

White Paper Brief

Higher Education and the World Wide Web:

The Emergence of  
“Distributed Vendor/Partner”  
Management



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Interactive experts and casual observers agree that in the last six years, the Internet and the World Wide Web have taken the world by storm. The medium has propelled commerce through digital limitations and accelerated personal and mass communication to unimagined points of acceleration. However, in the midst of these evolutionary changes, this increasingly dynamic and ever-changing communication tool continues to astound and confound the limited/competitive resources and unique organizational dynamics of many higher education institutions across the country.

Generally, academic and non-academic administrators indicate that a university's Web site is the single most viewed and accessed institutional medium. A particular school's Web site is far more dynamic than any existing traditional communication pathway (i.e. brochures, viewbooks, alumni magazines, etc.). The medium is detailed and immediate. For example, a user visiting a university athletic Web page could expect to receive background information on coaches and players as well as scores and statistics of a particular game as the game is unfolding (i.e. in real-time).

The higher education industry understands that the continued use of technology must be a critical element of their communication strategy. However, many continually struggle to determine a balanced management model that can consistently harness strategic technological advances, provide targeted messages to specialized constituent groups, address the varied needs of the campus community and be regularly maintained with available human resources and staff time.

A 1999 article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* by writer Kelly McCollum foreshadowed the existing conundrum facing many institutions of higher education as they manage their interactive presence.

“As web sites become more sophisticated, university officials now must decide who should run them. Many institutions built their first Web pages five or six years ago with the help of an enterprising student or employee who learned HTML and designed a basic site. As Web use has grown, universities have turned more serious attention and resources to their Web presences. For some, that means creating new positions or departments to handle Web services. Others have left them under the purview of the their information-technology department. And many consider the Web, like other media, to be the domain of the public-relations department...

... A growing number of institutions are handing the site-design job over to professional Web designers beyond the university's gates. For some institutions, particularly smaller ones, outsourcing Web services can be more economical than doing them in-house. And finding an existing employee to handle a complex Web site can be hard. 'It's very difficult to identify one

person who has the expertise in computer design, art design, communications and writing,' says Mr. Tom Bruce, director of University Relations at Anderson University. 'That's a tall order.'"

And while Web sites at colleges and universities become more detailed and complex, external users of these resources continue to increase and demand immediate attention and increasingly convenient access to the campus offerings and institutional services. Amidst the growing level of expectations and competition, college and university leaders seem to be scratching their heads as they attempt to effectively justify and manage the institutional resources needed to take full advantage of this relatively new mode of mass university information delivery.

A September, 2000, article, entitled, "Surfing for the Right School" written by Rachel Hartigan in the 2001 "Best Colleges" edition of *U.S. News and World Report* provides a snapshot of the interactive attention received by some colleges from prospective students.

"Another recent study found that half of high school students had turned to the Web at least six times during the previous month in search of college information. Individual colleges also are noticing significant increases in the number of high school students contacting them through their Web sites. One third of Kenyon College's [Gambier, Ohio] applicants, for instance, first heard about the school on the Internet, up from none a few years ago. And last year, for the first time, the College of Wooster's incoming freshman class used the Web more than books to learn about the school...

...Colleges have been slow to realize the recruiting potential of their Web sites in part because most were started as student projects—places to tinker with computer languages like HTML or Java, for example—and so were anything but polished. But now, administrators are taking control of the sites and transforming them into stylish marketing tools for luring surfing high schoolers."

Currently, most Web sites throughout the higher education landscape are managed using one of three distinct models: distributed authorship, central Webmaster management, or vendor management. Each model differs in the way the content is assembled. With a distributed authorship management model, specific content is created, edited, and posted by various campus users managing specific sections of the corporate Web site. Many users manage their pages of information utilizing Web site creation software such as Microsoft FrontPage, while others maintain their department areas with more advanced developmental software. Very little attention is given to consistency with other pages of the site, but change can, and does, happen immediately.

The corporate Webmaster management model allows for greater consistency between pages, but also introduces potential "bottlenecks" by requiring a key person or team to handle all campus requests for edits, creation, or deletion. The Webmaster model allows key information to

be presented in a consistent message with a certain attention to the corporate brand, but sometimes sacrifices speed of delivery and the ability to handle large requests.

Working with an outside vendor will allow a campus the greatest possibility of brand consistency throughout a Web site, but forces the community to rely on one key person (or perhaps a team) to relate all needs from the campus community to the Web site. Turn around time for outside vendors can be an extremely aggressive schedule at the start of a Web site in accomplishing many tasks simultaneously, but the ongoing support of daily tasks soon becomes more than can be accomplished in an affordable and efficient model.

Like many universities and college across the country, Anderson University in Anderson, Ind., developed a Web site in the spring of 1996 with the help of a computer science class. Between 1997-98 a group of gifted computer science and graphic design students redeveloped the university Web site with technical support from the university's computing services department. In the spring of 1998, the university made the determination that the institutional Web site should be viewed as an "external medium" with on-going oversight and management provided through the area of University Relations.

Subsequently, a consulting / vendor relationship was formed with Brainstorm in Indianapolis, Ind., and a new—highly sophisticated—version of the AU Web site was launched on Oct. 5, 1998. Within the last two years that the AU Web site has been managed by University Relations, there have been some interesting statistics recorded and several enhancements have been implemented. Since Oct. 1998, the entire Anderson University Web site has grown from approximately 600 individual pages to more than 2,000 individual pages (see attached graph). The number of "unique" external users of the AU public Web site has grown from approximately 800 per day in October, 1999, to approximately 2,000 per day as of this reporting date (see attached graph).

The AU Admissions office has reported that among the total number of applications received for the current fall, 2000, semester, 14 percent were directly received through the AU Web site. Among the total number of persons who matriculated into the university for the fall, 2000, semester, 8 percent applied through the AU Web site. As of last October alone, 53 applications have been received by AU Admissions through the AU Web site for the fall, 2001, semester. According to a recent admissions report, between the top 10 "major points of contact," between prospective students and the university, the AU Web site was the second highest "source of inquiry"—just underneath counselor visits to high school college fairs. This particular fact about the AU Web site and its overall effectiveness was reported nationally last month within the "Best Colleges" edition of *U.S. News and World Report*.

With the work accomplished with the Anderson University Web site, as well as the close relationship that Brainstorm and Anderson University have maintained throughout development, a new Web site management model has emerged—namely the "distributed vendor/partner" management model.

The distributed vendor/partner model allows for an outside partner to work closely with a campus community to develop key technology that will allow critical and key information to be updated by campus users while maintaining a consistent brand and overall structure representative of the campus. An on-campus individual or team works with an outside vendor/partner to develop additional technology to provide an easy interface for frequent and meaningful updates by a distributed group of individuals. Such technology is based upon common browser usage already installed on campus computers and secured by individually assigned usernames and passwords. Such a model allows a tighter control of the corporate brand with a greater base of distributed content creation and maintenance.

Campus “brand managers” must continually justify a balanced approach (internally) when directing an institutional communication medium. Brand managers who are involved with the direction of the university’s Web site understand the inverse relationships that come along with the management of a Web site (i.e. depth and scalability as well as brand equity and reaction time to name a few).

The final direction of this analysis (expanded version scheduled for release in January/February: 2001) will provide an broader historical basis of the higher education industry and the Internet, compare and contrast—with significant detail—the three most common web site management models used by administrators in academe, highlight the inverse relationships of Web site management mentioned previously and provide a possible alternative approach for wider consideration.

The expanded discussion will present opportunities and statistical evidence regarding a “distributed vendor/partner” Web site management model as well as mention the various challenges and opportunities that a campus-wide Web site brings to an audience of internal users, students, alumni, friends, donors, and other constituents of higher education. Evidence (both statistical and anecdotal) will be gathered from a wide variety of sources and from various colleges and universities.

Just as an architect of physical material designs an office building, an organization's Web site should be designed and planned by an architect of information. The ultimate goal is to provide visitors with an effective Web site that meets marketing objectives and consistently delivers dynamic content to improve not only the Web site, but also the entire organizational process.

Higher education institutions interested in providing information from their institution for incorporation in this white paper or receiving a final copy of the analysis are encouraged to contact either Bart Caylor at Brainstorm ([caylor@getzapped.com](mailto:caylor@getzapped.com)) or Chris Williams at Anderson University ([williams@anderson.edu](mailto:williams@anderson.edu)).