

Washington College

ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS:

General Information Architecture & Content Recommendations

Introduction

In 2012 and beyond, the web is *the* place people go for information. They **expect** to find accurate, interesting content. If your pages are out-of-date or severely neglected, people won't cut you slack. They won't think: "Oh, they must be too busy to update their site." They will think that whatever you have on your site accurately reflects the department, its people, and activities.

Does it?

Academic department and program sites are an important source of information for prospective students, and one of Washington College's biggest recruitment opportunities. One thing we know about these students—especially top prospects—is that they pay close attention to department and program sites, often more so than to conventional "marketing" pages. Some may have only one department in mind; others visit several to get a general sense of the faculty, courses, student research and opportunities, etc.

Beyond prospective students, are your current students finding your site helpful? They will look to it when considering which courses to take next semester, whether to pursue a major or minor in your department, and what additional opportunities are available to them. They'll be flipping between departments too, comparing courses, figuring out how to meet their general requirements, and so on.

Finally, academics from across the world—prospective faculty, journal editors, academic conference organizers—will search these sites to find out more about the character and caliber of work being done at Washington College.

Our goal is to help you produce friendly, well written, consistently organized, and engaging academic department and program sites that benefit all constituents. Updating basic page text on these sites is now easier, allowing for more time to incorporate news, events, and multimedia—things that contribute more depth and authenticity to a site.

General Recommendations

1. Follow the same basic homepage content strategy.

The information currently provided on department/program homepages is all over the map. Some have a few short and engaging paragraphs describing a student's likely experience in the department, while others offer very long, general descriptions of their area of study. Some list recent news and upcoming events, and with others a reader would have no idea if anything happens beyond classes. On top of this, quite a few departments currently use their homepages to post anything and everything—expecting site visitors to wade through everything to (hopefully) find what they need.

While we recognize that departments vary widely in size and capacity, we describe in the ***Content Recommendations*** section below a flexible approach that we hope will bring some standardization to departmental homepage content. This should help your external audiences find similar information across many different departments and programs.

2. Use a standard yet flexible information architecture (site navigation).

Prospective (and current) students browse through departments and programs when comparing colleges and universities, deciding which courses to take, looking into the resources in various departments, trying to decide on a major, etc. Because of this, information should be similarly organized.

We are recommending a common, yet flexible, information architecture for department and program sites. See details below.

3. Implement a clear navigational path between all departments/programs as part of the design template.

A “department switcher” will help visitors switch from one department to another easily. White Whale will implement an expandable/collapsible list of departments/programs that is integrated into the design template.

4. Have Communications staff assist in maintaining department and program homepages.

The interest and capacity of each department and program to create and maintain content varies widely. Given the need for some level of consistency, we suggest a system of ongoing review by Communications staff to monitor homepages for dated material and to assist when needed. Beyond these areas, departments and programs should retain independent control of their content.

Content Strategies: General

1. Tell *and* show.

One of our general recommendations for the Washington College site is that it should do more *showing* than *telling*. There is obviously some telling to be done on a departmental site, as your students need to know about requirements, policies, and so forth. But we highly encourage you to *show* what faculty and students are doing.

Showing real department activities, research, and events will ground abstract learning outcomes in reality and give prospects concrete ideas of what they will be doing while studying a particular subject.

The majority (though not all!) of the text currently on academic department sites simply *describes* the topic at hand, rather than using real life examples to validate and put it in context. Consider where adding a real example to your body text will help illustrate your claims. On top of that, the new tools for managing content will also make it easier to tell and share stories/news, as well as upload and manage photos and video.

As the content on the new site takes shape, we recommend you constantly seek out creative ways to incorporate recent department achievements or activities through stories, video, audio, candid photography, blogs, Twitter feeds, and so on.

2. Reduce word count, add pages.

Just because it's there doesn't mean your intended audience will read it. Too many of WC's current department pages are crammed with text. Instead of trying to list as much information as possible on a single web page, we recommend breaking up your content into categories and organizing those categories into hierarchical pages (specific page organization suggestions below). See our *Best Practices* for principles behind this recommendation.

3. But, keep it simple.

As exciting (or daunting) as a new website might be, don't bite off more than you can chew. 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.

More content is not necessarily better. Engaging content is better. While we'd like to see similar content on each department and program site, it is more important that your pages be thoughtful, relevant, well written, and interesting to your audiences. Incorporating a page that has little more than old print brochure copy is not going to help engage your audience and won't

compare well with another department that is actively updating its content.

Updating the website needs to be a regular part of someone's routine.

Even if you stay on top of 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 content.

4. 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 department started a newsletter 7 years ago, published it quarterly for 3 years, and then stopped. 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 places to go for department news.

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

Content Recommendations

Department/Program Homepage

The homepage should act as a guide to detailed information deeper in your site. It should be clear, articulate, and representative of the department. No matter what the subject, it should make a visitor *want* to learn more about it – to dig into the interior pages, take a class, read a research paper, become a major, and so on.

Department/program homepages should incorporate both introductory text (a welcoming introduction to the department) and dynamic content (news, events, photo gallery, blog headlines). The goal is to briefly illustrate the field of study and Washington College's particular take on it. For departments with no capacity for dynamic content, a simple introduction with a few specific examples, reviewed each year, should suffice.

The introductory text should be between 50-150 words. Adding to that other dynamic content, you should strive for around 150-300 words total.

Static Text

The static homepage content should include:

- A short, friendly **opening paragraph** in large type that in some way captures the essence of the department.

IDEAS: An example of real work (research, activities, outcomes) being done right now in the department; a sampling of course titles; an example that illustrates WC's unique take on the field of study; or some other means of drawing the reader's attention to your particular department
- A **few additional paragraphs** that provide:
 - General description of the field of study using real examples—what *is* the study of Business Management —(1-2 sentences) and/or philosophy of the department—our take on the study of Biology—(1-3 sentences).
 - Some reference to the most important internal site content with **in-text links** to those pages.
 - Examples of work being done in the department, whether that's faculty publications, unique student projects, internship examples, etc. (2-3 sentences).

News & Events (dynamic content)

If possible, department and program homepages should have dedicated real estate for news and events. This is one of the easiest and best ways to *show* the department in action, with the additional benefit of having a high-profile area to post department events, lectures, talks, symposia, etc.

The design will allow for flexibility, though. Not all departments will have events and there will be down times for everyone; as a general rule, most academic units can be expected to generate far more news items than events, and the former tend on the average to be much more interesting.

Once it is entered into the system, department news can also “trickle up” to other pages on the Washington College site, including the institutional homepage, giving even more exposure to department activities.

Site administrators should be able to populate their homepages with content they are maintaining elsewhere such as blogs or Twitter, and/or RSS-driven WC academic news. For those departments/programs without an active content manager or very little news or events at a particular time, consider incorporating general academic news and events on your homepage.

Other Media (dynamic content)

Departments and programs should have the capacity to present video, audio, and department-specific images on their homepages. Images and video should be of relatively high quality, with bright colors and good composition. They should capture students and faculty in action or show images related to the area of study.

Some departments have a greater need to present images and other media (ex. Art and Art History) they should be able to do so easily within the new design options.

Other Features

On the homepage and other relevant pages, we suggest incorporating a feature area for “Related Links.” Many sites currently do this already. It’s a great way to point out other pages of interest to the topic of the page without placing them in the main site navigation. These links should highlight something a particular audience might immediately look for or expand one’s understanding of opportunities connected to a department.

Inside pages

Static Text

Many of the current department 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 also 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 department-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, faculty/student profile, video, etc. as a complement to the text. Do you have photos of your facilities that could be uploaded for a photo gallery on your Resources page? Have you been collecting updates from alumni that could rotate on a page that focuses on what to do with a degree in your field?

All of these things will make your site richer and more interesting. But make sure you have the capacity to keep it up. Facilities photos won't need refreshing but other types of content will. For something like alumni updates, you need a new story 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 alumni updates can simply be lumped in with general department news. Photo features need refreshing once a semester (once a year at least).

Writing Style and Tone

The writing on the academic department/program homepages should strike a balance between formal and scholarly (but not staid), and conversational and welcoming (but not glib).

Highly technical text is fine on inside pages, whose audience will likely be more explicitly interested in the department's field of study, but readability and friendliness should be the primary concern on the homepage.

Text on your site should be written in a way that is clear and easily understood by someone without knowledge of your area of study. Remember, prospective students (as well as first-years and even sophomores) are just starting to learn what it means to study within a particular academic discipline. The language should entice the reader to explore further and get them excited to learn about the activities of the department or program.

These pages can incorporate the first person (you, us, our, we), though falling back on "Washington College students..." rather than "you" is fine too. On occasion you should address the audience directly, as we want prospects and interested current students to be able to envision themselves as part of the department's community.

The style should also reflect the personality of the department. WC is such a close-knit place where students have the opportunity to get to know professors. We want this quality to come through. If your department is known for its quirky group of professors, make sure that comes through on the website.

Navigation / Information Architecture (IA)

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.
- **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.

Recommended academic department top-level navigation

These links represent categories of information currently found on most sites. Depending on their offerings, many departments/programs may require additional links unique to their area, discussed below. These top-level pages can have sub-pages if additional content is available. To help people find similar information across departments, these links should appear in the same order.

Why [Department/Program Name]? **

Faculty

Courses

Requirements

Resources

Opportunities **

[Department/Program Name] in Practice **

News & Events **

The ** links denote optional pages/sections, so departments with less content may have only 4 links when the site launches.

Though we suggest a standard information architecture above, there should be room for some deviation from this set of links. It can be hard to find a perfect balance of conformity and individuality. A good rule of thumb is that information common to all departments – Courses, Faculty, Resources, News & Events, etc. should all be given the same link titles. Individualized department links should be added after Resources and before News & Events.

Departments with very unique or well-known programs/attributes should be allowed to edit the standard navigation list. For instance, Business Management should continue to list Alex. Brown Investment Fund in the top-navigation, and likewise for the Department of English and the Sophie Kerr Prize.

There are also a few departments that serve as umbrella entities for programs, e.g. Modern Languages and Sociology and Anthropology. For these we suggest a slightly different approach that will lead visitors to the program sites for more substantive information (program sites should use a variation on the above IA):

Program Name

Program Name

Faculty

Courses

Resources **

Opportunities **

Notes on departmental architecture and content

<p>HOMEPAGE</p>	<p>A link back to the department or program homepage will be included in the new design. Many departments currently use an About the Department link in the navigation as their homepage link. This will be unnecessary.</p> <p>The homepage should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A brief introduction as described above • The opportunity to incorporate dynamically generated news, events, blogs, twitter, images and/or other multimedia • General department contact information
<p>Why _____? **</p>	<p>OPTIONAL: A surprising number of departments/programs have a Why [Department Name]? page or section on their homepage. Excellent information! We suggest standardizing the placement of this type of content onto its own page.</p> <p>For those departments with this information already, a simple review and update of the content is advised.</p> <p>For those interested in adding this section, consider that your main audiences for the information are prospective applicants and First-Years/Sophomores trying to figure out their major. Try to answer the basic question Why _____? from several angles: what students do while in the department—opportunities, coursework, learning outcomes, and what they might do after WC with your particular degree. This page can also offer a more detailed overview of the discipline, expanding on what you’ve introduced on the homepage.</p> <p>Video testimonials from your students would be excellent complementary content to a page like this.</p>
<p>Faculty</p>	<p>This would be the standard faculty list common to most departments already.</p>
<p>Courses</p>	<p>Some departments/programs currently have pages for Courses. Some incorporate their course descriptions onto a page, others link to a word or pdf file, and many link directly to the Course Catalog.</p> <p>Course information should be presented here (not as a link to the catalog or requiring a download). Ideally, the content would be dynamically generated (pulled directly from the registrar database), indicate when a course is being offered, and be searchable by semester.</p> <p>List links to course sites and other resources as a sidebar/feature section on this page.</p> <p>Potential sub-pages: Seminars</p>

Requirements	<p>Like Courses, we recommend automatically displaying the Major/Minor/Other General requirements for each department/program. This information should be pulled directly from the Catalog database so it's entered just once in the system.</p> <p>Details on other major-related requirements should be moved to sub-pages in this section.</p> <p>Potential sub-pages: Senior Capstone _____ Concentration Study Abroad (if this is a requirement to major, otherwise it should be under Opportunities)</p>
Resources	<p>This page should serve the needs of current students with a side benefit of being interesting to prospective students too.</p> <p>Information here should include any resources the department provides students: course materials (only if you currently list this on your public website), facilities and special equipment (especially in the sciences), connections to a broader network of scholars, special collections, "additional links," links to external research info, links to course sites and blogs, etc.</p> <p>Whether this section consists of a single page or a header page with a number of sub-pages will depend on the amount of content you have in this area. If you have too much information for one page, use this page to feature each resource with a name, short description, and link to the sub-page with more details (not all resources will need sub-pages – the listing may be sufficient).</p> <p>Some facilities are so well known or high profile they may have their own place in the navigation, such as the Modern Language Department's Language Suites.</p> <p>Potential sub-pages: Mapping Your Major Facilities (specific name) Forms Reading Lists Citation Guides Resources Beyond WC</p>

Opportunities **	<p>OPTIONAL: Again, this would be a page for current students but of interest to prospects. Like Resources, this page should list out the opportunities made possible through the department. Judging from the current department/program sites, many will likely need sub-pages that provide details. In that case, this should be an overview page with brief information and links to sub-pages.</p> <p>Include unique programs/opportunities, competitive prizes, scholarships/fellowships, summer jobs, internships, etc.</p> <p>Potential sub-pages: Study Abroad Field School Funding Sources Research Support Student Conferences Prizes & Grants Summer Jobs Internships Student Organization/Honors Society (use specific name)</p>
_____ in Practice **	<p>OPTIONAL: This is the area of your site for outcomes, encompassing a whole range of content from student work to faculty research or publications to an outline of what you can do with an X degree to alumni profiles.</p> <p>The section should reflect the amount of content the department is capable of maintaining. It could be a relatively unchanging page with a nice description of what people in the department are doing or could do with the degree. Or, it could be a vibrant, often-changing page/section with news/stories of faculty and student achievements, alumni profiles, etc.</p> <p>For those departments with the capacity to maintain more in-depth information in this area, we suggest using the main _____ in Practice page as an overview with some descriptive text but mostly rotating features on your students, faculty, and even alumni.</p> <p>Sub-pages can focus in on specific groups (Our Grads, Student Research) or content types (What can you do with a X degree).</p> <p>Potential sub-pages: Faculty Publications Senior Theses Student Research (Work, Productions) Faculty-Student Collaboration Our Grads</p>

[Optional department-specific links]	<p>As mentioned above, departments have the opportunity to incorporate their own specific links into their main navigations as long as they don't fit into the established categories.</p> <p>Any number of links can be added as long as the total does not exceed 10.</p>
News & Events	<p>If a department produces more news/events than can easily be listed on the homepage (while relevant), then they should add a separate News & Events page. It would provide a fuller listing of news stories and departmental events. If a program does not have its own news and relies on general academic news, a separate page for news and events listings is unnecessary.</p> <p>With the new content management system, departments should consider transforming their "newsletters" (often pdfs) into more consistent news stories that feed onto their pages and can be shared with the rest of the College.</p> <p>If departments have photos or videos, create sub-pages that house the photo and video repositories.</p> <p>Potential sub-pages: Event Series (use specific name) Photo Gallery Videos News Archives</p>