UAA/APU Consortium Library
Plan for the Web Presence

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As approved by the 2012 Web Team:
Anna Bjartmarsdottir, Daria Carle, Christie Ericson, Robin Hanson, Kathy Murray, Kristi Powell, Mike Robinson, and Coral Sheldon-Hess (Chair)

This is a “living document” that will change over time. The most up-to-date version will be available on the library’s intranet and by request from the Chair of the Web Team.
Introduction

The library’s web presence serves a crucial role in making the library a transformative experience for students and researchers. The library provides access to an ever-increasing number of resources, including hundreds of databases containing over a million books/ebooks and over 165 million articles. Virtual reference instruction, online guides, and video tutorials offer assistance with the research process, use of library resources, and many other aspects of university life. The use of social media and mobile technologies allows library staff to interact with members of the campus community in online spaces that were not previously associated with the library. At the center of the library’s web presence is the library website, which serves as a gateway to all of the resources and services offered by the library.

Due to the close ties between these areas of the web presence and the library’s mission, many groups and individuals work together to develop the web presence, including the Web Services Librarian, the Web Team, the Social Media Team, the Systems Department, the Electronic Resources Librarian, the Liaisons Team, the Reference Team, and Archives & Special Collections. Other groups, such as the Access Services Department, the Collection Development Department, the Technical Services Department, the Assessment Team, the Instruction & Reference Department, and the Dean’s Office are directly responsible for content on the library website and social media accounts. The purpose of this document is to serve as a communication tool and guide, to help the many contributors to the web presence work within a shared framework and toward a shared vision.

Current Landscape

Research shows that library websites compete with Google, Wikipedia, Amazon, and social media\(^1\), and many college students rate search engines as faster, easier to use, and more convenient than library websites\(^2\). To compete well a library website must be usable with minimal frustration for a novice library user: people approach websites with varying amounts of goodwill and trust, but patience diminishes quickly when users face difficulties\(^3\). If a website is too challenging to use, people tend to leave\(^4\), usually within 10 seconds\(^5\). The content of a library website must also be discoverable by search engines, to help guide those students who begin their research elsewhere to the best possible resources, and it must be accessible to users with disabilities.

Although the Consortium Library website received an award from the Association of College & Research Libraries in 2008\(^6\), response from students, staff, and faculty at UAA and APU has varied. The 2011 LibQUAL+ survey found that respondents used the library’s website more often in 2011 than in 2008, a trend that is likely to continue as more of the library’s resources are available online; however, the website and access to electronic resources continue to be areas of inadequacy for several user groups. The LibQUAL comments do not provide much direction for areas to improve, although there are several requests for better attention to usability and several general comments about inability to find resources. One student said “the website is rather dated,” which may refer to aesthetics, to content, or to both\(^7\).
Positive online interactions with the library promote student success by encouraging use of the library to find authoritative information and increase the campus communities’ appreciation of the value of the library. Conversely, students’ and researchers’ trust in and esteem for the library are damaged when their experience is negative. Research shows that users’ trust in and satisfaction with an organization are directly correlated with the usability of its website; therefore, every failure to provide a positive experience represents a lost opportunity for the library.

Strategy

As the library continues to design and build its website, new students must be the primary focus. Students starting their education will tend to be novices in using the library’s services, including its website. As a rule, a site that is well-designed and usable for novices will also work well for experienced users. Providing well thought out and clear starting points for novice users will also help clarify intermediate and advanced users’ progression to more in-depth information and powerful interfaces; improvements made for the benefit of students will also benefit faculty and staff. Continued improvements to website usability will also further the library’s efforts to provide library instruction with “more emphasis on critical thinking skills and less on searching mechanics.”

The Web Team has committed to an iterative approach to website improvements, rather than a cycle of large redesigns. This strategy is consistent with current best practices both within and outside of libraries. With very few exceptions, changes to the front page and major sub-pages will be scheduled to take place between UAA semesters and during the summer.

Providing a positive online experience requires 1) understanding how students, faculty, and staff use the website; 2) providing well-designed interfaces and consistency between different areas of the web presence; 3) maintaining succinct and up to date content; and 4) extending the library’s web presence beyond the library website itself. To address these areas and improve users’ online experience with the library, the Web Services Librarian, Web Team, and Social Media Team will work with the rest of the library to begin implementation of a series of initiatives, aimed not only at improving the library’s current web presence, but building a foundation to keep the library’s online presence useful and usable for our campus communities over time.

Ongoing Initiatives

Establish a methodology for user-centric design.

In order to create the most usable website possible and fulfill its commitment to “user centric library systems,” the library’s approach to design must be evidence-based, with current web design best practices, user studies by other organizations, web analytics, usability testing with UAA and APU students, and feedback from faculty all taken into account.

The Web Services Librarian will monitor usage of the library’s website using tools such as Google Analytics and will disseminate findings to the Web Team and beyond on an as-needed
basis. The Web Services Librarian will run a Google Analytics report every six months and post it in 360 for archival purposes.

Working with the Web Team, the Web Services Librarian will develop usability tests for various areas of the library website and will perform regular usability testing with students to find issues and correct them.

The Web Services Librarian will maintain current awareness of best practices in web design, user experience design, and library web development and will share relevant materials with the Web Team.

The Web Services Librarian will develop a test server to allow for testing proposed changes with students before roll-out of new features.

The Web Services Librarian will present major changes to the library website to the Library Advisory Committee, in order to receive regular faculty feedback.

**Establish best practices for design and layout.**

In order to present a unified, cohesive, professional web presence, all content developers must have access to a style guide or set of style guides to help them use appropriate terminology and formatting and follow good design practices. Additionally, as the website and the library’s services change, the website’s navigational elements require attention and improvement. Following good design practices and improving navigation will not only increase the usability and accessibility of the site as a whole; it will also improve search engine optimization (SEO). Students almost never start their research with the library website, preferring search engines, but if a library website follows good SEO practices, searchers are able to find the library and its resources more easily.

The Web Services Librarian, in consultation with the Web Team, Social Media Team, and any volunteers who wish to assist, will create an editorial style guide for the library web presence. It will include information about and examples of the appropriate voice/tone for various portions of the web presence; usage standards for terms such as “ebook,” “eresource,” etc.; and formatting and capitalization conventions.

The Web Team will examine current best practices in creating and maintaining usable/accessible LibGuides. They will collaborate with the Liaisons Team to create a written set of best practices for LibGuides. The Web Services Librarian will create templates and provide training on implementing the best practices for all guide authors.

The Web Team will work to improve the navigation elements on the library website, with the goal of making the site more closely reflect the actions users (primarily students) want to undertake.

The editorial style guide and LibGuides best practices will become part of a larger Web Style Guide, with additional information about appropriate fonts, colors, and styles and guidance about making web pages accessible to users with disabilities. This will serve as a reference for
the Web Services Librarian and any other website editors, as new content is added and old content is updated.

**Perform a content review, and establish a content lifecycle.**

Significant portions of the library website’s contents have remained untouched since the 2005 redesign. There are inaccuracies and out-of-date pages throughout the site. As an organization that points students to the CRAAP test for evaluating web resources (to be trustworthy, a website must have Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose), it is imperative that the entire library commits to maintaining an up-to-date website. Additionally, the library must utilize good practices in writing for the web\(^\text{15}\).

Members of the Web Team will undertake a content inventory and analysis of the entire website. They will utilize the editorial style guide and collaborate with the relevant departments and individuals to update and improve the readability of library website content and, where necessary, add or remove pages.

For every page in the website, a Web Team member will identify a key stakeholder or group of stakeholders with the knowledge and willingness to check periodically and make sure the page is correct. The Web Services Librarian will consult with the stakeholder(s) to create a schedule that makes sense, given the type of content on the page. The Web Services Librarian will maintain a calendar and remind the stakeholder each time the page needs to be checked. For many pages the update cycle will be once a year; some will be each semester; some may not require updates more often than once every five years. If all possible stakeholders have been consulted, and nobody can be found to maintain the content on a page, the page will be weeded.

Throughout the content inventory and analysis, Web Team members will identify opportunities to provide help at point of need. The Web Team will discuss and test methods for providing help in a visible but unobtrusive manner.

Web Team members analyzing web content will also be vigilant about the potential need for APU-specific content.

**Engage with campus communities online.**

Beyond the library website itself, the library must embrace other opportunities to create positive interactions with the campus community in online spaces. Students and faculty expect the library to interact with them on social media and in other online spaces\(^\text{16}\); therefore, the library has committed to maintaining a presence on several popular social media sites\(^\text{17}\). The library’s participation in the online conversation is an important aspect of its web presence and its engagement with its campus communities.

The library will continue to expand its web presence, to deliver library content and services to the web spaces the UAA and APU campus communities are already using.
The Web Team will collaborate with the Social Media Team to improve the representation of the library’s social media efforts on the library’s website (and vice versa).

The Social Media Team will create and maintain an up to date Social Media Marketing Plan and Social Media Best Practices.

The Web Team will refine and expand the library’s mobile offerings.

The Social Media Team, Reference Team, and Web Team will work together to explore the possibility of providing more formal social media and SMS (text message) reference.

The Social Media Team will continue to work with the Banned Books Week Committee and other groups within the library to cross-promote online and offline library programming and to represent librarians as friendly and approachable to the online campus community.

The Web Services Librarian will work with the Elearning Workgroup and other campus groups to explore methods of integrating the library’s web presence with other online offerings throughout campus.

In order to support the needs of distance students and to encourage discoverability, video tutorials and learning objects must work well with current technologies, such as YouTube, whenever possible.
Cited Works


Other Resources

D. Library websites should be smaller. http://www.walkingpaper.org/3974
E. Why we do usability testing. http://matthew.reidsrow.com/articles/12
G. Principles of user interface design: http://bokardo.com/principles-of-user-interface-design/
I. Usability.gov: http://usability.gov/
J. Fourteen heuristics used in OCLC heuristic evaluations: http://www.oclc.org/usability/heuristic/set.htm
M. Mobile Learning at UAA. http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/facultytechnologycenter/mobile/index.cfm
P. Librarian in Black. http://librarianinblack.net/librarianinblack/
R. Library Hat. http://www.bohyunkim.net/blog/