

Washington College ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES: General IA & Content Recommendations

The notes below refer to information architecture (IA) and content strategies particular to administrative office sites. In addition to these, please refer to the IA and content best practices document (Best Practices-IA & Content.doc) that outlines our strategies for organizing and presenting web content.

Content Strategies: General

In conducting a general review of administrative office sites, we've discovered a few issues needing particular attention.

1. Don't get bogged down in the details (right away).

It is often tempting to put a load of detailed information on your homepage or even top-level pages. But not everyone will need all of the content you are providing— some will need certain bits of info, others will be seeking just the basics, and all will appreciate help in finding the particular information they need.

Office homepages (and top-level section pages if you have a large site with many sub-pages/sub-sub-pages) should be treated as gateways or guides to content deeper in the site. They should be short, succinct, and written in a friendly, welcoming tone. (See specific homepage recommendations below.)

Think about how you might explain a procedure to someone calling your office or what you might ask them in order to figure out the information they need. Use this knowledge to structure your top-level pages in a way that guides your various audiences to their particular content.

Use of links within your main body text to guiding visitors from the homepage to specific content. If you know a lot of people come to the site looking to get a certain document or bit of information, make it easy for them by creating a call-out box of "Important Links" or "Most Downloaded Forms."

Finally, remember, regardless of the amount of information you need to provide, heavy blocks of text are hard to read on a computer screen. You may need to make your information more web-friendly (using tips provided in our Best Practices documentation).

2. Expand your thinking about audience.

Some administrative offices may feel that they serve internal audiences exclusively. But many, like Health Service and Counseling, Public Safety, and the Registrar are visited by prospective students curious about the College's services and offerings. Thus, it is critical to make the content clear, easy to navigate, and not too jargon-y (new students and first-year faculty may not be familiar with the inner workings of Washington College either).

3. Feel free to have a little fun.

Office sites can be fun too. Allow your personalities to come through! One of the many things that distinguish Washington College from the University of Maryland (or any larger institution) is the small community of staff members who truly care about and connect with students. The website should reflect the personal touch you provide and the genuine care and concern you have for the WC community. We are not recommending total frivolity though— as an official Washington College site it must uphold certain standards and always reflect well on the institution.

Some ideas: Feature a staff member each month highlighting what they do on campus and in their free time. Create video clips of people explaining the answers to common questions. The more engaging your site is, the more likely you'll be serving your audiences better which will mean fewer phone calls from confused students/parents/staff/faculty. And less work in the long run!

4. Each page on the site should have unique content and purpose.

Connecting the information you provide on your own site to the College's main institutional site and other office/department sites and vice versa will be crucial to the success of Washington College's web presence. Our goal is to make sure content is accurate, up-to-date, and not duplicated.

Take care not to post information that is already maintained on the institutional site (ex. directions to the College) or on another office site (ex. parking fees). Use links in the text to guide visitors to information hosted elsewhere. This does not apply to news, events, stories, announcements, and other dynamic content that should be shared throughout the site.

As part of your review process, ask yourself: *Does this information exist elsewhere on the site? And related, is there someone else on campus more directly in charge of this information that I should be coordinating with?* If the

answer is yes, then briefly mention the information and link to the primary source page. This step helps cut down on the size of the site and ensures that each page has a unique purpose.

5. Keep it simple.

Don't bite off more than you can chew over the long haul. Veer away from incorporating too many moving parts. Starting small with fewer pages to maintain is infinitely better than rolling out a large and brilliant website that looks great this year but quickly becomes dated because you can't maintain it.

Updating the website needs to be a regular part of someone's routine. And even if you stay on top of things like events or news, make sure to schedule a few times each year (or at least once) to go over your entire site looking for dated information.

6. It's okay. Let it go.

Dated material needs to be reviewed and either transformed to fit into an archive or simply deleted from the public website. An archive should not be a bottomless pit of web pages that are simply moved **as is** to a different section of the site. Out-of-date pages/content should be edited to change verb tense, with a synopsis/lessons learned section added before moving it into the archive.

You may want to keep the content of a page around (off-line) for your own reference, but seriously consider if it's at all relevant to your web audience today and the impression it makes.

***Example:** Your office started a newsletter 7 years ago, published it quarterly for 3 years, and then stopped. Now your News page still lists the newsletters with the most recent issue being 4 years old (and counting).*

At best your site visitor will think you've forgotten to update this page; but at worst they will think other parts of your site are not credible because no one seems to be maintaining them. The newsletters, from this example, could be kept on the site if you add an introduction that recognizes them as a lapsed effort, point out (and link to) a few things that might still be interesting, and mention any new locations for department-related news.

Otherwise, it's time to clean house. It'll feel good.

Content Recommendations

Office Homepage

Your office homepage serves as the gateway. It should be energetic, clear, and representative of the office. No matter what you do, it should make a visitor *want* to continue to seek out the information they need. Develop a homepage content strategy that will clearly communicate and strengthen your office's goals and services.

Office homepages should incorporate both introductory text (a brief, welcoming introduction to the office) and dynamic content (news, events, photos, blog headlines—if you have them). Your main goal is to funnel people to the information they are seeking and along the way show them things they may not expect, but you'd like them to know— announcements, upcoming events, etc.

The introductory text should be between 50-150 words. Adding to that other dynamic content, you should strive for around 150-250 words total on the page.

Static Text

The static homepage content should include:

- A short **opening paragraph** in large type that offers a basic welcome and an overview of the resources and services you provide.
- A few additional sentences/paragraphs that reference the most important internal site content with **in-text links** to those pages. But don't over-do the links—their effectiveness is lost when everything is emphasized.

News & Events (dynamic content)

Office homepages may want to have dedicated real estate for news, events, and/or announcements. The design will allow for flexibility, though. Not all offices will have events or news and there will be down times for everyone. Site administrators will also be able to populate their homepages with other dynamic content such as Twitter/Facebook feeds, RSS-driven general Washington College news, office blog posts, etc.

The new site will have the ability to share content too. You can show news produced elsewhere on campus and others will be able to post your events, news, and announcements on their pages if relevant.

Other Media (dynamic content)

Offices should have the capacity to present video, audio, and office-specific images on their homepages. Images and video used on homepages should be of high quality, with bright colors and good composition. Think through how other media will help to further your communication goals.

Homepage—Other Features

An easy way to highlight content for one or more of your audiences without adding it to the body text or placing it in the subpage navigation is to incorporate a “Related or Important Links” feature. This feature gives you another way to guide your audiences by pointing out additional pages of interest to the topic of the page.

Title this featured list of links appropriately—if you have a bunch of forms for people to download, call the list **Required Forms**. **Other Sites** might be a good title for links to external sites with related information. **For Parents** could highlight pages that are of particular interest to that audience.

Inside pages

Static Text

Many of the current office inside pages are cluttered and overburdened with text. This text is often cut-and-pasted from print documents and has not been adapted for the web. Web pages offer opportunities to showcase ideas through photos, video, and other interactive media and allow you to use links to lead your audiences to explore things in more detail.

Heavy blocks of text are hard to read. Please refer to our *Best Practices* document for suggestions regarding sub-page headers and other tactics to break up information.

Review and revise internal department pages with a focus on tightening up the writing; making it more succinct and rich with office-specific examples; and incorporating in-text links. And remember: it’s best to simply remove out-of-date content.

Dynamic Content

Any internal page might benefit from a photo gallery, news story feed, profile, video, etc. as a complement to the text. Do you have some casual photos of your staff that could be uploaded to a photo gallery on your staff page? Have you been collecting testimonials from students that could rotate on a program page?

All of these things will make your site richer and more interesting. But make sure you have the capacity to keep it up. Staff photos won't need constant refreshing but other types of content will. For something like student testimonials, you need a new one every month (very minimum every 2 months) during the school year and once during the summer to consider a specific dynamic content feed of this nature. Infrequent updates can simply be lumped in with general office news. Photo features need refreshing once a semester (once a year at least).

Navigation / Information Architecture

General Guidelines

Office site navigation should follow the same IA guidelines as presented in the *Best Practices—IA & Content* document. In reviewing the current IAs for offices, we've found a few of these to be particularly relevant:

- **Keep navigation lists under control.** Sub-page navigation lists should be no more than 6-10 links long. Many sites have more than this. The shorter the better. Create hierarchy. Group pages and information together intuitively.
- **Link only to pages within the section.** With few exceptions, the navigation should link to internal pages only. Links that are part of the primary navigation should never lead to another site or to a PDF or other downloadable file.

Changing your “About this Office” page to “What We Do”

About pages tend to rely on—or, worse, consist solely of— mission statements. Your external audiences need more concrete information from you. They need to know what kinds of services and resources you provide and how they go about accessing them.

We recommending that all offices consider adding or replacing their current About pages with a **What We Do** page that provides specific details and examples of your work and services, and gives visitors clearer insights into the type of resources they can expect from your office.