FYE Website 3.1: Revising for Inclusion

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Summary

In Fall 2006 a student-led team developed a plan to redesign the site for Western's FYE program, updating it to include content relevant for all FYE constituencies, while meeting University web standards and facilitating more sustainable development. This poster session describes the plan development methodology, goals of the redesign, resultant changes in use, and our future plans for maintaining the site. We conclude with our plans for the future of the site, and suggestions for further reading.

Methodology for developing site redesign goals

Dilger's class agreed to take on the project. They researched peer institutions and built a list of schools with FYE sites which looked promising. Students wrote a review of the old site, then met with Dallinger and Daytner to establish goals for the revision. Students conducted interviews with audiences identified as core site users—peer mentors, professors teaching FYE sections, and students in FYE sections. Given the user-centered design principle of privileging observed user behavior over users' stated preferences, we supplemented these interviews with direct observation of current WIU students and high school students—the two core audiences for the site. Students were observed using the old site and several prototype designs.

Results of these tests were used to shape the goals for the redesign, to develop a plan for implementing that redesign, and to complete as much of the work as possible. The new site was built in Summer 2007.

Site redesign goals

Our collaboration established the following goals for the site:

1) Build accessible, standards-compliant design based on current University templates;

2) Address more relevant audiences: prospective students, parents, peer mentors (current and prospective), first-year students, and faculty;

3) Improve navigation so all audiences are addressed directly, and content more findable;

4) Add useful information to the site, such as background on the common reading, and materials peer mentors and faculty can use in courses;

5) Make the site more attractive, by reducing the amount of text on the front page, and increasing the use of color photos throughout the site;

6) Increase the use of links on site, reducing the amount of on-site content maintained by the FYE office;

7) Add a weblog to allow easy addition of up to date news and events, and keep content up to date as FYE program is developed.

Results

Site statistics show more than 9,000 unique visitors for the FYE site since the redesign. Over 1,000 unique visitors used the faculty, peer mentor, or student sections of the site. Unfortunately, it is difficult to accurately calculate the number of visitors to the weblog because spam robots frequently targeted the site.

In 2008, the FYE site was the eighteenth most visited site at WIU, with 338,000 page views. This is a sharp increase from 2007, when FYE was #115 with only 42,000 page views. While some of these new page views are associated with the spam robots, much of the jump can be attributed to better linking of the site throughout the University and the new site's higher quality.

Though we find these results positive, we acknowledge that our staff and faculty teaching FYE courses still had difficulty getting updates onto the site. Potential users of the site may have stopped checking it when few updates were added throughout the year.

Also, by focusing more closely on the prospective and new students audiences, some detail previously available for faculty and peer mentors was inadvertently eliminated. Our staff had to increase paper-based dissemination of content previously available on the site.

Future work

Introducing a new or redesigned website is exciting, but it soon becomes outdated if not constantly maintained. While many of the date specific items from the previous website version were made more generic, the website still needs to be regularly updated and plans for including that task in a job description are being considered. As other changes are made on a complex campus, any references to such information, especially including linkages to other pages, need to be continually updated.

Additional usage of information about how the website is being used is needed. While not confirmed, we suspect that many faculty and peer mentors who work in the program are relying on meetings, handouts and emails to learn needed information which may already be included in the website. An analysis of how the website meets those users needs must inform the basis for reviewing content to determine if the appropriate content is available on the site.

Finally, we hope for additional users of the site, both on and off campus. The website needs to be made more dynamic, with timely postings included on events that are occurring (as well as being removed at appropriate times). The continued improvements and changes being made to our FYE program should be reflected in our website.

Conclusions

- FYE audiences are very diverse, but building a site which addresses all needs is possible;

- A well-designed FYE site can provide an excellent introduction to a University through deep links to a wide variety of information (orientation, student services, local events, etc); this serves prospective students, first-year students, and parents very well;

- Student involvement in FYE site design provides critical insights and ensures content is genuinely relevant to students, not a "creepy treehouse" (cf Lott 2007);

- Faculty and staff surveyed found the site achieved the goals we had established: attractive, useful, and not outdated.

- Though we succeeded in eliminating out-of-date content from the site, we need to do a better job adding news and other recent information throughout the year.

- FYE staff and select faculty need access to the web site and the ability to update via a content management system or similar software which streamlines the process.

Further reading

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Hackos, J. T., & Redish, J. C. (1998). *User and Task Analysis for Interface Design*. Hoboken: Wiley.

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Hunter, M., & Murray, K. (2007). New frontiers for student affairs professionals: Teaching and the first-year experience. *New Directions for Student Services, 2007*(117), 25-34.

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Porter, J. (2008). *Designing for the Social Web*. Berkeley: New Riders.

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