

Ah, What Rotten Webs We Weave
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Most college and university Web sites are poorly designed. As a result, they reflect badly on their institutions. The problems range from embarrassing and inexcusable mistakes -- like poor grammar, misspellings, and out-of-date information -- to the failure to take full advantage of new technology. Furthermore, too many sites baffle or aggravate visitors, offering them links that do not work, sending them to pages that do not exist, referring them to information that they are not allowed to view, and so forth. Granted, some institutions have excellent Web sites, but they are in the minority.

Web sites have become a primary marketing tool for colleges and universities. We must remember that how we present our institution online can make a difference to important outsiders. If an alumnus cannot learn from the site how to order tickets to the next football game, how happy will he be about the college when the next pledge card arrives in the mail? If a prospective student finds the site confusing or boring, how likely is she to apply?

Every college Web site should provide accurate and complete information, and should have a design that makes the information easy to understand and technology that makes it easy to find.

Does your college's Web site contain all the information a visitor is likely to want? A whopping 86 percent of the hundreds of sites I surveyed recently did not provide any e-mail addresses for individual members of the admissions staff, or information about how to contact them without trying to figure out who's who in the staff directory -- if the visitor can find that. A visitor who doesn't know the name of anybody in the admissions office may well be out of luck.

Fifty-two percent had a button that potential students could click to contact the college or the admissions office in general. But 34 percent of the 1,244 students I interviewed in the course of conducting customer-service research for college and university clients reported that clicking on a

"contact us" button felt as though they were sending personal information into cyberspace with no idea who would receive it. They worried about privacy and the misuse of their information. Moreover, very few students who clicked on those buttons said they ever got a response from the colleges. That only reinforced their anxiety.

Many sites omit other information. I recently surfed one site that referred visitors to its spring schedule of courses, but the schedule did not exist. The problem was not that the link was inactive; I moved from one page to the other, but the new page was blank. How could a student sign up for spring courses at that Web site?

Another college site had a link from the home page to "the administration," but when that page came up, it listed only employees in the human-resources department. Still another college provided a list of what appeared to be 63 kinds of information that visitors could access. Unfortunately, 31 of the items in the list had no active link. Clicking, for example, on "message from the president" produced no response at all.

Too many sites offer little more than pages copied from the college's catalog and other official documents, like overly detailed registration policies, federal and state financial-aid regulations, or descriptions of courses written in impenetrable academic prose. That is a poor use of the Web's potential as a marketing tool. Students and visitors to your college's site do not want to have to wade through wordy, tedious jargon, like this real example: "Applications for admission in a given semester should be filed as early as possible prior to the semester or term for which the applicant intends to enter or the applicant may not be admitted to the college for that semester." Why not just say: "Apply as early as you can, to increase your chance of getting in"?

Even colleges that provide appropriate content online, written in understandable English, can make a bad impression on visitors if a site includes incorrect grammar or spelling errors. Spell-checking software alone will not catch all the mistakes. A human being should go over everything on the site -- whether that person is an instructor of freshman composition, the secretary who proofreads the president's speeches, or someone hired to edit the site's contents.

Once your college has put the right information online, you need to make that information easy to understand. Clear, consistent design of the pages throughout the site is essential.

Either to permit self-expression or to save money by not hiring a professional, some institutions let departments or offices design their own pages. The result is often an example of academic freedom run wild: No two pages use the same layouts, graphics, or fonts; many pages do not link to each other, and some even contradict one another. The message that such chaos sends to the outside world is that the college is badly run, as well as inexperienced with modern technology. Remember that potential students will compare your institution's site with the slick commercial and game sites they visit.

Off-the-shelf software programs for Web design and online building tools can provide only basic designs, not the kind of marketing tool that a college's Web site should be. If your institution has an employee who can design and construct good-looking Web pages, great. If not, you should hire an outside designer. Many good designers are available, and their services need not be expensive.

Be sure to hire a designer who understands that simpler is often better. Some Web sites look like their designers wanted to use all of the different typefaces available. A development officer who created the Web page for his office told me he believed that many fonts "capture the eye." In fact, with too many typefaces, the eye doesn't know where to look.

Choosing fonts is an important decision that should be made less hastily than it usually is. The typeface on your Web site can say a great deal about your institution. For example, many sites use traditional fonts, like Times Roman. Other colleges prefer fonts with a cleaner, more modern look, like Tahoma. If you don't have a designer to advise you, at least take a look at the fonts available on your computer and think about the image they would project for your institution.

Once you have made your choice, stick with it throughout your Web site unless there is a good reason to switch. Use the italic and boldface versions of your font sparingly -- not every statement needs to shout. And make sure the font can be read easily. Tiny five-point type is almost indecipherable on most monitors. Use fewer words and larger fonts.

You should also keep gimmicks to a minimum. One site I saw recently had evidently been designed by someone who had just learned to use PowerPoint. Pictures flew from the top, bottom, and side of the screen. Text crawled, exploded, and wiggled. Other sites have spinning letters, scrolling information, and other gimmicks that are supposed to make the page look exciting. Yet my interviews with students indicate that they find the gimmicks annoying and old hat. A good graphic design and the use of color can do more to make Web pages come alive than all the gimmicks available.

In addition, gimmicks make a site load more slowly. Many visitors to your Web site will have been spoiled by commercial sites that have sophisticated technology to load the entire site almost instantly. Even a 15-second wait will seem interminable to younger visitors -- your potential students.

For the same reason, it is not a good idea to put too many pictures on a single page, or to insist on a very high resolution for pictures. A resolution of 100 pixels per inch, or even less, will almost always provide a good photo on the visitor's screen and the lower the pixel count, the shorter the load time.

Your institution's Web site may contain the information visitors are looking for, and the design to make the information easy to understand, but without the right technology, nobody will be able to find the information.

Common problems include broken links and dead ends. Visitors rapidly become frustrated when they click on a link, say, and find themselves at a new page with no way out -- or worse, still on the link they clicked, with no way to move forward or backward. If the only way out is to close your site, chances are that the visitor will go on to another institution's site, in search of better service.

Frequently, a visitor does not see a promised page but a message that says something like: "The page you are looking for is currently unavailable. The Web site might be experiencing technical difficulties, or you may need to adjust your browser's settings." The truth usually is that the visitor's browser is fine but the college's Web site is not -- and most visitors guess

that is the case. Plenty of good programs exist to check links. Your institution should use them.

Many sites intentionally restrict access to information, like the e-mail address of the institution's president. That sends a clear message to potential students and their parents: The president does not want to hear from you. Giving a phone number or snail-mail address instead of an e-mail address seems absurd to the visitor who is savvy enough to find your Web site in the first place.

Another poor decision is to make a link blend invisibly into the page, as when the visitor needs to click on a picture instead of something that is obviously a link. Not all visitors will guess that a photograph of the football team will lead them to the fall 2003 football schedule.

We live in a competitive world. You should make sure that your Web site shows off your institution's best side -- rather than sending visitors in frustration to the sites of other colleges and universities.

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