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THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY AND CAMPUS WEB DEVELOPMENT: A Case Study

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Abstract

Since World Wide Web (WWW) development at the University of Akron (UA) began in 1994, many individuals from various areas of the University have contributed to the organization and development of the campus Web sites. Formal responsibility for Web development passed from one committee to another, while numerous subcommittees contributed to planning, organizing, and developing policy for the UA Web. Ultimately, a University Web Team, chaired by the University Webmaster, was appointed and charged with responsibility for the design, organization, and content of the UA Web. Reasoning that the University Libraries could easily incorporate the provision of Web related services into its existing service mission, campus administrators placed the University Webmaster and associate responsibilities within the administrative structure of the University Libraries. This new organizational structure provided the University Libraries with an opportunity to assume a leadership role in future Web development and services.

Keywords:
World Wide Web; University libraries; World Wide Web development; World Wide-Web organization

Introduction

The University of Akron is a public, state-assisted university
located in a major urban setting, and with some 26,000 students, has
the third largest principal campus enrollment among Ohio's state
universities. The University of Akron draws students from 43
states and 64 foreign countries to its 10 degree-granting units which
offer 82 Associates, 154 Bachelors, 47 Masters, and 17 Doctoral
programs. With only 1,600 students residing on campus, the
University of Akron is truly a university of commuters. Additionally,
some 25% of students attend evening classes, many of them
working on their degrees part-time. With a large portion of
commuters and a significant number of part-time students, many of
whom have jobs and families, the University Libraries have been
challenged, not only to draw students into our physical facilities, but
also to provide state-of-the-art remote access to a rich array of
resources available through campus, local, and state networks, as
well as the Internet and the WWW. In order to better meet these
challenges and fulfill its service mission, the University Libraries
have been engaged heavily, through committee service and hands-on
instruction, in campus Web development. Recently, however,
Bierce Library, the main campus library, assumed a leadership role
in campus Web development, organization, and training. This
major shift of responsibility for Web content, organization, and
instructional support to the Library was the end result of a
philosophical change on the part of campus administrators. With
the new responsibility came additional staff, financial resources, a
new organizational structure, an expanded service mission, and
support for the Library's future role in campus Web activities. How
did such a change in campus computing philosophies evolve? What
prompted campus administrators to shift their complete philosophi-
cal and financial support to the University of Akron Libraries for
future Web development and services? As you will see, the change
came about as administrators recognized that libraries are the
primary resource of information on campus and that the Web is
another form of information which the UA Libraries can readily
incorporate into their service mission, a mission which includes in
this case, classroom instructional support for UA faculty.

The Web and Libraries

At a time when hundreds, perhaps even thousands of colleges
and universities worldwide had developed Web sites, institutions
which had not yet done so were grappling with the complex question
of how to go about this important task. In the past almost all large
computing projects were delegated to campus computer centers, but
as the nature of personal computing evolved into a client centered
model with faculty, staff, and students utilizing a myriad of resources
at remote sites, computer centers became only one of many campus
units involved in the provision and utilization of networked
information.

New computing expertise began to appear at the departmental
level as demand for such expertise increased there. Eventually,
Internet and WWW utilization became routine and campus units
began to develop their own Web sites. Students, faculty, adminis-
trators, and staff began to visit the Web daily, while increasing
numbers of professors began to create Web pages for their courses,
cite Web sites, and incorporate Internet resources into their course
syllabi.1

Kenneth Green, director of the annual Campus Computing
survey, estimates that the current number of campus Web users
could easily exceed 7 million.2 Not all campus Web sites, however,
are fully developed, finished products. Many are the result of
narrow or individual effort, rather than a unified, campus-wide
effort. According to McLeod and White, of the University of
Maine, many individual efforts fail to resonate at the institutional
level because of a lack of staff and computing resources to organize
campus Web development, competing campus information system
philosophies or priorities, the absence of comprehensive Internet
publishing guidelines, or an unawareness of the problem.3
According to Green, campus Web sites reveal tremendous diversity on both content and design. As use of the Web for internal campus communication, instruction, and scholarships increase, institutions are recognizing the role of the Web as part of a digital public presence intended for off-campus audiences, which include alumni, prospective students, news organizations, and potential donors, all of whom view the design and content of the campus Web presence as an indicator of an institution's technological infrastructure and sophistication.

Clearly, developing a campus Web site is as much a public relations concern as it is a technological undertaking. McLeod and White ask how a university is to "avoid the uneven development, inaccuracy, poor organization, lack of coordination, and intermittent maintenance common in many campus Web systems." There are no simple answers to these problems, however, assembling the right group of individuals is a good first step. In order to utilize a university library's expertise in the organization and provision of information, universities should include library staff in Web development groups. The Web task force which the University of Maine formed in order to address those issues included staff from the Library, computing and instructional technology, public affairs, and other departments, all of whom had some Web experience. The goals of this task force were to improve campus Web usability and design; to create publishing guidelines, standardize images, and departmental templates; to examine personnel and equipment needs to support ongoing Web development; and to promote communication and coordination of campus Web development. The broad range of skills and backgrounds which can be assembled from various campus units, provides a task force, team, or committee with the combined expertise necessary to complete the task of Web development. Whether intentional or not, the University of Maine model seems to be that which other colleges and universities have adopted, at least in part, in order to expedite campus Web development in a unified manner. The University of Akron followed a similar course for a time, but eventually moved beyond conventional models into a bold new future in which the University Libraries will play a major role in the provision of Web related services.

The UA Process

Early attempts at campus Web development at the University of Akron occurred during the 1994–95 academic year. By this time numerous universities of comparable size and with similar academic programs, had developed and implemented campus Web sites of considerable quality. Many dedicated professionals at the University of Akron had begun to develop their own departmental Web sites as a matter of course and these same individuals pointed to the need for a centralized campus-wide effort at Web development. In response to this need a committee was formed to investigate the various issues relating to Web development and make recommendations to campus administrators. This original Home Page Committee or Web Development Committee (WDC) as it referred to itself when submitting its final recommendations, was composed primarily of individuals from University Communications, Information Services (Computer Center), and Student Services, but included no library personnel. The work of this committee culminated in a six page report on Web related issues and recommendations. This document which was submitted in July 1995, contained some astute insights and useful suggestions.

Perhaps most significant was the WDCs first short-term recommendation that the University should establish a Web Team as follows:

1. Using a collaborative model and embracing an enabling philosophy, create a Web team as soon as possible. This small "hands-on" team should include University of Akron employees with expertise in computer systems, graphic design, training, and communication. The
team will—

- Develop and maintain University of Akron’s main home page, which serves as both a link to all other University of Akron home pages and a guideline to the preferred look and feel of University of Akron home pages.
- Develop a bank of general University of Akron information and images, Web forms (common gateway interfaces), programming templates, and access to Web development and support resources. General university-wide information should come from University Communications to maintain consistency with University of Akron publications and other communications.
- Provide initial training to departments’ Web personnel.

The WDC also recommended that a campus steering committee be established to oversee development of UA Web resources, address policy issues, and create guidelines for campus Web development.

Although the work of the WDC seemed to resolve some of the issues pertaining to the future of the UA Web, there remained a basic disagreement on issues among those individuals most heavily involved in hands-on Web development. For instance, where within the University’s administrative structure should ultimate responsibility and authority for Web content, design, and policy be located? What Web related services are needed by faculty, staff, and students, and who should provide these services? Clearly, there was a need to explore these issues further. In order to cultivate campus-wide involvement and build a broad-based consensus, the University Provost appointed a new World Wide Web Committee (WWW C) in November, 1995.

The WWWC was composed of 32 individuals from a wide range of campus units including University Communications, Information Services, one representative from each college, three members from University Libraries, and one representative each from the Alumni Association, Student Government, and the Faculty Senate. The WWWC, which had the complete expressed support of the Provost, was charged with developing policy and removing technological barriers to campus-wide WWW access and so began its work with the following goals:

- To create a vision for the WWW which refuses to be bound by current levels of technology and resources.
- To develop the WWW to its greatest potential for service to students, faculty and staff of the University.
- To develop the WWW to its greatest potential for attracting friends to the University, e.g., alumni, potential students, potential faculty.
- To foster use of WWW to support the teaching, research and service missions of the University.
- To implement, ASAP, a Web team responsible for the University homepage and to give the mission of maintaining the web presence of the University to that team in whole or in part.
- To create an internal web for specific University uses and an external web for the public at large.
- To develop a policy of access that makes the fullest use of the Web for all members of the University community.

As with most large committees, the degree of commitment of individual members varied. A cohesive unit of approximately twenty-two members attended meetings regularly and worked diligently to resolve the issues which precluded serious Web implementation at the University of Akron. While large issues were discussed at full committee meetings, much of the work required the expertise of a small number of campus personnel and was done by the subcommittees. These small, five to eight person groups, formed from the large committee and, when needed, non-committee personnel, were assigned responsibility for specific actions, as follows:

**Policies and Procedures Subcommittee**—Determine policies relating to the University’s use of the Web including access and legal concerns. Develop procedures for Information Providers to follow.
Web Development Subcommittee—Develop, maintain, and enhance the University's Home Page, develop and maintain expertise in new and existing Web technologies, provide training to the Web Committee members, develop "back-end" processes for Web form processing, and develop other Web services of interest to the University.

Training and Support Subcommittees—Evaluate products and development tools for Information Providers to use, develop training and support aids for academic and administrative departments interested in learning how to place their departmental information on the Web.

University Services Subcommittee—Identify, design, and develop Web connections to University databases to provide an enhanced interface for students, staff, and faculty to access and maintain their University information.

Electronic Learning Subcommittee—Provide training and assistance to academic departments interested in integrating the Web into their course materials. Also, provide classroom support on an ongoing basis.

Web Access Subcommittee—Provide recommendations to enhance the ability of all members of the University community to get access to the information on the Web. Develop training for effective use of the Web and providing assistance to users on an ongoing basis.

The committee members representing the University Libraries—the Head of Audio-Visual Services, the Head of Reference, and a Network Analyst from the Library Systems office—contributed to the work of the Electronic Learning, Web Access, Web Development, and Training and Support subcommittees. In addition to the original subcommittees, a Web Demonstration Subcommittee was later formed for the purpose of arranging and conducting informative demonstrations that would enlighten the campus as to the WWWC's purpose, progress, and membership.

During Spring Semester 1996, this subcommittee, chaired by the Head of Reference, held two Web Demonstration Sessions in Bierce Library's instruction rooms. The sessions, which consisted of three separate Web work stations manned by committee members who demonstrated basic Web searches, various Web resources, and Web authoring, were announced to faculty and staff through a campus-wide electronic mail posting (see Exhibit A), while numerous personal invitations were made to the University of Akron administrators. Both sessions began at noon and were so well attended that committee members were obliged to continue the demonstrations well into the afternoon. At the first demonstration, the University's Provost provided food for 100 persons. Although the food ran out at 1 p.m., faculty and staff, eager to expand their knowledge of the Web, remained at the demonstration work stations until 3 p.m. The WWWC concluded that the sessions were an excellent communication instrument which had clearly sparked further interest in the WWW campus wide.

In order to gather information about UA Web users, surveys were issued to all those in attendance (see Exhibit B). The completed surveys provided the WWWC with valuable input about demonstration format, basic user profiles, and most importantly the type of Web-related services desired by various groups on campus. Some of the services indicated in the responses to questions 5 and 6 of the survey include:

- Small group demonstrations for a department.
- Creating bookmarks and using the WWW efficiently.
- Step-by-step Web site creation.
- Authoring systems for HTML coding; basic session on how to and where to begin a home page.
- Explanation of different browsers and how to get home pages linked.
- Hands-on training, perhaps in a classroom format, where activities are explained, demonstrated, and practiced (by us).
direction of one campus administrator. At the same time, the new service unit called the New Media Center (NMC) was established within the University Libraries as a front door for all information support services on the UA campus. A new position—Coordinator of the New Media Center and University Webmaster—was established to oversee this new endeavor, which officially opened for business in March 1997.

In order to centralize Web development within this unit, the Associate Vice President for Information Services appointed a four person University Web Team, chaired by the NMC’s Coordinator and University Webmaster. Other appointees to the University Web Team included the Head of Reference from Bierce Library, the Director of University Communications, and an Applications Services Project Leader from Information Services. The Web Team was given complete responsibility for the appearance and content of top-level University Web pages. A separate Web Policy Advisory Committee was formed and charged with responsibility for all Web policy issues, while responsibility for maintaining the campus Web server and all computing hardware remained with Information Services.

The University Web Team

Once established, the University Web Team quickly began the task of reorganizing and unifying the look and content of the UA Web. During the course of developing a final product, the Team considered dozens of models and viewed numerous university and college Web sites. A graphic artist was brought in to develop prototype screens for the Team’s consideration and once a prototype was accepted by the Web Team, it was made available to campus administrators for comment. With a few adjustments the present model was adopted and can be viewed at http://uakron.edu. Although this can be considered a final product of sorts, like most Web sites the University of Akron Web site is in a state of constant
evolution and so is never truly finished. New pages become available periodically and departments change format or make additions and deletions over time.

A project which had taken numerous individuals and committees a great deal of effort to launch, came together with great facility as the Web Team assumed responsibility for the finished product. This is probably due to the group dynamics of a small working team as opposed to a large committee. According to Davidson and Rusk of the University of Oregon, a motivated, supported, and well-guided team can meet demand for a new Web site in a flexible and relatively timely fashion. Other factors which contributed to the Team's ability to affect change and implement its final product were the authority with which the Team was able to act and the support it received from the Associate Vice President for Information Services. In describing a similar team success story, Davidson and Rusk assert that the team at the University of Oregon was given autonomy in its decision making but the encouragement and support of the Associate Provost for Information Services was vital. Finally, the sense of ownership and mutual trust within the Web Team created an atmosphere conducive to active participation from all members.

Although the New Media Center has just begun to address the various service needs of campus Web users, the future looks very promising. A highly talented staff, including two Multi-Media Producers, has been assembled and is operating. Services offered include teaching HTML programming, assistance in creating Web pages, programming using a variety of tools, hardware support, videotape editing including digital video, and assisting users in the creation of courseware and integrating the Web into classroom instruction.

Conclusion

As the future unfolds, change occurs more rapidly and more often. Academic libraries wishing to be at the forefront in the use of state-of-the-art technologies for information provision must become involved at the most basic level in discussions of campus technology initiatives. Whether or not a library becomes the central location of development and instruction for new technology such as the World Wide Web, is not the most significant issue. It is imperative, however, that library personnel, with their expertise in the organization and provision of information and commitment to access, be directly involved in the planning and development of information technology initiatives. Academic libraries should continue to develop new skills in existing staff, while striving to recruit new staff with appropriate skills in state-of-the-art electronic technologies, such as the World Wide Web.

Exhibit A

Campus E-Mail Announcement for April 30th Web Demonstration Session:

For E-Mail Digest: April 19 & 26
From: World Wide Web Committee
The University of Akron World Wide Web Committee will host a World Wide Web Demonstration Luncheon on Tuesday April 30th in Bierce Library Room 269, 12-2 p.m.
A series of informal demonstrations will address the Netscape browser, University of Akron Web resources, and a range of other Web resources and topics.
This is an excellent opportunity to see what's available and useful on the Web, while enjoying and informal lunch with your colleagues.
University of Akron Faculty and Staff Welcome; lunch will be provided.
Hope to see you there!

Exhibit B

Web Demonstration Survey (first session) with tally of responses in parentheses:

University of Akron
World Wide Web Committee
Survey: Web Demonstration Sessions
Please Let us Know How We Are Doing. Evaluate this Web Demonstration Session and let us know what you'd like to see in future sessions. Thank You!
1. Usefulness of information provided:
   Not Useful 1 2 3 4 5 Very Useful
   (4) (4) (7) (9)
2. Satisfaction with the Format of demonstrations:
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Not Satisfied 1 2 3 4 5 Very Satisfied
(4) (5) (6) (7) (8)

3. Overall, how Satisfied are you with this event?
Not Satisfied 1 2 3 4 5 Very Satisfied
(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

4. As a Web User, are you:
Beginner Intermediate Advanced Expert
(1) (2) (3) (4)

5. Given the informal nature of this event, what would you like us to address in future demonstrations?

6. What type of formal Web training would you find useful?

Additional Comments:

Please leave the survey in the box as you exit or return to Library Reference.

Notes


2. Ibid., Kenneth C. Green.


4. Ibid., Kenneth C. Green.

5. Ibid., Jennifer McLeod, and Michael White.


9. Ibid., Jeanne Davidson, and Cherie Rusk.

Bibliography


