

my.newpaltz.edu

SUNY New Paltz Tackles the Problem of Portal Content Management

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The State University of New York at New Paltz

is an exciting blend of tradition and vision. At its educational core is the ever-present belief in the importance of a liberal arts education. This served as the guiding principle at the time the University was founded, in 1828, and continues to aid in the preparation of students for transition into the global community today. Equally important is the commitment to the growth of the student – intellectually, culturally, and socially. Throughout its history, New Paltz has led the way in the development of significant innovations, not the least of which has been its dedication to providing an international focus to all areas of its curriculum.

It's probably been heard and said a million times over: "Technology is supposed to make life easier." In reality, we sometimes struggle with this ideological concept; but when it happens, it's a great thing. Such was our experience at the State University of New York (SUNY) at New Paltz.

Based on student opinion survey feedback, the Division of Student Affairs determined they needed to make more outreach efforts to better communicate the services their division offers.

In the Web Management Office, our challenge was to find a practical way to make that happen without adding an extensive workload to an already small staff. After some initial struggles and a late-night epiphany, we discovered that the near-perfect solution was right there all the time. Nearly 2 years ago, we launched SunGard's portal product, Luminis, to go along with our transition to their Banner information system. On campus we refer to our portal as "my.newpaltz.edu." When we launched Luminis, we put to rest a previous home-grown portal – a portal that was near and dear to our hearts, but was no longer consistent with the University's strategic technology objectives.

We decided to create a hub for first-year students within this portal to introduce these students to Student Affairs services as soon as they arrive on campus.



To kick-start this new portal initiative, I offered to chair the new My First Year Initiative committee, which would develop and launch the new My First Year tab within our Luminis portal (my.newpaltz.edu). This committee is comprised of individuals from various student service offices and meets once a month to plan new features and content.

It goes without saying that portal content must be up to date and relevant in order to be valuable to an audience and keep them coming back for more. So, a serious threat to the success of any portal project is the content management process. As it turned out, while the Luminis product excels at its core capabilities, it quickly became obvious to me that our staff needed a simpler and more streamlined way to update the content.

Originally, we created a tab within the Luminis portal and put the specialized content for first-year students there. This content was updated monthly by one Web staff member based on changes re-



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ceived from at least 15 different sources. The exercise of gathering the information was time-consuming and required the enforcement of stringent deadlines. Unfortunately, some of the information needed to be updated weekly, even daily, to be useful to students. However, the manual process in place simply could not support this level of activity. We agonized over the process when it suddenly occurred to me that we could use OmniUpdate's Web content management software (CMS) to make the updates much more efficient. Currently, more than 11 SUNY campuses use OmniUpdate for their campus Web sites. We've been using it at New Paltz for our own site since 2004. So, many of the staff members working on this initiative were already familiar with its work flow pro-

cess. Still, making it work within Luminis required some code finagling.

Implementing Our Portal and CMS Solutions Together

Luminis is a front-end solution – users log in to get information. Channels that we create within are snippets of information. The content really has nothing to do with Luminis other than being a destination for people to access the content. The actual content files are on a Web server, and thus, only a single file in a single location needs updating, although it may appear in multiple destinations, such as the portal or somewhere on the college's main site. Since Luminis does not have built-in content management with fine-grained permission control, we got creative in finding a way to use

OmniUpdate's Web CMS to update portal content. We enabled portal channels to be editable using the CMS simply by using the "Remote HTML Reference" within Luminis for each file created and saved on our main Web server outside of Luminis. Now, each channel that is editable within OmniUpdate's CMS has a transparent direct edit button embedded in it. We can specify where on the page it is and who can do updates, even to what parts of a single page. Now, by using OmniUpdate's CMS solution, we can keep the portal updated as easily as we do any other pages on our Web site. OmniUpdate has what-you-see-is-what-you-get (WYSIWYG) convenience, combined with familiar word-processing icons, so updating content is made easier. Individuals within departments can make needed updates after one brief training session from a Web staff member.

Before implementing OmniUpdate's CMS to update the My First Year channels within our Luminis portal, every department that had content that needed updating had to e-mail my staff member or stop by with a CD/DVD/USB key with the files. As mentioned previously, my staff member was responsible for updating all of the channels himself. This required us to have stringent monthly deadlines, where some 15 channels needed updating all at once. Now, the work is more time-distributed – not all the channels need updating all at once like before, so there is no longer this big time crunch. In addition, because of the simplicity, it has empowered 10 more people on campus to update their content on their own thus, there is now even more fresh content available to students, staff and other portal users. As an example, the Office of Student Activities now updates more

Doing It Yourself

It's important to use a mix of applications to keep content fresh. In addition to OmniUpdate's CMS, we continue to use typical applications, such as Adobe Dreamweaver CS3 to create or edit Web pages and Adobe Photoshop CS3 to create or edit images. These are all applications we were already using, so there was no added or new costs that resulted from our portal implementation, implementation of the My First Year tab, or using OmniUpdate's CMS within our portal.

If you're struggling with a portal and looking for ways to improve its content management process, remember to think outside the box. When you set up a channel in Luminis, just use the Remote HTML Reference feature to point to files that reside on your main Web server so you can use a CMS, like OmniUpdate's solution, to manage the content. Don't forget to promote what you have done, to train your users and to have a "cheerleader" who rallies the troops toward project success. The My First Year portal implementation has really made communication with first-year students so much simpler, just like technology is supposed to do. ☺



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A few of the departments already had staff members trained and authorized to use OmniUpdate's CMS for their departmental Web sites, so those were the easiest to get up and running – we just had to point them to the My First Year tab and tell them which channel they now have access to update, in addition to their departmental site outside of our portal. There were probably only a handful of additional people who had never used OmniUpdate's CMS before that had to attend our standard training session. However, we simply included them in our monthly campus-wide OmniUpdate training program so there really was no learning/training curve impact in implementing the CMS with Luminis. Sometimes there was an initial fear that resulted in a typical expression of "How am I ever going to have time to update my own content?" which after they quickly learned how easy it was, we no longer heard these concerns.

frequently, so students have more current information available to them highlighting different activities and opportunities on campus.

The success of the My First Year tab within Luminis has created a spin-off this past spring for our newly accepted students. We created an Accepted Students tab, which the same Student Affairs staff members have access to through OmniUpdate's CMS to keep their channels up to date. We're working on giving access to other staff members throughout the campus to other channels not affiliated with the My First Year project, including Institutional Research and Human Resources staff who need access to update documents and policies contained within the portal.



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Web site redesigns and implemented two portals during her tenure. Under her direction, the New Paltz Web site has been awarded the SUNY Council for University Advancement Award for Excellence Best of Category three times in the last 8 years. She has grown the site from roughly a dozen to more than 10,000 pages. She oversees the Web Management Office, including the Senior Web Producer and Web Production Assistant, and works closely with the Web Programmer in IT. Contact her at reubenr@newpaltz.edu.