

Washington College Web Redesign: Strategic Recommendations

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Introduction

The goal of this redesign project is to make the Washington College site more like WC itself.

Washington College is a great school full of accomplished, interesting and literate people who care deeply about it. You've got an outstanding faculty, a dynamic and exciting location, and a close-knit and deeply connected community. That's not just marketing; everyone who talks about WC, online and off, knows the qualities that make WC great.

If the goal of a redesign is to present an authentic and accurate (even aspirational) picture of an institution, then we've got a great head start. There are very few angles from which WC doesn't look absolutely outstanding.

This document, a record of our findings from the research and discovery process, will translate a broad strategic goal into specific tactics. Our recommendations address issues in the general areas of content, design, community and technology. Although the nature and scope of these recommendations vary, they all constitute approaches to a common goal: bringing authenticity, clarity and prominence to WC's presence on the Web.

In formulating these recommendations, we have chosen to focus on proposals of two types. First, anything requiring immediate action is noted here; some of the ideas we propose will take work on WC's end, and we'd like to get you started right away. Secondly, we have tried in some cases to produce proposals whose content is debatable. There are some big questions to be answered in the course of this redesign; we're trying to ask them early on, and provoke discussion and debate about these key points, before we get too far into the design phase of the project.

A final note: We have written this document with the intent of making it available to the entire Washington College community, at the discretion of your committee. We are eager to work collaboratively with you at every step of this process. We ask, however, that this document not be circulated outside WC.

Now let's get started!

1. *The new Washington College site is for everyone.*

Certain pages of the WC site should of course be tailored to certain audiences— but in general the site's got to work and feel right for all its visitors. This includes current and prospective students, their parents, faculty, WC staff, job seekers, the local community of Chestertown, alumni (young and old), donors, the news media, peer institutions, and more.

Our view as designers and consultants is that *none of these audiences is inherently more important or valuable than any other*. Of course it's prospective students (and donors) who pay the bills— but what they want to see on the WC site is a thriving community of engaged students, staff and faculty working together. We can't make those people up— the community the site makes visible is one of real people. For those people to engage with the site and contribute their stories, images and ideas, they've got to feel that the site is about more than just marketing. (After all, *nobody* likes marketing— especially prospective students.)

There are some things the new site can do that all its audiences will appreciate:

- **It's got to be easy to navigate and to search.** No matter who you are, finding the information you need should be as quick and easy as possible.
- **The site should give a good sense of what's going on at WC.** This can happen through stories and events that are current and relevant, and pages that feel like they're being attended to.
- **It should be easy to see what's important and what's not.** Although there's a lot of great content on the WC site— from a content perspective, you're in one of the better starting points we've experienced— it lacks coherence. At times there's no real sense of how its various pieces fit together. A new WC design should feel intentional, with each part of the design related to its other parts, and there should be a clear visual hierarchy.
- **It should look like WC.** It should be familiar to the people who know WC and interesting to those who don't. Alumni should see the site and recognize their alma mater; to prospective students, it should convey the feel of a campus visit.

Those are the fundamental goals of this redesign project; we hope to add quite a bit of value on top of this foundation, but that baseline is non-negotiable.

2. *Small stories are the engine that powers great college Web sites.*

We talked a lot about stories and storytelling during our visit. Many folks we've met seem to assume that a news story ought to be about the same thing as a press release— researched, sourced, and written up. There's certainly a place for those sorts of stories; in-depth feature articles are invaluable on the web. But small stories are important too—in fact, sometimes a headline and a web link are enough to tell a story.

Internet geeks like us, who already consume news in fairly bite-sized portions, take this for granted. And so do most of your web site's visitors, especially prospective students. For students who are looking all over the web, and consuming information from many sources at the same time, short bits of information can communicate a great deal. Small stories mean a lot to these visitors.

Sometimes a story can be as simple as a link. There's a young man named George who's coming to WC as a freshman next fall from Cambridge, UK. He publishes a blog called "Scribblings of a British Escapist," and a music writing blog, and he's active on Flickr. Someone like George can really help us tell stories— but **britishescapist.tumblr.com** is already a pretty good story.

We'll be talking about stories like these throughout this document. Big stories make headlines, draw traffic and impress parents; but it's the small stories that enable the human connections so important to modern Web communications.

3. *Finding the energy sources on campus is the first step.*

We found George, our British escapist, in the weirdest way— by Googling "mywashcoll" to see if such a thing existed. But we're not surprised to have found him. In every redesign process we undertake, one of our most important first steps is to seek out the content generators throughout campus. It should come as no surprise that there are bloggers, photographers, videographers, etc. among the WC population.

We know Shane's doing great photographic (and, increasingly, videographic) work around campus. We've met a couple of professors who put great stuff on the Web. The Career Services staff have a lot of videos about young alums in the workplace, many of which aren't even online. Imagine how many more sources of energy there must be that we— or even WC's communications staff— haven't discovered yet! WC needs to put in place processes and practices to find the people in your community that have stories to share, and create clear channels for those stories to make it to the Web.

- **WC Communications staff should make a list of all the people on campus who can serve as energy sources for your new site.** You should keep this list accessible online; update it as people come and go; and *never stop*.

4. *Communications is about curating, not just writing.*

There are a lot of potential sources for content about Washington College. We can solicit stories from WC students and faculty; we can search the web for news; we can subscribe to feeds from everyone in WC's Social Media Users Group. (We're doing a lot of this already as part of our design process.) WC's even got a news staff of its own, with capable writers who travel around campus looking for stories.

With all this content out there, the role of communications staff is to *sort it all out* for the public. What's the top story today? What sorts of information do we want to put in front of people when they come to WC's web site? There are three interesting campus events on February 29th— which one ought to be featured on the homepage? These are the sorts of questions that can only be answered by communicators.

- **It should be the job of someone in Communications to be on top of *everything* happening online at WC.** Curating content can be a full-time job, but it doesn't have to be. In particular, the LiveWhale CMS makes it easy to follow stories and events all over campus, but it ought to be someone's job to review everything that gets entered, on a weekly if not daily basis— not to police it, but to find great content that deserves a wider audience.

- **Problems arise when the people in charge of communications are the same people who do day-to-day content management work.** What happens, often— it’s a very real problem for many of our clients— is that communications-related site management becomes an item on a to-do list along with many more pedestrian tasks like updating the Chemistry site. And the difference is that someone from Chemistry is sending angry emails, which tends to bump that item up on the list. This leads web sites slowly into disarray. It’s great to have people on staff who can make Web changes, but communications is different, and no less important.
- **The two groups formed to guide and advice the redesign process can evolve into two separate groups that continue to meet on a regular basis after the site launches.** This will make sure it continues to thrive and grow sustainably long after your consultants have left the building.

WC should create a Homepage Advisory Group that meets weekly, to set a course for the coming week’s communications; and a Web Communications Group that meets monthly, composed of everyone across the WC community involved in web communications (as distinguished from content editing). Unlike the Homepage Advisory Group— which we should have clearly defined leadership— we’d like to see the Web Communications Group be non-hierarchical, a gathering of equals to share ideas and techniques.

5. *The new site should incorporate first person voices wherever possible.*

We *can’t overstate* the importance of first-person stories on the Washington College site. There are a lot of student, faculty and alumni stories on the WC site now—most grouped under the category of “Stories of Revolution”— but they are all shaped, if not written outright, by Communications staff. While there’s a place for the well-written profile in higher ed communications, the best-written stories won’t have half the impact of good first-person narratives about real life at WC.

Great first-person stories don’t have to be about the college at all. We all know Aundra as a hardworking and dedicated admissions officer, and a member of our working group. But her Twitter account is *@poweredbyzumba*, and her blog is filled with engaging observations about pot roast, distance running, dental work and smoothies. (It’s the perfect blog, really—personal, but not too personal.) It’s wonderful reading. None of it has that much to do with WC, but learning about her gives us a great sense of the kind of person who does well at WC— and it’s that kind of emotional connection that turns prospects into applicants.

- **Give student groups a voice on the site.** WC has dozens of student groups, with affinities ranging from the religious to the service-oriented to the downright quirky. The prospects that come to the WC site will bring with them a wide diversity of interests; exposing them to as many of these groups as possible will help them find something to identify with. This might entail providing small grants to student groups to create short videos detailing their mission; it might mean allowing groups to create profile pages, and exposing those pages to prospective students. The groups themselves will appreciate the greater visibility; organizations like SGA can help keep club lists current.
- **Explore letting students dig up stories.** In addition, we recommend that WC explore creating a work-study position or two for student reporters; if you locate some students who know how to edit web video, and are interested in running around campus tracking down stories, they could accomplish a great deal in 10-20 hours per week. It’s also possible that a role could be played by the *Elm*— whose own web site is great— in collecting campus stories for the college site.

- **In striking a balance between freedom of expression and editorial control, we suggest WC err on the side of freedom.** There's always a place for an editor on the Web. But we urge Communications to bring a light touch to the editorial process, and allow real personalities to shine through, even if they don't always reinforce the brand.

6. *Integrate social media (and social thinking) into Web communications*

Many schools treat social media as something of a one-way conversation—they publish posts, people “like” them, but no real conversation happens. Schools treat social media as a box to check off—“are we on Facebook? We are? Great.”—but in reality these new platforms are just another place for people to interact and tell stories.

WC's already taken the first step—you've got a very active social media presence, and someone very talented and hardworking at the reins. But the various social media channels do still feel like a broadcast more than a conversation. The new site, and the approach to communication that will come with it, should open up new possibilities for using these platforms creatively.

- **Blogs, Twitter feeds and photo galleries made by WC people should be both incorporated and linked to throughout the site.** We want people visiting the WC site to make connections with the people and places of WC, and that can happen on or off your site itself.
- **Social media should be more visible on the WC site.** That doesn't mean a Facebook logo linking to a Facebook page; rather, we'd like to see a more thoughtful integration of content from these sources. A news story should give you the option to share it on Facebook; a single page might integrate social media posts from every student organization; the top tweet of the day might make it onto the homepage. The same kind of interactions that make social media so magnetic and enjoyable—for everyone from middle school kids to grandmothers—ought to be possible on the WC site. The existence of all these great platforms should only make that easier.

7. *“Show, don't tell” is the golden rule.*

We said this quite a bit during our visit to campus, and by now we're sure you get it. But it'd be remiss not to include that statement in a document like this.

The WC site will better represent the College by illuminating its (very real) academic excellence online. But the trouble with “academic excellence” is that you can't really say you have it; it can only be shown, not told. As a phrase, it simply doesn't mean anything: the nature of a school is to offer an academic education, and if a school is anything but a complete disaster, the education it offers will have elements of excellence.

But let's talk about *eye tracking*. We met a professor (George Spillich, apparently quite well known on campus) who has some very sophisticated eye tracking equipment that he uses in his Mind, Brain and Consciousness classes. This equipment—which we saw in person!—is available for use by undergraduates at all levels. **Finding ways to convey the actual work faculty and students are doing via text, images and media—and replicating that process anywhere on campus that it's welcome—will do more for WC's academic reputation than a novel's worth of words.**

8. *Capture a single WC day in pictures*

It can be hard to get great campus photos; in particular, professional photographers tend to be notoriously bad at capturing campus life. Of course, the things that make college fun are hard to get on film. We can't send a photographer into a residence hall and expect anything truly authentic to come from it; we can't send him into a lab without getting "research" shots that look generic; and we can't put him in a car with students headed to DC for the weekend.

What we can do is get the students, faculty and staff of WC to do that work for us. Technology has bred a generation of very skilled amateur photographers, and we are sure that if you look around, you'll find lots of people throughout campus with a good eye for campus life. Ongoing solicitation of photos should be a permanent part of your Web communications process, but we envision an additional step.

- **We recommend designating one day per season as Campus Photo Day.** This day— ideally vetted in advance for seasonally appropriate weather— should be declared open season for campus photography. On that one day, it should be socially acceptable for someone to walk into a classroom and take some photos, or walk around the tables at the dining hall with a camera, or set up a photo booth on campus. Not only would this make for a nice slideshow after the fact— "a day in the life of WC"— but it could serve as a great source of Web photos for the next few months.

9. *Present centers as a central part of the College*

There is an imbalance between the importance of the work being done in Washington College's academic "centers" and the prominence of that work on the WC site. A senior staff member called them "invisible," and while that might be an overstatement— their links are on the homepage, after all— it's certainly very hard to get a sense of what the centers are, or why they matter, by simply clicking around the WC site.

Certainly centers don't fit solidly into the typical college academic structure, so it can be hard to know how they fit into a navigation. And we know the role they play in WC's academic life is complex and always under discussion. But WC's centers fit very firmly into the mission of the College, and more attention to the work that they do will only benefit the greater institution. We want the centers to be, well, *central* to the College both in spirit and in reality. They make Washington College more interesting and multifaceted, and a better place to go to college.

- **The term "Centers of Excellence" is awkward and indistinct, and should be jettisoned.** Calling the centers "excellent" implies that other aspects of WC academic life aren't, which of course isn't true. And it's easy to interpret "centers of excellence" as places on campus where excellence is created, which is misleading at best.
- **Content created in the centers should be allowed to bubble up anywhere on the site that it's relevant.** The categorization of centers into the information architecture of the new site will be a challenge. But the work they do, the events they host, and the content they create should be visible all over the site. Your new content management system will make the technical part of this easy, with tagging and sharing features to enable the free exchange of content in this way.

10. *Landing pages for broad themes*

- **New top-level landing pages should be created for each of WC's areas of focus, to which the centers can be primary contributors.** We think it will help to communicate WC's philosophy and mission if some rich, inviting pages are created on the core themes of the institution— its coastal (and historic) location, its literary history, its relevance to contemporary political issues, and others as appropriate. Of course, the college's academic centers— whose work tends to align closely with WC's core values— would of course be a prime source of stories, events and media.

A landing page on WC's literary heritage could accommodate many aspects of academic life at WC, from the Sophie Kerr prize to the Lit House to the Creative Writing program to the *Colophon*— without the burden of figuring which department or program the content belongs to. And a page about WC, politics and American culture could incorporate content not only from the Starr Center and relevant academic departments, but from news media and other online sources.

11. *If Web tools aren't working for people, don't use them.*

Washington College is currently using a lot of third-party Web applications and services. On our visit we heard about WebAdvisor, Colleague, Blackboard, Admin, iModules, Zimbra, and the “login” page— of course, there may be some we haven't heard about.

We suggest the following exercise. Can any of these tools be used in a sentence like this?

Now that we use _____, people can _____.

Any service that can't be easily used in a sentence like this might not be a service that WC needs.

- **Separate the problems from the tools.** There are certainly Web services that are very important in a college environment. Users should be able to sign on once and be logged any applications that require login. They should be able to view their secure private information in a secure environment. And they may occasionally need to make payments online. These (and probably others) are the needs; let's address them with exactly the tools needed for the job.

We'd like to see a brand-name-independent list of the things WC's community of faculty, students and staff needs to take care of their business—and then to try to solve those problems with as few brand names as possible.

12. *Web design should lead the Washington College visual brand forward.*

- **The redesign should introduce a “Web brand” that won't immediately replace any official print marks, but could be considered a starting point for institutional rebranding.** We've detected a lot of dissatisfaction with the current Washington College visual identity. This has come in many forms, from perceived confusion among WC's brand elements—the goose, the shoreman (or sho'man), George Washington— to unhappiness over George's lack of a ponytail in the official logo. This Web redesign can't remake WC's visual brand entirely— at least not in this phase— but we can begin to address the problem and clarify the brand.

13. *The work starts now.*

Assembling the ingredients of the new WC Web site should begin long before the new WC Web site launches. Very early in the design process— in just a few days, in fact— we'll be sharing some ideas about how to start gathering stories from the Washington College community, and to begin to locate our sources of energy right away.

- “What are you working on?” WC students and faculty should be invited to answer this question as frequently as they like, to help your communicators see an accurate and dynamic picture of what the campus community is exploring on a daily basis.
- When we're talking with people about stories, let's also ask about *the people they know who have them*. Often people who are hesitant to talk about themselves too much will go on and on about the accomplishments and interests of their peers, professors, or students.
- Stories collected from the community should be available to Communications for followup, but are useful on their own as well. When those of you in the Communications staff find stories you'd like to pursue, you can follow up and write up a full piece on your own. In the meantime, these stories can form a constantly refreshing stream of sidebar items, “Did You Know?”-type content, and blurbs for use throughout the site. And in many cases— departmental Web pages, for example— faculty and students will create stories that live only on those pages, seen primarily by their own constituents.
- Content management takes time, no matter how easy the tools are. If you aren't already familiar with LiveWhale, trust us: you'll love it. A good, modern CMS makes content management easy. But that doesn't mean it happens automatically. Even if the tools make it simple, it's important that everyone with content on the Web set aside some time to work with it— whether weekly, monthly or quarterly.

— *Finis* —

