

Noel-Levitz White Paper

Making Web Sites an Effective Recruitment Asset

Content management solutions keep Web sites fresh and relevant—and students engaged

Have you updated your Web site today? Is it possible that answering “yes” to this simple question is the key to the success of your marketing and recruiting efforts?

In the current recruitment arena, the ability to update and maintain this one high-value asset (your Web site) might be the key to the potency of your institutional marketing effort. While e-mail, print, and other methods of interacting with students and parents remain vitally important, there’s no question that college Web sites have taken center stage in the effort to convey key messages and engage prospective students.

This paper will discuss how colleges can use a content management system to keep their Web sites fresh, relevant, and engaging to students, while also promoting ownership and participation from multiple campus users.



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Why content is still king for Web sites

Higher education has alternately plunged and stumbled its way into the era of electronic marketing. As it has gradually supplemented traditional marketing approaches and media with use of the Web sites, e-mail, blogging, and social networking, it has continually repackaged its messages to fit the medium. In the case of college Web sites, early efforts were viewed somewhat like electronic versions of print publications (“brochure-ware”)—once uploaded, they were updated only slightly more often than their paper partners.

Over time, college Web pages have been augmented by video, Flash-based design and other visual elements deemed more likely to grab and hold students’ attention than pages of text. The pressure was on to keep content fresh, make it more interactive, and hold copy to a minimum, because according to common wisdom, students who grew up in the world of e-communications were unlikely to sit still for pages of information.

A recent study, however, challenges that perception. In a survey of college-bound students conducted by Noel-Levitz, James Tower, OmniUpdate, and the National Research Center for College and University Admissions*, students detailed what they felt about the content, organization, and look of college Web sites, as well as how those elements factor into their enrollment decisions. The findings may provide a reality check for many colleges and universities struggling to manage one of their most valuable recruiting assets—the college Web site.

While the survey confirmed what recruitment offices know—that students use the Web to find information about schools—the more significant finding was that an overwhelming 88 percent of respondents said they would drop a school from their search or be disappointed with the school if its Web site didn’t have the content they needed, and 80 percent said that content is more important than design. More than half of all respondents (57 percent) said they would be likely to take a school off their list if the content presented on its Web site seemed out-of-date, incorrect, or unhelpful.

Perhaps most surprisingly, large majorities of respondents expressed a willingness to read a great deal of information on a college Web site if it pertained to their topics of most interest. Seventy-nine percent said they would read all the admissions content, even if they had to scroll to read it all, and 74 percent said they would do the same for information about cost and financial aid. The survey suggests that, while Baby Boomers and GenXers who grew up with newspapers may have demonstrated a reluctance to read Web content that they considered “below the fold” in value, Millennials seem less likely to share that bias. In fact, the effort to reduce important content to fit the top of the screen may be misguided, if not risky, in terms of meeting the information needs of prospective students.

The survey’s overarching conclusion is that in-depth content—once deemphasized in favor of multimedia and design—reigns supreme among today’s college-bound students. This stresses the need for colleges and universities to create and maintain Web sites that offer information that is detailed, accurate, up-to-date, easy to find, and focused on the issues of most concern to prospective students.

* *Scrolling Toward Enrollment: Web Site Content and the E-Expectations of College-Bound Seniors* (Iowa City: Noel-Levitz, 2009).



Known by your Web site

Given the Web site's central role in prospective students' college exploration and choice process, there is no doubt that developing and maintaining a high-quality site should be a priority for forward-thinking institutions. Increasingly, it is a college's Web site that is the cornerstone and repository of its brand—the first, last, and best opportunity to differentiate itself *from* its competitors and *for* its various constituencies.

A successful marketing and recruiting effort does not just rely on the presence of clear and powerful messages. It is equally important to be able to express the messages through a vigorous, compelling Web site that intrigues prospective students, answers their questions, and encourages them to return again and again for more information and interaction, all while continuously reinforcing a carefully honed institutional identity. A good Web site is an extension of the institution itself: thriving, growing, and changing along with the institution, while maintaining an unmistakable sense of its mission and values.

Current data suggest that colleges have a tremendous need and opportunity to upgrade the quality and value of their online content in order to strengthen identity and serve the information needs of their audience. At the same time, every institution knows firsthand the enormous challenge presented by the care and feeding of a dynamic, content-rich, up-to-date Web site.

Managing content to attract and engage

Institutions of higher education are highly complex, and their Web sites reflect this complexity. Today's college Web sites typically contain thousands of pages, influenced, created, written, and maintained by a host of people: site designers, campus Webmasters, marketing officers, and "content experts" in departments all across campus. Is it any wonder that colleges struggle to maintain Web site quality, consistency, and timeliness in the face of an audience that is constantly looking for new content?

For an increasing number of institutions, an important solution to this challenge is the employment of a content management system (CMS), a software tool that makes it possible to marry consistent design with accurate, up-to-date content across the site. A good content management system allows users to organize text, images, and files within a system that interfaces easily with the Web site in order to create new content or update information. Ideally, a CMS can be used to manage the entire lifecycle of Web site pages, using simple tools to create content, publish and distribute it, and archive material.

Successful Web CMS users focus on two essential aspects of this approach—the software tools and templates that allow users to write, edit, and input copy; and, secondly, a clearly defined organizational plan that lays out responsibility for writing, editing, approving, and proofing content for various sections of the Web site. Customized according to institutional style, structure, and staffing, this plan should specify who champions and makes final decisions about the institutional brand, which primary pages are controlled by the marketing department, and how other portions of the site are written and managed.

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Web development and management is, without a doubt, a team sport, utilizing different talents in different roles. The Web CMS makes it possible for varied campus personnel—from technical experts and graphic designers to the chief marketing officer, professional writers, and departmental staff members—to employ their skills and knowledge appropriately in support of the overall objective: meeting the information needs of prospective students.

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Reducing barriers

By providing an easy-to-use interface for writing new and editing existing material, a content management system removes many of the barriers to creating and updating information on a college Web site, offering a range of benefits for an institution striving to keep its site accurate and current.

For starters, a CMS eliminates the need for HTML knowledge and other technical skills, helping people who aren't trained in computers or Web design overcome the fear of technology and allowing for wider campus support and involvement without a loss of consistency. CMS templates also help users create clear content by guiding them to think in terms of headlines, subheads, body copy, photo placement, and other elements of a page. This guided, decentralized authoring in turn facilitates more frequent engagement with the site and faster turnaround time and for new or updated pages. Although upper-level marketing personnel and professional writers should continue to guide the main site content and write primary content, a CMS makes it easier for other campus personnel to assist in creating and updating the hundreds of other pages that comprise the body of a college Web site.

On many campuses without a CMS, Web site changes go through a single individual or just a few individuals. At best, this results in an input bottleneck and, at worst, in a high-risk situation in which one person can cause disruption or trigger a significant loss of system know-how if he or she decides to leave the institution. With a CMS in place, that risk is diffused over a larger group of people. Major structural changes can be made in less time by making modifications to the CMS templates, and there is greater site flexibility and capacity for growth.

A Web CMS also helps to address Web site funding concerns. Unfortunately, many institutions grossly underfund their sites, viewing a site launch or relaunch as a one-time expenditure like a publication. As a result, many a great design is wasted on a site that is not well-tended and soon becomes anything but timely and accurate. One of the critical benefits of CMS is that it supports the time and money invested in a good design by helping to ensure that the site is maintained and updated with fresh content on a regular basis, while continuing to enforce the brand. The cost savings of continuing to refresh a solid working site can be significant.

Meeting student expectations

Today, Web sites are expected to offer fresh, customized content for the visitor who returns not just two or three times but over and over again in the course of his or her search and evaluation process. As a result, Web sites have become starving monsters that require huge amounts of input. Without a CMS, the objective of feeding that monster adequately is likely out of reach.

Equally important for colleges is the role that Web sites have come to play as the “content repository” of an institution’s public information and focal point for its marketing communications. Increasingly, the Web site has become the landing place toward which all other forms of marketing and recruiting communications point. Based on what a student or parent finds upon arriving at a college Web site, that encounter can make or break a relationship in a matter of seconds, underscoring the need to ensure that Web content is managed accurately and effectively, combining meaningful content with a consistent brand.

The Web’s role as the hub of an institution’s marketing and recruiting efforts takes on added importance as institutions dive into the social networking arena, communicating with students through Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and text messages. Because of the granular nature of content created through a CMS, a college using this tool can channel “content chunks” from its Web site, or content repository, to any of these media. The expectation, of course, is that this content will not be a month old, but updated constantly.

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Are you ready for a CMS?

A content management system can help immensely with the herculean task of ensuring the effectiveness of the college Web site—as long as it is the right system, and is embraced by the community of campus users. A few suggestions will help guide the process:

A CMS has the potential to prompt significant, positive change in a vital campus asset, but only if it is embraced by those who use it on a day-to-day basis.

- Campuses that are most successful in choosing and using a Web CMS are those where decision-makers bring the end-users—typically content contributors, editors and approvers—into the selection process. A CMS has the potential to prompt significant, positive change in a vital campus asset, but only if it is embraced by those who use it on a day-to-day basis. Rather than searching for the system with the most exotic features, institutions should seek a balance between sophisticated features and ease of use.
- Consider the pros and cons of systems that are homegrown, built from open source software, or developed by specialized vendors. Homegrown systems may have features customized for a particular campus, but are often overly dependent on a single ambitious programmer. Open source systems use standardized parts that are cobbled together to create a campus-specific system; unfortunately, they are often more expensive and time-consuming to create and maintain than anticipated, and can again be dependent on a small crew of programmers that might leave the institution. Open source solutions often present an increased security risk as there are many authors and, when a security threat arises, a unified response is difficult. Vendor systems may have higher up-front costs, but are often turnkey and fully supported. And vendors are more likely to continue developing their systems to meet the needs of their clients. Because vendors must remain competitive in their marketplace to be viable, they tend to remain on the cutting-edge of technology. Hence, colleges can reap the benefits of these technology advancements without investing manpower in their development.
- Institutions choosing a vendor-created CMS should look for a company that understands and has a track record in higher education. Colleges and universities are large enterprises with large-scale and unique needs. A CMS that meets those needs will offer both enterprise speed and scale *and* customization capabilities through the use of comprehensive tools and application programming interfaces (APIs)—meeting current requirements while allowing the campus to adapt to evolving needs. Vendors that cater to banks, hospitals and other niche markets may not be able to give college clients the attention they need or deliver the depth of features they require. Talk to peer institutions that are using a CMS to learn about their experiences and get references.
- Compare deployment options—the use of an institutional server (installing hardware and software on campus) versus SaaS (Software-as-a-Service, or cloud computing). CMS vendors may offer both options. In many industries, SaaS is being viewed as a more favorable option as organizations look for ways to control budgets and minimize hardware and staffing concerns. SaaS generally costs less upfront and offers the benefit of predictable payments over time, making it a more economical long-term solution for many campuses.
- Content contributors across campus bring a wide range of skills and knowledge to the Web development process. Before deploying a system, make sure to explain the goals of a Web CMS and provide adequate training in its use, ensuring comfort and buy-in among users.

As essential as turning on the lights

Has your Web site been updated today?

If not, you may be missing your best opportunity to reach and recruit prospective students. Investing in a vigorous Web site is no less essential than paying for basic utilities such as water, heating and lights. And where content is king, campuses that fail to keep that content fresh and fully attuned to students' concerns are squandering their investments in technology and state-of-the-art design.

Given the challenge to sustain a living, breathing Web site using available campus staffing and resources, a reliable content management solution may be indispensable for many institutions. If used correctly, a Web CMS will make it possible to maintain a Web site that is accurate, engaging and current—while automating the flow of information to new technology platforms where students are increasingly spending their time.

Mills College: Using CMS to accomplish major Web site aims with small team

Associate Vice President of Marketing Judy Silva came to Mills College five years ago to address a common challenge. "I was asked to bring an overall consistency to our brand and how we express it through all of our media," she explains. At the heart of that process was the college's Web site, which was undergoing a major overhaul. The previous site had been managed by an off-site Webmaster with content contributors working independently across campus, Silva says. "We needed to create our visual brand for the Web and then find a way to keep our content fresh."

With a small marketing department, Silva sought a way to create and manage a fully developed site that would present the college's messages in a timely and consistent manner. "We don't have a large group of people available to manage Web content," she says. "We needed a way to help distribute content development responsibility, keeping some level of control while giving departments access to parts of the site."

Mills' Web design firm researched content management systems and brought demos of three systems to campus before choosing the one that user groups deemed the most intuitive and easy to use, Silva says. The company provided introductory on-site training for groups of content contributors.

Silva describes Mills' new content development approach as a decentralized one in which she retains oversight of "highly visible, top-level marketing pages," while other departments create and publish content through an approval process set up in each area. The CMS provides the behind-the-scenes tool that creates content without changing the look of the Web site. She says the new system is especially valuable for campus "power users" with a need to update information frequently, including the marketing department, career services, and the art museum.

"It's a great tool for updating information real time," Silva stresses. "It's tremendously satisfying to empower people to update their content as it changes. The CMS takes the need for technical knowledge out of the equation." Her next goal is completion of an undergraduate admissions micro-site, based on market research and content development support provided by Noel-Levitz, that will put the college's key marketing messages front and center and communicate them consistently through its pages.





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Questions about this white paper?

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