

W&M Web Assessment Report

October 2006

Executive Summary

For the period of August 2005 to July 2006, the William and Mary website received 11.6 million visitors. Internet usage trends indicate that the College can expect a growing number of web users each year, and given the proven importance of our website, we have a unique position to improve our web presence and bolster the effectiveness of our communication efforts through a comprehensive website redesign.

In mid-July 2006, Provost P. Geoffrey Feiss assembled a small committee charged with assessing the College's website and making recommendations regarding a possible redesign. After a period of research and analysis, the Web Assessment Committee recommends that the College pursue a site redesign effort, and this report of our activity provides some analysis of the key considerations.

I. Analysis of the Current Website at <http://www.wm.edu/>

A. Audiences

The total of 11.6 million visits in the most recent academic year is substantial and represents numerous categories including prospective, admitted, and current students, faculty, staff, alumni, parents, visitors, legislators, donors, job applicants, and members of the media. Virtually every group that has contact with the College is a candidate audience for the website, even relatively small groups like new faculty and members of the Board of Visitors. But the competing needs of these smaller constituencies need not drive the design of the home-page gateway. A better approach is to actively communicate to these small groups where their content is located on the website, and how to access it.

All of our audiences are important, and while it is our desire for each group and individual to be served effectively, we need to be strategic about how needs are served. Additionally, the College's web presence must support our key messages about openness, diversity, and globalization; our web strategy should contribute to the goal of William and Mary as "great and public."

B. Strengths and Weaknesses

The following list of strengths and weaknesses of the W&M website is not comprehensive. Rather than an exhaustive list of positives and negatives, the basis of our assessment and recommendations is more heavily influenced by the data we reviewed (see Part V. Appendix).

1. Strengths

- interesting and frequently changing news features
- vast majority of departments and programs have a current web presence
- a "find people" directory tool which is well placed
- some good images in the rotating banner
- powerful and reliable web infrastructure (servers and software are redundant, flexible and secure)
- progress towards standards and consistency due to adoption of WM Web Templates

2. Weaknesses

- news content is narrow and too newspaper-like (lengthy news articles, rather than headlines)
- the navigation is confusing and the home page is cluttered
- outdated design that lacks continuity
- rotating features and images should be updated more frequently

- bridge pages have out-of-date and/or minimal content (e.g., <http://www.wm.edu/libraries/index.php>)
- ineffective general search capabilities
- not compliant with web accessibility and usability standards
- no comprehensive and integrated campus calendar of events
- inadequate campus map

C. Summary of Data Reviewed

William and Mary's home page is far and away the most visited page of the site. Approximately 37% of all site visitors last year (a total of 11.6 million from Aug. 1, 2005 - July 31 2006) visited the College home page. Also, 33% of all visitors entered the site at the home page. Data supporting our initial analysis of <http://www.wm.edu/> and our recommendation for a comprehensive redesign is provided in the Appendix.

II. Preliminary Review of Other College and University Websites

A. "Best in Class" Sites

- Harvard University <http://www.harvard.edu/>
Harvard's clear strategy presents a focus on its academic product, with its three featured stories typically falling into teaching-research-public service. The Harvard site provides good access to academic units, and the administrative structure and functions are submerged into the background.
- Swarthmore College <http://www.swarthmore.edu/>
Swarthmore's site successfully communicates the personal attention a student might receive at a smaller university. Articles focus on individual students and their research. Any university site has a large hierarchy of administrative groupings: Swarthmore focuses on the basic levels of administration (departments) that are most familiar and useful to students and visitors.
- University of California Berkeley <http://www.berkeley.edu/>
The home page of UC Berkeley has a strategy focused almost entirely on navigation, with a featured navigation element designed for student use.

B. Critical Attributes

The dominant factor in determining the success of any website is an overarching strategy that drives the design of the home page, navigation features, and underlying content. A second factor for any site is careful integration of information for students, faculty, and other users. Some additional attributes we find important are as follows:

- appropriate news stories in headline format (Harvard and Cornell)
- easy access to schools/units (Harvard and Swarthmore)
- focus on (preferably individual) students and undergraduate research (UC Berkeley, Swarthmore, Macalester)
- clean, fresh, well-organized design (Penn State and Cornell)
- administrative organization is secondary (Cornell and Bennington)
- an immediate "connection" for students at the home page; not just at an admission page (UC Berkeley)
- clear intention and messages on the home page (UC Berkeley and Harvard)

- prominent display of a log-in box for the campus web portal (Swarthmore)
- sophisticated search utility that has directed, categorized, and open search options

III. A Web Redesign Project for W&M

A. Guiding Principles and Goals

1. Within the limits of what is practical, allow broad participation by the campus community.
2. Establish the website as a primary, strategic communication tool for the College and support the continued evolution of the W&M website before, during, and after the redesign.
3. Design an intuitive information architecture with a focus on usability and accessibility, enhancing the web experience for all College audiences.
4. Present a user-centric focus where the College administrative structure is transparent and a clear, persistent navigation scheme exists; utilize a balanced approach to respond to unique characteristics and needs of audiences.
5. Incorporate a robust and effective search feature.
6. Create a well-structured content model for marketing, news and multimedia.
7. Design a consistent look and feel that coincides with College branding initiatives.
8. Provide better integrated, more easily accessible information on curriculum, academic policies and opportunities, so that students, faculty and staff come to rely on the website as a reliable, time-saving resource.
9. Send the critical message that content is what matters on the web.

B. Proposed Plan for Representing Campus Constituencies and Collecting Feedback

Recognizing that numerous W&M constituencies will want to participate in a web redesign project, we recommend a plan for making the web redesign effort as inclusive as possible. This commitment to representing various interests is two-pronged and includes 1) collecting as much feedback as possible, and 2) regularly publishing the committee's progress.

- **Web Steering Committee**
An executive oversight group, with representation from each vice presidential and academic dean area at W&M, could provide senior sponsorship for the web redesign project and perhaps evolve into a web steering committee for the long-term oversight of the W&M Home page.
- **Focus Groups**
With careful planning, formal and adhoc groups that are not directly represented on the web redesign project committee could articulate their interests via focus group meetings. These moderated, audience-based discussions should be small (5 to 8 members) and manageable. Members of the web redesign team can share designs, prototypes and ideas with group members and record reactions and discussions.

- **Put Us on Your Agenda**
Members of the web redesign committee could offer brief presentations at any formal meeting. This would allow groups such as Faculty Assembly, Student Assembly, and HACE to contribute recommendations and suggestions.
- **Campus Survey**
IT's existing web survey tools and myWM could be used to quickly and easily give any member of the W&M community the opportunity to offer comments.
- **ClickTracks**
Regular reporting from ClickTracks, the College's web analytics tool managed by Information Technology, could be provided to the web redesign team.
- **"Contact the College" Form**
Continue monitoring the "Contact the College" form with the addition of a specific submission option for "website feedback." Feedback in this category will be collected, analyzed and reported to the web redesign committee by the Director for Web Communications. This feedback option will be advertised during planning and implementation stages of new web products and services.
- **Web Redesign Project Blog**
Using an online community, web redesign committee members could post information about decisions and progress. The option for anyone at W&M to "comment" on these postings could serve as another means of participation.
- **Usability Testing**
Individual users could view a mock-up of a web site and be asked to accomplish a typical task for that site. Testing sessions are often video recorded for later review. Web professionals view this as a required phase of development.

C. Recommended Members of a Web Redesign Project Team

Andrew Bauserman, Senior Web Architect, Information Technology

Susan T. Evans, Director of Web and Communication Services, Information Technology

Stewart Gamage, Vice President, Public Affairs

Tim Jones, Director of Web Communications, Public Affairs

Scott Nelson, Associate Professor of History

Andrea Sardone, Director, Marketing Communications, Mason School of Business

D. Recommended Timetable

In our research, we were able to confirm that university web redesign projects of this scope often require a timetable of 12 – 18 months. We recommend that the Provost charge a web redesign project committee to serve for the period of November 2006 – March 2008.

E. Budget Impact Statement

At this stage, with so many unknowns, it is premature to develop a budget. We can state that the W&M website is a dominant and powerful projection of the College to external and internal audiences. We recommend that the College invest the needed resources to ensure the website presents the College strategically and successfully.

For purposes of budget planning, we suggest that the College identify consulting funds. An outside consultant could be helpful in (a) proposing an objective strategy to guide the home-page content and navigation features and (b) neutralizing the personal and political perspectives of the various internal campus constituencies. A carefully selected web redesign team, with connections to a cross-section of W&M entities, could provide a consultant with the requisite knowledge about W&M, preventing an otherwise cookie-cutter approach that does not capture our unique strengths.

F. Proposed Administrative Model for Sustaining the W&M Website

Management on an institutional web site has evolved from a paradigm of one individual webmaster to a model of institutional collaboration. A successful web presence in higher education is strategic and requires exceptional content presented using flexible technology building blocks (e.g., multimedia and interactive elements). Viewing the W&M website as an College priority, the required oversight and high-level planning and policy efforts should be the work of a diverse web steering committee. An executive web steering committee, with representation from each vice presidential and academic dean area at W&M, could play a senior advisory role for the long-term management of the W&M website.

IV. Conclusion

Put simply, we believe that there is data to support the need for a comprehensive redesign of the W&M website. That said, by “redesign” we do not mean only a new look for the site. Instead, by “redesign,” we intend a new and improved architecture to plan the form and structure of the W&M site. More concretely, a web redesign effort for achieving an exceptional web presence for W&M would require support for the following five elements:

- Web Standards - the incorporation of an endorsed set of standardized best practices for building web sites
- Information Architecture - the practice of structuring information (knowledge or data) for a purpose
- Main Navigation - a persistent organizational structure displayed through hyperlinks
- Utility Navigation - sophisticated tools that provide quick and easy access to key content on the site (e.g., search, A-Z directory)
- Branding - the concrete symbols such as logo, slogan, and design scheme (i.e., the look of the web site).

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the planning for the College’s web presence. We look forward to a future site that is exceptional and reflective of the special nature of the College of William and Mary.

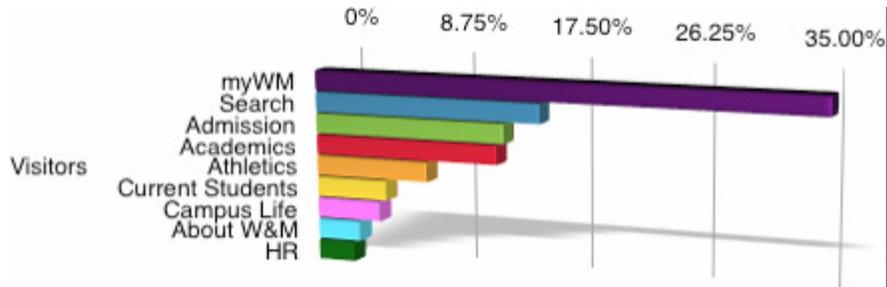
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V. Appendix

A. Web Analytics Data

Using a web analytics tool called ClickTracks, we gathered some statistical information about William and Mary's website. The tool has, at this point, been used only for overall site information. What follows is a summary of general statistics and facts about William and Mary website usage.

1. Where Do Visitors Go from the Home Page?



2. Pages with the Most Visitors

Page	Number of Visitors	% of Total
Home page	4,303,205	36.9
Information Technology	740,126	6.3
Search	573,813	4.9
myNotebook	538,653	4.6
News	530,381	4.5
Prospective	399,886	3.4
Academics	393,534	3.4
Admission	355,373	3.0
ID Office	280,562	2.4
Athletics	230,154	2.0
Law	228,738	2.0

3. Most Frequently Used Keywords for Internal Searches

bookstore, registrar, tuition, dining services, exam schedule, campus map, health center, calendar, map, career center, rec center, swem, academic calendar, sin, study abroad, residence life, address, jobs, IT, parking services, it, employment, res life, dining, housing

4. Geographic Information about Visitors

a. International

Country	% of Total
U.S.	85.2
United Kingdom	1.9
Canada	1.8
Germany	0.9

China	0.8
Australia	0.6
France	0.5
India	0.4
Netherlands	0.4
South Korea	0.4
Other	7.0

b. National

State	% of Total
Virginia	40.7
California	5.3
New York	4.5
Pennsylvania	3.4
Washington, D.C.	3.0
North Carolina	2.9
Maryland	2.9
Texas	2.6
Florida	2.5
Other/Unknown	32.3

B. Local High School Focus Group

In February 2006, a “focus group” session was conducted with the students at Lafayette High School in Williamsburg. The expressed purpose of the session was to evaluate the College’s existing prospective student site (<http://www.wm.edu/prospective/>) as well as a work-in-progress revision of this site. The group consisted of 18 high school juniors and seniors, mostly college-bound. During the session, participants were encouraged to share their thoughts on the overall William and Mary website, starting with the College home page (<http://www.wm.edu/>).

1. Impressions about the College’s home page

- Number of links on the home page described as “intimidating,” “overwhelming,” and “a little scary.” Page also criticized it for containing “way too much text.” The “People Places and Things” section was largely ignored by most group members.
- Large banner photos were well-received. Group members wanted more pictures of campus and current students displayed throughout all pages they viewed.
- Most indicated they would use the home page to locate the Admission link. Many thought Prospective Students would be a less direct way to information. Several were disappointed that both Admission and Prospective Students links go to the same place.
- Many thought a notable exclusion from the College’s home page was an “Apply Now” link.

2. Impressions about the Prospective Students and Admission Sites

- Group members wanted direct, clear access to SAT scores and GPAs required to be considered for admission, major options, classes, costs, scholarships, and student life information. Such information was deemed “difficult” to locate. Several group members said they would turn to other websites, such as

www.collegeboard.com to get the facts about W&M and to determine whether or not their applications would be competitive.

- Criticisms mirrored those offered in regards to the home page, including “too much stuff,” “no photos,” and “the pages are not warm and welcoming.”
- Most expressed dissatisfaction with lack of consistent navigation on pages one, two, and three clicks into the site. “You get lost and there’s no way back.”

3. Other items of note

- All group members cited the Web as the primary way they would research colleges.
- Most expressed a desire to see more student-produced pages.

C. Data from “Contact the College”

A summary of website-related questions and comments submitted via the College’s online “Contact the College” web form is provided below. The referenced form is located at <http://www.wm.edu/contact/>.

1. Overview

The “Contact the College” online form has received nearly 2,000 submissions during the past year. Of those submissions, almost 10% (200) reference explicitly a user’s difficulty or failure in finding specific and/or general information on William and Mary’s website. In some cases, the information sought is in fact available online, other times, it is not. Nonetheless, users are unable to find the information whether it exists or not. It should be noted that in the past year, there have been no positive comments about the College’s website submitted through the “Contact the College” form.

2. Most Common Submissions

The following are the 10 most common types of questions, starting with the most frequently submitted. All submissions included a variation of the statement “I tried but was unable to find it on your website.”

- Do you offer major/minor/classes in [blank]? I don’t see it on your website. (A related and also very common question: Where can I find a list of departments and majors?)
- I’m unable to find any information on [blank] department/program, such as courses offered, contacts, curriculum, schedules, etc. (Several complain of difficulty in navigating specific departmental websites.)
- When can we visit campus/take a tour/schedule an interview in admission? (Often users cite conflicting, out-of-date or incomplete information, particularly weeks that do not have scheduled tours. One user asked if he/she could take a tour at the same time as “Prospective Students” as he/she was only a junior.)
- I can’t find tuition and fees, application deadlines, application requirements, SAT scores/requirements, the in-state/out-of-state ratio or “tips” for increasing chances for admission.
- Where is the bookstore online? (Related, and particularly common question near holidays, is: Can I order W&M clothes/hats/mugs/etc. online?)
- Where can I find a checklist of items to bring for my dorm room? When will I find out who my roommate is? What is my postal address? Can freshmen have cars?
- Where/how can I pay tuition online?

- Where is the College calendar? Why are there so many calendars? Where is information about [blank] event?
- I am a current resident/future resident/senior citizen, what classes can I take and/audit, and how much do they cost?
- What is the shipping address for the College and/or specific department?

3. Specific Web Critiques

Occasionally submissions offer more detailed criticisms of the College's website. Below are some such entries in their entirety.

"I was made aware last week that there was to be a concert held on Saturday the 3rd of December, but when I looked at the calendar of events it showed nothing. This is not the first time that I have found this to happen, and I wonder why. My questions are: 1. Why are there so many different calendars of events? 2. Why don't they have ANY and ALL events being held at the College along with dates and times? I figure with all the resources and people doing specific jobs at the College and with the website, that there would be a more complete calendar of events. Someone needs to fix this. After all it is a state funded school and its inhabitants are entitled to know what is happening at the school at any and all times."

"I was looking through your A to Z directory, and have some comments based on my observations of similar directories on other websites. I believe that navigation would be improved if you had the complete A to Z choices on each page of the directory. Thus, if a person selected the letter "S" and, after looking at all the "S" choices, wanted to search entries under letter "D", the person would not have to go back to the original page but could choose "D" from the "S" page. I have also found it useful, in similar situations, to have as an option, all directory choices on a single page even if it is a long page. Then a simple page search could be made of all entries. Such a page is located here: <http://gbgm-umc.org/navitext.html>."

"Dear Sirs: My son is very interested in attending W&M after his senior year at Fairfax High School this year. While perusing the website, I did not notice any degree specifically in Marketing. Is that accurate? Would he only be able to get a degree in business? I find your website is not "people friendly" like most of the others, or perhaps it's the format. Could you please send a packet of info to my son so he can read about W&M while he's on vacation?"

4. Summary

While the "Contact the College" form submissions represent only those users compelled to request the information they seek, patterns that emerge from the submissions cannot be overlooked. Given the importance of much of the content deemed difficult or, in some cases, impossible to find by the College's web users, it seems prudent to reconsider the presentation and availability of this information. The College should strive to provide its web users with the information they want and need.