Basic Guidelines for Redesigning a Campus Website

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Redesigning a web site is no small task. There are numerous issues to consider—before, during, and after the project commences. Recently, I was the primary liaison on two separate web reconfigurations. One was for an institution of higher education while the second project was for StudentAffairs.com. Even though the thrust of each undertaking was different the underpinnings for each endeavor were very similar. This article will present guidelines for individuals charged with heading up a redesign project.

The Before, Part I

Being well-prepared before the programmers start dabbling with their web development tools will streamline the process and create fewer headaches (and heartaches). One of the key points to remember is you (and/or your team) are the ones who know higher education better than any programmer. My experience with individuals performing such work is, while they are proficient in html coding and manipulating web development tools, their understanding of, for example, student affairs is quite limited. Working together, your knowledge base melded with the programmer's skill sets, will forge a dynamic and productive alliance.

Choosing a Vendor

Who will be the entity behind the redesign work? Is it the campus computer center? An outside web development company? A public relations firm that moonlights in web-related assignments?
(Important Note: Avoid using student workers who may not have the necessary expertise, access to the University server, be around to finish the project, or remember to provide sufficient documentation for the undertaking).

Each of these choices brings its own strengths and weaknesses to a potential project. Therefore, it is important to spend time completely investigating firms or departments you may be thinking of using. A good analogy is how you would begin the planning and building of an addition to your home. You interview the architect and contractor and, most likely, visit and review some of their finished handiwork. You would probably speak with some of their clients to gauge their level of satisfaction, not only with the quality of workmanship, but also with their level of satisfaction during the process. Were they conscientious? Did they respond promptly to questions? Building a website from scratch or redesigning one takes a similar approach. You have to be comfortable in your relationship with those charged in achieving the project's goals and be amply impressed with their prowess at constructing web sites. As with a new addition, you will be living with the finished product for a long time.

Overlapping the task of deciding on a vendor are several factors, three of which are discussed below.

Budget

You need to be cognizant of your monetary resources. What is your budget for the project? Do you have any flexibility with those in charge of the purse strings? What is the hourly rate you are being charged? The going rate for web development is usually $100.00 - $125.00 an hour. However, a campus Computer Center may charge considerably less without sacrificing quality.   Can the vendor breakdown their charges by desired function so, as with a line item budget, you can delete costs for specific items while still maintaining the integrity of the overall project?

Project Scope

What, specifically, are you trying to accomplish? The more details you can provide to the person/group undertaking this assignment the easier for the desired outcomes to be satisfactorily rendered. Initially, this can be painted in broad strokes—what type of navigation flow should the site have (links along the top of the pages, side, bottom)? Will databases be utilized to manage information on the pages?   Will templates be incorporated into the backbone of the website? But many other, more detailed, discussions need to be conducted throughout the entire process.

Contract Details

Again, utilizing the home addition analogy, be specific as possible in the contract. Seek specific timelines for each portion of the website being overhauled as well as a date for completion of the overall project. Vagueness in contract wording allows programmers to potentially drag out an assignment. Ensure that an adequate amount of testing time is incorporated into any document before you conclude an agreement. I would try for a minimum of 60 days to allow for people on your campus to look over the web pages for any types of errors, unfinished work, seek out misspellings, nonfunctioning hyperlinks, and incorrect navigational pathways. A clause covering the training of staff needs to be part of any contract so when updates to the site are required—whether a simple editing of text or production of a whole new page of information—someone in-house has the knowledge to do so. In addition to the testing period there should be some written warranty arrangement that would cover overlooked problems without being charged to make the necessary corrections. In essence, the more information spelled out in the contract the better for both parties — you, as well as the vendor performing the work.

The Before, Part II

Once contract negotiations have been completed, your role (or the committee's) in the project begins in earnest. Five key issues are discussed below.

Point Person

Who is going to be the representative from both sides? There has to be a single person responsible for funneling information back and forth. If there is an issue to be resolved, who is to be contacted? This is an example of when too many cooks can definitely spoil the broth.

Target Audience for the Site

One of the initial questions should be "For whom is the website is being designed?" Are you looking for students, faculty and staff to utilize the site for their everyday activities? All college and university websites should have a section for current undergraduates, future students, visitors, maybe parents, as well as academic and student life information. The variety of pages and their content will be affected greatly as the purpose is discussed. But, even with all these constituent needs a decision is required—and relayed to programmers—as to where the emphasis and priorities are going to be placed.

Research Sites

I'm always amazed, amused, and a bit taken aback when programmers gaze straight in my eye and ask me how I want the website to look? I thought that's why I am paying them, to come up with various designs for our approval. Aren't they the experts? While, programmatically, this may be true this is not always the case in the look and feel of website design. Therefore, these "experts" want help. So, you and/or your group should spend a considerable amount of time browsing through institutional websites, picking out aspects you like. You could even examine .com web pages. The goal would be to provide URLs to the developers so they they can strive to incorporate your designated features into individual pages of the overall design of the project.

Wish List

This is more of a subset of "Research Sites." You may come across a number of websites with impressive functionality that you would like included in the project. Whether your desire(s) will fit within your timeframe and budget restrictions is problematic. Still, include these somewhat pie-in-the sky examples for your discussions with the programmers, knowing you only may be able to incorporate a few of them into the design.

Campus Input

You and/or your working group are the ones charged with seeing this project through to fruition. However, opening up input to the campus community allows for ideas you may not have considered, such as providing individuals a buy-in to the project. The one thing to remember about garnering campus input is very few people will heed your call to participate. Give them the opportunity, but do not expect a groundswell of enthusiasm.

<p align="center">During</p>

Now that the stage has been set, the programmers and design team will huddle in their cubicle to begin producing pages for your review. During this time your job is to provide text, pictures, and graphics for their use and to ensure your vision of the site is being maintained.

Substance Over Style

Bells and whistles are nice, but not always appropriate for campus web pages. Sometimes the enthusiasm of programmers gets the best of them which produces too much showmanship, overpowering your central message. While discussions about the integrity of your vision need to be addressed beforehand, vigilance, at this point in time, is important.

Institutional Consistency

Almost every institution of higher education maintains certain templates, color charts, and approved navigational schemes. Programmers, both ahead of time as well as during their work on the project, need to be informed of sanctioned formatting. This might prove constricting to some individuals or firms, but one of the main purposes behind any redesign is to keep the central look and feel of the entire institutional web site within your redesign. Departments or divisions that create their own unique domain only cause confusion to people that browse their pages since they may not be sure they are still within the institutional web site.

Text, Text, Text

The programming team creates a shell for a site, ensuring all the design elements load properly and the navigational links work. But a great looking, well-functioning website is worthless without appropriate text and information to view. While a seemingly simple assignment, providing quality text, pdf files and other documents for programmers can be a challenging proposition. Who will do the writing? The editing of current web pages? A daunting task that usually requires a large number of disparate individuals spread out across the campus answering to a designated team leader. As difficult as the undertaking may be, it is critical if the project will move forward successfully.

Afterwards

Once the project is "finished" there are two simultaneous initiatives that must take place. As mentioned earlier, there needs to be an adequate amount of time allocated by programmers for testing of the site by you and/or your committee to ensure all aspects of the web pages are working properly.

At the same time, training needs to be held so campus personnel have the knowledge base and skill necessary to make adjustments without relying on programmers or other campus individuals to do the work.

When the redesign project is officially completed you and/or your team can relax…for the time being. Web sites, unfortunately, are always a work-in-progress. They are never truly finished. Pages need to be constantly updated, new web applications are always being unveiled and, as in that new home

addition, after a few years a fresh coat of paint ought to be applied to spruce up the place. The same pertains to your new website.