between SoftChalk Cloud Learning Management systems that implement LTI. OAuth helps guarantee that transactions are coming from a trusted source and that all information is exchanged securely.

SoftChalk Cloud enables instructors to store their instructional content outside of a centralized LMS, but still be able to use the content stored on the SoftChalk Cloud in an integrated way with their institution's LMS. Student's access SoftChalk content through their institution's LMS. All authentication is handled by the institution's LMS. When a student clicks on a SoftChalk content link in the LMS, SoftChalk Cloud can track detailed score information about the activities and progress of the student through the content. The properties of the scored content are recorded on SoftChalk Cloud, as well as a student's answers and their point values for each content attempt.

The final score for the content is recorded, and is then passed from SofChalk Cloud to the institution's LMS gradebook. This score is passed using an encrypted LTI transaction between SoftChalk Cloud and the LMS.

For LTI to work, when a student accesses a SoftChalk Cloud item in the institutional LMS, the LMS sends SoftChalk Cloud information about the content. This includes a course identifier, a content item identifier, the unique OAuth identifier for the LMS system, and a student identifier from the LMS. **These values are all system level identifiers, typically the primary key in the database for the items.** So, for example, the student username in the LMS might be "jbond", but the system-level identifier would be something like "pk_57634". The latter is the value passed to and stored by SoftChalk Cloud. The actual **student username is not passed nor stored** by SoftChalk Cloud.

LTI v1.1 allows for a learning management system to also send the student's first and last names to SoftChalk Cloud. Sending the student's first and last name is a configuration option and is enabled by the administrators or the instructors when the SoftChalk Cloud LTI tool is configured in the LMS platform. If the student name information is passed to SoftChalk Cloud, the students name is stored and associated with the student's system level id that is sent from the content system as part of the LTI transaction.

No other personal information related to the instructors or students, such as usernames or passwords, is sent or stored by SoftChalk Cloud. It is possible, though not recommended, to exclude the student name information from being passed to SoftChalk Cloud. Student name information is necessary to allow the course instructor to view student detailed score result data. Final score results can still be tracked and passed to the institution's LMS even if student name information is not made available to SoftChalk Cloud.

Recap of FERPA-related issues

To recap - SoftChalk Cloud uses and stores only the LMS system-level-identifiers for a course, content item, the LMS instance, and student id. These values are all system level identifiers, typically the primary key in the database for the items. The student's first and last names may also be stored if the LMS system admin allows this -- this information is optional, tho recommended. In addition, SoftChalk Cloud stores student score data associated with the SoftChalk Cloud content the student accesses via their learning management system.

We hope this information is helpful in understanding how student information is handled by SoftChalk Cloud. Please let us know if additional information is required.