

HighEdWeb 2008  
{Infinite Solutions}

*Getting Them to the Table, and Keeping Them There: Campus Web Redesigns Require It*

Susan T. Evans  
Director of Web and Communication Services  
College of William & Mary  
and  
Joel Pattison  
Web Designer and Project Manager  
College of William & Mary

**Presentation Summary**

Leading a campus web redesign is more about bringing people to the table than it is about the technology needed for your website. Using the web redesign project at the College of William & Mary as a model, we offer strategies for achieving buy-in and executing exceptional internal communication for university-wide web redesign projects.

**The Challenge**

A college or university website is a key component of the overall communication strategy. While many institutions realize the potential value of a cohesive institutional web presence, getting there often requires “corralling” many (hundreds?) of disparate and decentralized websites. We offer concrete ideas, suggestions, and methods for establishing effective internal communication channels, creating buy-in and momentum, and reaching campus consensus about everything from a color palette to a web content management system.

**Guiding Principle**

We committed to leading the web redesign effort in a transparent way supported by a communication plan that allowed numerous opportunities for participation by faculty, staff and students.

**Background**

Following a six-month assessment and pre-planning period, the William & Mary provost (aka amazing executive sponsor) authorized and announced the William & Mary web redesign in February 2007. With leadership from IT, the web redesign had two primary goals: 1) to regenerate the usability, information architecture, and design of the William & Mary web presence, and 2) to implement improved processes and tools for web content creation and maintenance. We engaged mStoner for web consulting and the technical implementation. Our new website launched, using Hannon Hill’s Cascade Server, on July 31, 2008.

## **Methods**

The web redesign project team relied on these methods for collaboration and communication:

- building consensus and understanding *before* the project was announced
- creating a brand for the redesign project (e.g., at William & Mary – re.web)
- establishing a project website
- defining the project organization
- using web 2.0 communication tools (i.e., the project blog and Facebook group)
- understanding and relying on the power of personal communication
- systematically following up on concerns and resistance

## **Some of the Random Things We Did that Turned Out to Be Bits of Genius**

On our campus, we took credit for these as intentional parts of our plan; here we admit we stumbled upon them:

- Host web strategy meetings using a pre-meeting receiving area for informal discussion and refreshments.
- Rely on student leaders to round up other students (their friends) for attendance at focus group meetings. Translation: a friendly email invitation from IT is trumped by a text message from a friend on the day of the event.
- Create anticipation about the unveiling of the proposed design concepts and go public with them early. Make the big splash the campus reveal of the three design options, not the reveal of the final design choice.
- Every time you present to a faculty group, provide each person with the names of all faculty members who have participated in the web redesign to date.
- Share the required and preferred specifications for the CMS with anyone who shows interest. Also give them the matrix of products you are evaluating against these specifications.
- Arrange for an external and neutral expert (not the CMS sales rep) to demonstrate the two finalist web CMS products to one hundred campus web editors.
- Generate enthusiasm and momentum by using Facebook for unofficial previews and insider info and announcements (we posted a link to our preview site a day early on Facebook).

## **Tools in our Communication Bag of Tricks**

We used these vehicles for internal and external communication and to encourage feedback:

- personal visits with senior administrators and key stakeholders
- project website (with home page news and customized pages for graduate schools)
- project blog with open comments and guest bloggers
- Facebook group
- messages to a web editor listserv
- campus presentations by consultants during the RFP phase
- open demonstrations of CMS products
- presentations to departments, divisions, campus groups, board meetings

- regular updates to our campus digest
- weekly podcasts
- feedback surveys to prospective students
- persistent tell us what you think survey
- web strategy focus groups for faculty, students, staff, administrators, board members
- interviews with student newspapers
- alumni magazine and e-connections list
- re.web channel on our campus portal
- photos on the login page of our campus portal at key milestones
- email messages from William & Mary's president
- re.web postcard with the project site URL
- keeping you informed meeting with campus communication professionals
- web education events (e.g., writing for the web workshops)

### **Outcomes**

The College of William and Mary web redesign project was comprehensive and included the previously decentralized websites of four graduate and professional schools. The redesign effort was also collaborative and included: 1) a project advisory committee that was accepted as broadly representative of key campus constituencies 2) opportunities for other stakeholders to participate, thus improving the results; and; 3) extensive and successful internal and external communication plans.

- 250 participated in web strategy focus groups (including president, provost, all vice presidents, all deans, faculty, students, staff, and prospective students)
- 25 official presentations
- 220 blog posts and 314 comments in a 19-month period
- 65 personal visits to key stakeholders
- 67, 924 total hits (38% on campus; 62% off campus) on re.web project site in a 22-month period
- buy-in from all units at William & Mary including four graduate schools
- permanent, campus-wide web governance committee in place
- new website (phase 1) launched on time and within budget on July 31, 2008
- first graduate/professional school (Law) launched on September 30, 2008
- 200 departmental sites and four graduate school sites will launch by August 2009

### **Things We Learned**

Some of these (1-5) we expected, others (6-9) were a bit surprising:

1. An internal communications plan is essential for increasing understanding, building momentum, and ensuring participation.
2. The likelihood of success is increased when personal communication with key stakeholders occurs prior to the project announcement.
3. Managing the communication and facilitating decisions based on consensus is more difficult than selecting and deploying the technology.

4. Consensus is an expected goal in university decision-making; but some “non-consensus” decisions will be needed to keep a project on track.
5. Collaborative projects with defined budgets and deadlines are more typical in IT units. Leadership from IT on a campus-wide initiative can demonstrate the value of collaboration to other administrative and academic units.
6. Many campus web editors know how to “build a website,” but very few know how to communicate information or messages effectively.
7. There are lots of people who don’t know how to use their computers efficiently, and too many of them use IE.
8. Once the web professionals develop a fresh and well conceived website, we resist giving it back to the people who are supposed to maintain it.
9. You don’t have to respond to, or accept, every piece of feedback that you receive.

### **References**

Three William & Mary websites are resources for the planning and execution of an effective communication strategy:

- The re.web project site – <http://www.wm.edu/reweb>
- The re.web project blog – <http://reweb.blogspot.com>
- The Web Team blog on the new William & Mary website – <http://www.wm.edu/blogs/wmblogs/webteam>

Please contact us for more information:

Susan T. Evans | 757.221.1585 | [sevans@wm.edu](mailto:sevans@wm.edu)

Joel W. Pattison | 757.221.1777 | [jwpattison@wm.edu](mailto:jwpattison@wm.edu)