



Doctoral Students' Council (DSC)

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March 6, 2009

TO: William P. Kelly, President
Information Resources Committee of Graduate Council

FROM: Gregory Donovan, Co-Chair for Student Affairs

SUBJECT: Student Web Design Recommendations

The Final Report of the GC Web Planning Committee was submitted to President Kelly in September 2007 and updated in December 2008. As it currently stands, this report primarily identifies and discusses solutions for design and content concerns. These concerns are important, but recommendations that will actually address them are not clearly articulated in the report.

Additionally, this report did not involve students in the processes of research, evaluation, and planning. Several student populations have extensive knowledge of and practice with web technologies, including members of the Interactive Technology and Pedagogy Certificate Program, researchers at the New Media Lab, Interactive Technology Fellows, and program webmasters. Moreover, many students are professionals in the field of interactive technology, acting as consultants for web design, site architecture, search engine optimization (SEO), and web 2.0 technologies. By ignoring this cutting-edge expertise, recent web committees have produced plans that lag behind current practices.

Thus, as a supplement to this report, we present seven recommendations that we believe will address the concerns outlined in the committee's report:

1. **Commit to Open Standards for the entire GC website to afford a circulatory infrastructure.** Established by the International Telecommunications Union (a specialized agency of the United Nations), a commitment to Open Standards would ensure that all content within the GC website will become circulatory and locatable to all users and would correct many of the navigation and user-end problems currently identified.
2. **Enable RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds on all aspects of the site.** The incorporation of RSS feeds will allow specified content to be 'syndicated' throughout the site on various pages. This will allow content to be simultaneously updated and help to address the problem of outdated or contradictory information within the website. This will also allow the public to "subscribe" to certain RSS feeds and receive new information, as it becomes available, without having to visit the actual site. For example, an "events page" for the entire Graduate Center could be established that aggregates event "feeds" from program sub-pages. Or, in reverse, a "special notice feed" could be centrally controlled and syndicated on all program sub-pages.

3. **Adopt a centrally managed, open-source, content management system (CMS) for the GC website's architecture.** This CMS should have access points for all programs, offices, research centers, faculty members, and students. CMSes (such as Wordpress MU or Drupal) are as simple to use as web-based email and allow for frequent updating with minimal technical knowledge. They automatically produce RSS feeds (reinforcing recommendation #2) that can be aggregated across various sites, and work efficiently with SEO. Moreover, an open-source tool would free the GC from expensive license upgrades, restrictive proprietary standards (reinforcing recommendation #1), and the cost of continual staff training.
4. **Maintain local systems of content management.** Individual programs are more highly motivated to generate, maintain, and promote their own content than other entities. Thus, program information should continue to be vested with EOs, APOs, and program webmasters who understand their content and the conventions of their discipline better than other entities. Adopting recommendation #3 would make this possible by allowing individual programs to 'plug-in' their pages to the larger website.
5. **Focus IT workshops on skills, not tools.** At minimum, these workshops should include basic use of the CMS, how to generate and integrate RSS feeds, basic understanding of Open Standards, effective site architecture, principles of theming, and writing content for SEO. This sort of skills-based training would reinforce recommendations #1-4.
6. **Establish regular communication between the Admissions Office and program offices.** An open dialogue should be promoted with all programs to plan prospective student pages. This would help to establish the mutually agreed upon protocols necessary for facilitating recommendation #4.
7. **Integrate program pages with emerging faculty web pages.** If faculty were provided with the proper resources for building personal pages using the central CMS, then information on publications, presentations, etc. could automatically be displayed (via RSS feeds) on program pages, faculty activity pages, and so on.

Though this is only a preliminary sketch, we believe these recommendations must be reflected in any future direction taken with the Graduate Center's online presence. Continuing the current course will be costly and ineffective, and it runs the risk of losing talented prospective students to web-savvy institutions. The Graduate Center needs a new, progressive model that can successfully position it on the national stage. We are eager to discuss the details of this vision in greater detail.