



June 15, 2007

MEMORANDUM

To: Kimberly McBroom
Associate Vice-President and Director of Marketing & Communication

Bruce Petryshak
Chief Information Officer

From: Christopher Cox
Web Advisory Group Chair on behalf of the Web Advisory Group

At your request, in January 2007 the Web Advisory Group (WAG) was convened. The charge of the WAG is to review the Bowling Green State University web environment and provide feedback to ITS and Marketing and Communications.

The committee met several times through the spring semester. It was determined that there were two primary components the committee should review. The first is the MyBGSU portal, the second is the University's web presence. The committee decided to review the portal as our first task. The review process consisted of each committee member gathering opinions of the portal from their constituents. No parameters were put in place to limit opinions to certain topics or functions. By April, the committee had gathered a tremendous amount of feedback from all across the university.

In late spring, it was brought to the WAG's attention that the ITS portal team has been charged with enhancing the portal's functions for a fall release. The request was made of the committee to make some preliminary suggestions that might be incorporated in this next release.

The WAG determined that our best course of action is to supply you with our immediate recommendations. These recommendations take on two forms. One is changes to portal functions that we feel should immediately be considered for the fall release. The second form does not necessarily get at function changes, but issues and topics that need consideration now to enhance future recommendations.

Over the next few months, the WAG will compile a complete list of portal recommendations. Once that is complete and presented to you, we will begin to address the web presence of BGSU.

At this time, the Web Advisory Group submits for your immediate consideration:

Almost to a person, the committee reported that feedback from their constituents revealed that the portal layout is too complex, leading to confusion which in turn is causing users to avoid use of the portal. In the short term, there are two functions of the portal that need to be addressed to simplify the users' experience.

- Blackboard – Easily the most frustrating experience for users is having Blackboard appear as an open application within the portal. Many users have no need to access the learning communities and are frustrated by the perception that this application is forced upon them. To further exasperate the experience the users' expressed confusion as to why the services available from the portal home page are again displayed in Blackboard leading the users' to wonder which menu they should utilize.

There is no question as to the importance of Blackboard, however, the duplication of available services leads to user confusion and frustration. The committee agrees that Blackboard needs to be a prominent service/link from the portal's main page rather than a default open application. We understand that accommodating this suggestion will lead to some initial confusion, however a well executed communication plan will be able to explain the change and how those utilizing Blackboard will be able to access the learning communities. We also feel that there are technological solutions to explore that can be used to aid users in determining if they would like Blackboard. As user roles become more defined, Blackboard could be opened for instructors and/or students; or possibly a setup wizard that walks users' through an initial configuration where they would have the option of having Blackboard default to open for their use.

- Logout function – there only needs to be one method to logout of the portal. The portal is rife with multiple logout buttons, again leading to user confusion. Users are not able to ascertain what it is they are logging out of. Many mistakenly think they are logging out of a page or application to then logout of the portal and vice versa. As with many standard applications used throughout the community there should only be one logout function. Again, proper communication with users will train them to log out of the portal in the same fashion over and over again.

Another issue of portal use is trying to gauge what would entice the user community to use the portal. Many of our constituents shared that they would be more inclined to use the portal daily if they had some reason to log-in. Where the committee is discussing various ways to promote the portal, we have identified three opportunities that we feel can be offered in the near term to begin pushing the users to access the portal.

- Embed the webmail application – another source of discontent with many users is the need to open webmail separately from the portal. The portal being a user specific application, it is only natural to include webmail as an application within the portal. Many people provided feedback as to the unnecessary steps it takes to login to the portal as well as the webmail. Not only would embedding the webmail within the portal provide a streamlined service to these users, it would also ensure many users would be utilizing the portal in some fashion; providing exposure to the portal and streamlining other communication opportunities via the portal.
- Communication Tools – the portal needs to be retooled so that we can provide messages to targeted audiences. Portal technology provides an excellent opportunity to communicate with the masses of users to a small targeted subset of people. Over the years e-mail has proven to be a less than accepted mode of communication, particularly with students. There have been some small efforts to utilize the portal in this fashion, but we feel there is much more that can be done. One of the concerns with utilizing any communication tool is to be sure that target audiences are not overwhelmed with messages. This has been one of e-mail's Achilles heels. As audiences are continuously bombarded with messages, the audience begins to ignore all messages. The communication channels through the portal need to be customizable so that "must read" messages get through to their target audiences, while the other messages can be managed by the users that would like to view them versus those topics they would like to ignore.

- Market the Portal to the User – users do not know what the portal is and what it has to offer. A clear message must be provided that lets people know what the portal has to offer and how people can take advantage of these services. One prime example of this is the ability to customize your layout. Very few users know that you can customize how the portal looks on an individual basis. Those that are aware that the customization function exists don't understand how to customize page for themselves. Providing how-to's to the user will tackle many of the frustrations that have been shared with the committee. Another enhancement would be to list the services available through the portal, both default services and customizable services, again so that users know what exists and have that reason to use the portal.

There are a number of issues the university community is wrestling with that the committee feels that portal can offer a solution for. Although we are not prepared to offer exact recommendations at this time, we feel it is in the best interest of everyone to explain some of the issues now. This will help in planning for future recommendations so that steps can be identified now that will aid in the implementation of some of these services.

- Guest Access – one of the largest barriers in accepting people to the BGSU on-line community is a lack of guest access to the many functions offered through the portal. Both Continuing Education and the Office of Registration and Records have expressed concerns that many opportunities to recruit, enroll and retain students fail because people are not able to access the portal. The issue comes up that students are unable to receive a BGNet account until they are registered students. The catch22 is that students can not register unless they have access to the portal. This often leads potential students to become frustrated and go else where or leads to heavier work loads on the administrative departments to register students through manual procedures. Although student registration is one example where guest access can be an asset, there are many more that need to be discussed, such as library access, alumni access and instructor access.
- Sub-Accounts/Secondary Access – one of the largest security concerns of the committee is password sharing, which is not only a security issue but a policy issue that appears to be a consistent liability across campus and across all user roles. The committee documented a number of cases where students are providing passwords to parents, employees to supervisors, users to analysts. Where password sharing must stop, especially as we progress to a single sign-on environment, the committee does see a need for users to allow certain access to certain people, such as students allowing their parents to view their grades and billing information. This was a difficult conversation to have, as we kept coming around to the point that password sharing is so rampant at this point, any progress on creating a secondary user role may actually be perpetuating a problem rather than providing a fix. We highly recommend that the university begin communicating and enforcing the current policies to prevent password sharing. As the user community becomes re-educated to the idea, we further recommend that some form of secondary access be developed for each user to provide and manage sub-accounts as they see appropriate.

User communication is going to be the key to ensure that the future of the portal is successful. The portal is rich in functionality and usability, but very few people seem to know how to take advantage of the portal and what it has to offer. The fact that the portal can be customized, what applications and services are available and in too many cases how to access the portal are lost on end users. There needs to be an aggressive, long-term communication plan to the user community explaining what there is to know. Many expressed that they could be persuaded to use the portal if they only knew something about it. The committee understands that there are some changes to the portal expected in time for the Fall 2007 semester. This is an excellent time to start educating the user community about the portal, its uses and how to manage the functions.

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