

Summary of Conclusions/Recommendations for the Holy Cross Web Site

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Web and Electronic Communications Steering Committee (WECS) conducted a four-month critical evaluation of the Holy Cross Web site www.holycross.edu and related web-based communications initiatives from the College. With over 17 million page views in 2004, WECS acknowledges the Web site has become the primary “public face,” and therefore, the leading communications medium, between the College and its external users (prospective students, alumni, and other constituent groups such as academic peers, members of the press, and researchers). Affirming that the experiences users have with the site strongly influence their perceptions of Holy Cross, the committee finds that the current site – implemented in 2001 – does not parallel the excellence of the institution nor does it reflect the dynamic daily life of the College.

With rapid innovations in Web technologies resulting in higher user expectations, and a highly competitive market of schools consistently updating their own designs and offering new features, WECS recognizes that the role of maintaining a proactive academic site has become significantly more demanding. What started out as a static presentation of news and information on the College has become an interactive medium – a daily communiqué – of life at Holy Cross, requiring commensurate resources and staffing. The group concludes that changes regarding design, architecture, funding, policy and maintenance are necessary in order to effectively position Holy Cross on the Web as the nation’s top undergraduate, Catholic, Jesuit, liberal arts college.

With the goal of improving Holy Cross’ national visibility, the recommendations detailed within this report include; the hiring of an expert consultant to complete an in-depth site analysis and conduct market research on the needs and desires of our constituents; the creation of a robust funding path (comparable to print publications) to cover the costs of additional personnel and new technologies the site requires in order to be competitive, as well as a clear definition and understanding of the role of the Web in the College’s overall marketing and communications strategy, agreed upon by top level administration and communicated to the entire Holy Cross community.

INTRODUCTION

Nineteen individuals representative of the College's major divisions and constituent groups (Appendix A) were asked by Public Affairs to participate in a critical evaluation of the effectiveness of the Holy Cross Web site and new media (e.g. Alumni e-News e-mail newsletter) as marketing communications tools. This ad hoc group, the Web and Electronic Communications Steering Committee (WECS), considered a broad variety of resources, information and research over a period of four months to arrive at the recommendations put forth in this report.

At the outset, committee members were provided with several background resources on the Web, the Holy Cross site and new media, including: an extensive annotated bibliography (Appendix B), the results of a site evaluation done in 2001 by a pro tem Web Steering committee, the results of a site usability study conducted in 2003 with prospective students, site traffic reports from 2004 and the returns from selected new media campaigns. As WECS's work progressed, its members also undertook various analytical projects to assess the state of the site. Branding and benchmarking analyses (Appendices C & D) were conducted based upon comparisons of the Holy Cross site to 73 other academic institutions; chosen because of inclusion in one of several key competitive sets. Card sorting exercises were performed to hone site resource classification schemes and a survey of Web site users' feelings about the site was written and administered via the Web, eliciting nearly 2000 responses (Appendix E).

As a result of the studies undertaken, WECS concluded that many improvements and changes should be made to www.holycross.edu in order to maximize its effectiveness as a marketing communications tool. These suggestions are discussed below by topical area.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

MISSION STATEMENT/JESUIT IDENTITY

The guiding influence underlying all that we do at Holy Cross, the elements of our mission and our Catholic, Jesuit identity are also our main differentiating factors and need to be explicitly represented or referred to from the home page, as well as more extensively integrated with other content throughout the site.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION/REACH

Many research reports exist to show that external audiences infer characteristics of an institution from its Web site characteristics (Appendix B), yet in a survey of site visitors conducted by WECS, users rated the Holy Cross site as being only slightly above average and over 700 respondents wrote in recommendations for site improvements. The committee strongly believes that in order to elevate the public perception and the national visibility of the College, the quality of the site needs to be enhanced to reflect the true excellence of the institution.

Worcester

Only one short page on the current Holy Cross site discusses the advantages of our home city. It is important that an engaging approach be taken to present Worcester as an attractive, vital location in order to attract the highest quality faculty, staff and students.

Summary of Conclusions/Recommendations for the Holy Cross Web Site

GRAPHIC DESIGN

The design currently in use on the majority of the Web site – originally created in 2001 – is now outdated by Web standards and, in surveys, constituent users noted its outmoded appearance. Technology and design trends change particularly rapidly on the Web and if the Holy Cross site doesn't plan to keep pace with those changes, the institution itself will appear outmoded as well.

CONTENT AND ASSETS

After reviewing benchmarking analyses and user survey responses WECS found deficiencies in page structure, news, copy, photography, multimedia and constituent representation. Seventy percent of site users responding to open-ended survey questions requested improvements in the amount and quality of site content and assets. Selected responses pertaining to these issues include:

- “The homepage does not accurately reflect the College. I’ve seen high school sites that appear more prestigious.”
- “...in a word, it’s mediocre, and I thought HC was about excellence.”
- “Appearance and design seem inferior to other college Web sites, needs more frequent updating especially for College news.”
- “It’s not updated with enough detail, and there should be more pictures/visuals. When I visit the site, I want to feel like I’m visiting the school itself.”

USABILITY AND FUNCTIONALITY

The ease with which a user is able to make sense of the information and perform the tasks which prompted the site visit have a large impact on the perception of the quality, credibility and competence of the institution (Appendix B). Several enhancements to usability and functionality are necessary to ensure site visitors come away with the best possible impression of the College.

RANKINGS IN EXTERNAL SEARCH ENGINES

Many external constituents use commercial search engines such as Google or Yahoo to locate information about Holy Cross or find resources provided on www.holycross.edu. Because search engines are constantly changing the way they index sites, it is necessary to engage in ongoing assessment of optimization techniques to improve the College’s rankings. Continual evaluation of how Holy Cross codes pages and structures links is critical to ensuring the College ranks as highly as possible in external search engine results listings.

OUTSOURCING

Hosting information or web applications on servers which are not part of www.holycross.edu can decrease site usability and coherence, dilute branding and message delivery and reduce perceived credibility. WECS acknowledges that in certain circumstances outsourcing web sub-sites is the only workable alternative to achieving the desired results, as was the case with the Bookstore Catalog. When sub-sites are outsourced, steps should be taken to mitigate any potentially detrimental effects to the site as a whole.

MAINTENANCE/MANAGEMENT

Content-related Web site maintenance involves several distinct functions:

- maintenance of the elements of the site that are unique to the Web (design, architecture, link management, code, etc.);
- assessment of the need for and creation of new assets: copy, photography, graphics or multimedia;
- review of the site for errors in and updates to Web elements and assets;
- creation of new or modified designs, architectures and page layouts to incorporate content additions;

**Summary of Conclusions/Recommendations
for the Holy Cross Web Site**

- ✦ development and enhancement of content-centric applications (media guide, e-cards, etc.);
- ✦ exploration, mastery and adoption of emerging software, practices and standards;
- ✦ support, training and troubleshooting for contributors.

The number of functions involved in maintaining sites requires more time away from the central responsibilities of most departmental webmasters' positions than is manageable or available. What started out as a more static quarterly publication of basic information on the College has become an interactive medium – a daily communiqué – of life at Holy Cross. Realizing this, the committee feels strongly that the current system of appointing one person to act as webmaster within each department is insufficient for maintaining sites in an optimal manner.

RECOMMENDATIONS

MISSION STATEMENT/JESUIT IDENTITY

- The mission statement and its fundamental guiding questions should be made more visible and should be reflected throughout departmental sub sites.
- Clear descriptions of our Jesuit, Catholic identity and the value of a Jesuit education need to be explicitly stated.
- The Spiritual Life gateway page should be more fully reflective of the spiritual experience at Holy Cross, instead of merely acting as a navigation aid.
- Online news stories, headlines and abstracts should be selected and tailored to reflect the mission of the College.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION/REACH

- A consultant firm should be hired to complete an in-depth site analysis and conduct market research on the needs and desires of our constituents
 - Prospects should be particularly targeted, since this constituent segment was not well represented in the user survey
 - Resources should be earmarked to investigate the use of the Holy Cross Web site in secondary schools in order to accurately gauge any implications this has for communications/promotion with prospects.
- Maintaining branding consistency across the site as well as between print and Web communications is essential to avoid diluting our message.
- Print publications should tie-in with and lead readers back to the Web site (to help track campaign effectiveness).
- The reach of Holy Cross news could be further extended by creating customized syndicated news feeds (RSS) as additional information delivery channels.
- Increasing the use of electronic newsletters would help build and strengthen constituent relationships.
- Taking steps to improve search engine results, both internally and externally, would make www.holycross.edu more easily accessible via the Web and increase user satisfaction.
- Improving usability and reducing error rates would also help improve the public's perception by increasing user satisfaction.

Worcester

- Add content and assets illustrating the advantage of the school's location - with testimonials on all that the Worcester area has to offer (include multimedia features).

GRAPHIC DESIGN

- The existing design should be updated as soon as possible.
- A schedule redesign cycle of once every three years needs to be adopted and budgeted for accordingly, as is the standing procedure for print publications.
- Increased use of multimedia (Flash, video) should be used to enhance the visual interest of the site.
- Greater consistency should be maintained in design and layout.
- The design should incorporate a softer color palette, with less reliance on dark purple, and larger or more prominent fonts.
- The page layout should change to allow more room in the center of the page for content display with optimal use made of the available screen area (liquid format, 600x800 or 1024x768 resolutions).
- Student organization sites should receive major improvements in design and navigation.

Summary of Conclusions/Recommendations for the Holy Cross Web Site

CONTENT AND ASSETS

- Significant fiscal support will be required for production of professional-quality content and assets.
- Additional staff members need to be hired to proactively produce new content, particularly copy and photography, in collaboration with departments.
- Increased use of multimedia should be used to enhance the interactivity of the site (Flash, video, streaming audio and video for lectures, a virtual orientation, streaming media of athletic events).
- Increase the amount of news reported on the site as well as the number of student, faculty and alumni profiles, testimonials or highlights; using lead-in abstracts and thumbnail images to draw attention to these items.
- News and profile headlines should be listed on any applicable department pages as well as on their respective index pages.
- More frequent updates of both copy and photography should be made in all sub-sites.
- Include a larger number of photographs, select more recent photography, and use shots which are more natural, less posed.
- Provide more organic information in first-person voices about life inside Holy Cross using features such as diaries/blogs.
- Create more content that accurately conveys the academic excellence of Holy Cross including more information about faculty publications and research; stories about faculty and student collaboration and stories about student research.
- Create an Academic Life gateway page similar to what is done with Spiritual Life that would include a general statement on the academic life of the College with links to specific departments.
- The Student Life section of the site should be organized in a manner that is more reflective of actual student activities, interests and needs, rather than the current focus on Student Affairs' departmental structure and should include content that reflects the "close-knit community" that fosters strong relationships at Holy Cross.

USABILITY AND FUNCTIONALITY

- Maintain greater consistency in architecture and navigation, keeping Holy Cross (global) navigation consistent to the fourth level and adding gateway pages on inconsistent sites to improve external search engine indexing.
- Add constituent navigation for quick access to resources (particularly a page "For Students" with similar pages for internal & external constituents).
- Improve the relevancy of Holy Cross' search engine results.
- Provide access to syllabi, assigned readings and the course guide (investigate enabling guest features in applications that are now closed to the public).
- Allocate more Web development resources to creating or enhancing content-related, interactive applications (online event registration, polls/surveys, renovated e-cards, event calendar, media guide, image database). Create interactive applications that allow prospective students to match interests with programs/majors as well as with experiential learning opportunities like internships.
- Customize individual Quick Links menus for each constituent navigation page and standardize the types of links included in the menus.
- Provide resources to support AOL and dial-up testing of pages & applications.
- Include more areas on the site for interaction, open discussion and community-building (blogs, chat rooms, "forums," alumni networking).
- Provide better class year Web sites on which alumni could post more information and photos.
- Offer personalization options for key constituent groups.

RANKINGS IN EXTERNAL SEARCH ENGINES

- Move to XHTML doctype styled with CSS.

Summary of Conclusions/Recommendations for the Holy Cross Web Site

- Reduce the number of orphaned pages.
- Add target keywords in title and meta description tags.
- Encourage and train for reduction or elimination of Microsoft Word contamination in page code.

OUTSOURCING

- Sites on non-Holy Cross servers should share common design and content features with the official College site.
- When outsourcing is deemed necessary, provisions should be made to fund customization of outsourced sites during the initial planning stages.
- Disclaimers should alert users when they go from the Holy Cross site to an outsourced site.
- These issues should be addressed by adding a section on outsourcing to the official Web Policy (http://www.holycross.edu/web/web_policy.html).

MAINTENANCE/MANAGEMENT

- The site should be actively audited on a regular basis, and departments without staff to make Web updates should be provided production assistance as needed.
- Web editors in Public Affairs should be given the authority to set direction and guidelines, enforce consistency on the site and update or edit pages for departments that don't have sufficient staff.
- A more proactive, less decentralized approach to Web editing may need to be adopted, with Web editors actively auditing sites and suggesting updates in lieu of waiting for departments to request help with outdated content.
- Support for widespread implementation of the Mediasurface content management system is needed to provide a simplified editing environment.
- It is essential to more effectively communicate the constituent services available on the site and the assistance available through Public Affairs, Educational Technology and ITS for site contributors.
- A clear definition and understanding of the role of the Web in the College's overall marketing and communications strategy must be agreed upon by top level administration and communicated to the entire Holy Cross community.
- Development of a maintenance plan is recommended to keep student organization sites updated by having staff assist students, perhaps using SGA to coordinate the effort, would help avoid sites becoming neglected after the member who had the interest and ability to maintain the site, leaves the college.
- A 'working group' should be established to regularly conduct Web surveys, focus groups, user testing and benchmarking analyses so site improvements can be made on a continual basis.