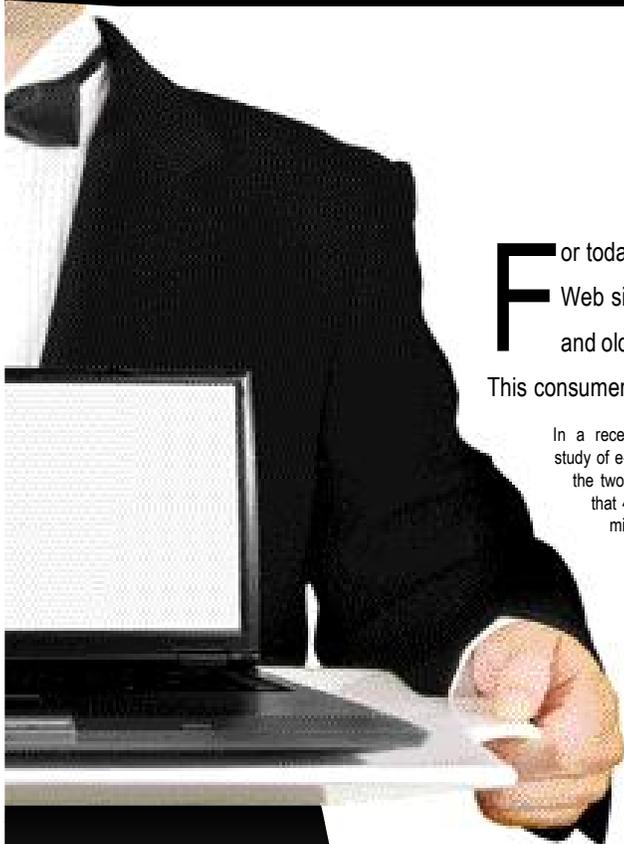


# SERVING UP SUCCESS

## on Community College Web Sites



**F**or today's community colleges, creating an engaging, responsive and effective college Web site is more than simply a goal; it's a strategic imperative. As a society — young and old alike — we've all been conditioned to shop, compare and buy off of the Internet. This consumer mentality is also proving to extend to how students choose a college.

In a recent Noel-Levitz national research study of e-recruiting practices, 52 percent of the two-year public respondents reported that 40 percent of their applicants submitted an online application as their first point of contact. For these applicants, their college selection process was most likely conducted on the Web by visiting candidate college Web sites.

Beyond recruiting, the college Web site has also come to play a major role in facilitating campus communications and delivering student services. Students have come to expect that everything from class schedule changes to downloads of

important forms are available from the college Web site. In fact, for many community college campuses, the Web site is an operational hub. It's now an indispensable tool for communicating with students and a key contributor to ongoing student satisfaction.

So with all that's at stake, what can community colleges do develop a successful Web presence? What plans, processes and tools should they put in place to ensure they have the level of control over their Web site they need to not only manage their site, but also be responsive to future student needs?

The very first step should be to look at tools which reduce the complexity and time required to manage their site's Web content. The average community college Web site is incredibly complex. It has thousands of Web pages, if not multiple Web sites, each designed to speak to a unique audience — traditional undergraduates, adult learners, part-time students, certification programs, etc. Then there are the seemingly endless requests to support new multimedia — chat, blogs, podcasts, MySpace and RSS, to name a few.

Few community colleges are able to afford a dedicated Webmaster to manage all of this complexity. And for those who are able to find a person with the necessary programming skills needed to maintain a Web site, they often find that that funneling changes through a single person really doesn't work. A better solution is to empower and enlist the support of the "content experts" within the institution to make their own changes. This would include staff from admissions, financial aid, student services and from the many other departments. They know best what students need and are the most capable of positioning the institution in the minds of site visitors.

To meet all of these challenges, there really is only one solution and that's to implement a Web content management system (CMS).

#### Leveraging a CMS to Reduce the Complexity

A CMS is much more than just a tool for editing Web pages. It simplifies the entire process, eliminating much of the complexity associated with creating, editing and publishing Web content. This includes managing the complex content architectures and multimedia mixes found on today's community college Web sites. This tool brings all of the Web site pages together under one simplified process. It creates a centralized and controlled environment where page creation, updating and publishing can be tightly managed. If implemented correctly, a CMS can do all of this cost-effectively, while leveraging existing staff and empowering content experts to contribute to the site.

Many community colleges have realized that implementing a CMS is the only way to practically keep their Web site in tune with ever-changing student needs. Most CMS solutions provide easy-to-use tools which level the technology playing field. An effective CMS can make it as easy to edit a Web page as it is to edit a document by eliminating the need to understand complex Web programming languages. This simplicity is what allows subject matter experts to become fully engaged and makes them actually want to help with the job of keeping the Web site updated with fresh and responsive content.

Another benefit of a CMS is that it gives marketing and communications departments complete control over their Web presence. A good CMS solution will provide built-in tools to allow changes to be made to content while keeping a consistent look and feel across the branding aspects of a Web site.

An effective CMS solution enables subject matter experts to become involved by simplifying content creation. Contributors use familiar editing tools to create content in a controlled environment.

In the end, the CMS solution should give institutions the tools and controls they need to improve the results that are expected from the site. For example, implementing a CMS will make it easier to adopt search engine optimization best practices.

#### Moving Past Budget and IT Resource Constraints

A CMS can be one of the best investments a community college can make when it comes to recruiting and retention. However, most institutions have historically been unable to take on the expense and effort required to implement these types of systems. With a total cost in the hundreds of thousands of dollars to purchase, implement and support, most CMS solutions are simply beyond what community colleges can afford to spend. Additionally, with marketing departments increasingly taking on ownership of the Web site, it's impractical for these non-technical users to implement a CMS on their own. They must have support from IT. And with IT resources already stretched thin at most community colleges, plans for implementing a CMS can become delayed for years.

The good news is that there is now a class of CMS solutions that is designed specifically to meet the needs of budget-conscious community colleges. Known as an "on-demand" CMS, this type of solution is delivered totally over the Web. There's no hardware or software to install or support,

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**Sara Sluss, Associate Dean for the Library and Academic Technology Services at California State University Long Beach, uses a CMS to manage content submitted by many users for the university's library web site. A CMS has removed previous bottlenecks in the content management submission, allowing for easier, faster and improved content submissions to flow to the site.**

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making implementation simple and quick – generally within a couple of weeks. And the cost for this type of solution is typically two to three times less than the costs associated with implementing a CMS.

With this level of simplicity and affordability, on-demand CMS solutions now truly allow community colleges to move past budget and IT resource constraints. It makes it possible to empower marketing, communications and other staff members with the tools they need to do the vital job of creating and maintaining an effective Web presence.

Before deciding on a CMS, remember that usability is the key – or the killer. Acceptance and use is driven primarily by ease of use and familiarity. The return on investment from your CMS choice can be zero if no one accepts or uses it. The real secret to maintaining a great community college Web presence is leveraging your CMS for all relevant parties to use, whether it's a faculty member page or student blog. All the while, remember that simplicity and control over content must be kept intact to maintain brand identity while delivering a unique and dynamic Web presence.

In today's competitive community college landscape, an effective Web presence has become vital to all aspects of operations. Traditional Web content management practices have led to college

Web sites that are often collections of out-of-date pages, broken links and uncoordinated branding. This is a significant competitive disadvantage in a world where student expectations are being driven by the exceptional commercial Web experiences they have on a daily basis. A CMS solution can quickly help a community college address these issues and help it create a Web presence that is in demand by students, faculty and staff. And, with on-demand CMS solutions, there is no longer any reason not to implement a CMS. This latest generation of cost-effective, easily implemented solutions makes it possible for just about any institution to reduce both the time and complexity of managing their Web content. With a CMS, the focus can now shift from how to struggle through making changes to Web pages to more easily serving up a Web site that helps attract and retain students.

*In her role at WebsiteASP, Fitzhugh works with hundreds of marketing and communication professionals in higher education, helping them learn more about and implement the latest technologies to improve their Web site and marketing more effectively online. She is the driving force behind the OmniUpdate Web cast series on "Website Best Practices for Higher Education."*

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