Continuous Improvement Team Award

The Website Redesign

The website redesign is a team effort that has touched almost every area of the college, and brings a much smoother experience for students. The site allows students to more easily find programs and resources that help them succeed. It came in well under budget, and it’s not over yet. The website team is continually testing and tweaking the site to make it better. An attractive, easy-to-use website fits right in with the college’s values of access and openness.

1. Team Members:
   
   - Tony Goins
   - Greg Phillips
   - Giselle White
   - Phil Porter
   - Scott DeJane
   - Paul Rehg

2. Summary

See attached

3. Sponsors

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Summary:

The college’s website, www.cscc.edu, is our primary face to the public. It is the first point of contact for many students, and a daily part of their experience with Columbus State. Over the last two years, the website team has made a sustained effort to determine what students want, improve the college’s look and feel, and provide additional support to the staff & faculty.

The project was a board-approved project, and came in well under budget. It required cooperation between Institutional Advancement, Information Technology and has touched almost all areas of the college, including students.

This project has at least three separate phases: The Redesign, Content Management System rollout, and the Build-Out of the new site. Let me walk you through the steps this process has taken:

Reviews

The following are actual reviews we received during focus groups and user testing:

“Amazing.”

“I like it so much more.”

“It’s on par with other college’s web sites. The current site is too dorky. It kind of makes community colleges look more dorky than they already are.”

The Usability Study

The previous site launched in 2006. It was designed with a “blog-like” look, in order to emphasize the many events and programs on campus. The old site garnered a number of complaints, however.

Our team hired a local consultant, Grip Technologies, to conduct a usability study of the previous site in January 2009. The study included a review of the site, as well as focus groups with current students and high school students. Grip’s major findings were:

- The previous site had 18 items in its main navigation (industry standard is about 8).
- The site lacked a clear “starting point” for new students.
- Lack of consistency across the site made it hard for students to navigate.
- General complaints about the look of the site – too dark, not modern enough, etc.

The Redesign

We decided a world-class community college needs a world-class site. We conducted a nationwide search for a website designer, sending RFPs to nearly two dozen firms. Design bids were due April 2009, and two design groups came to campus for a group interview with staffers from Institutional Advancement, IT and ITDL. We ultimately chose Ed Mullen Studios for the job.
The team worked diligently to ensure the new design reflected the needs of the campus. Ed Mullen (the studio’s principal) made two trips to campus, sat in on two focus groups and participated in two open forums. Additionally, he met one-on-one with more than 20 faculty, staff and administrators, and had follow-up phone conversations with a number of other employees.

Mullen delivered the design in January of 2010.

- The new design is much more cohesive than the old one and more professional looking.
- Mullen included a drop-down menu to allow us to display more items from the home page.
- Mullen spent considerable time working out an “information architecture” for the site, which makes it much easier to browse. On the old site, a lot of great resources ended up buried.
- Mullen designed the “orange bar” in the middle of the page, which opens to show a selection of our programs. According to our analytics, it gets clicked about 100 times a day.

The next step was to rebuild the entire site using his design.

**The Content Management System**

The website redesign project proceeded in parallel with the rollout of the Web Content Management System. The CMS is a system to allow individual departments to make changes to their own websites.

The college had investigated CMSes for years, but in 2008 the web team finally got a budget and went ahead with an RFP. We purchased a system called OmniUpdate in the summer of 2008, and rolled it out on a limited basis over the next two years. During that period it was used for the Community Education & Workforce Development site, Financial Aid site, Bridgeview golf and some other sites.

The CMS required us to add an additional web developer. One hire didn’t work out, but we brought Phil Porter on board in the spring of 2010. Phil became proficient the system, which requires a working knowledge of HTML, XML and JavaScript to do correctly. Phil created templates in OmniUpdate that we used to build out the site.

We also needed considerable work to allow OmniUpdate to publish to our servers. The college’s server team, particularly Scott DeJane, logged countless hours with OmniUpdate’s tech support.

**The Build-Out**

With the templates created and server issues ironed out, the web team began building the new site over the summer. We started with the administrative core of the site, leaving the academic department sites until later. Still, a project document used for the site lists more than 150 sites and pages to build. Those range from the stories on the front page to the FAQs in the Student Employment area. Many of those sites were quite large: The catalog site and the course description site have pages for every department and major.
Once we finished building a site, we sent them all to the relevant department for review. At that stage, many departments took the opportunity to rewrite their content or reorganize their sites. Each page was assigned artwork by our designers, Greg Phillips and Giselle White. During the rebuild, we were also learning the CMS and getting acclimated to the new design.

It was quite an undertaking – we currently have nearly 3,000 pages under management in the CMS (not counting pages still in use on the old site.)

Pre-Flight Checks

With the site mostly built, we took it on the road. Tony Goins hosted several open forums for campus. We posted a link to the new site on the home page and solicited feedback from students and employees. Tony conducted focus groups in an Interactive Media class and did one-on-one user testing with 8-10 current and prospective students. The user testing yielded valuable insights and led to several changes, but reaction to the new site was generally positive.

Launch

Launch Day was Dec. 14, 2010. We chose the date because it was right after the close of the quarter, giving us a few weeks to iron out bugs before students got back to campus.

Launch Day went exceptionally smoothly, thanks to ample preparation by everyone involved. The day before launch, we made a backup copy of the old site, in case of any problems. Scott DeJane pointed the server to the new site, and we uploaded a new sitemap to Google so it could re-crawl our site. We set about quickly changing outdated links. We got about 30 calls about broken links, but there were no showstoppers.

The 2010 relaunch went much more smoothly than the 2006 relaunch, and all issues were fixed within a week or so. The site continues to perform well.

Training Users

Our next step was to train users on how to use the content management system. We identified content providers in each department, and got them scheduled for training. The training takes about 20 minutes, and we now have more than 60 users on OmniUpdate. Tony still approves changes, and receives about 10-20 website changes each day. User acceptance of OmniUpdate has been high.

Ongoing Build-Out

The ongoing build-out of the new site continues. We are rebuilding academic department sites in four batches, and the first 30 or so have already launched. Users in those departments have also been trained on the CMS. Our third batch is slated to launch in mid-May.

The new academic department sites have much more consistent branding than the old sites, which were a hodgepodge of different designs. Many of the old sites used outdated technology or just plain looked dated. The new sites are much more ADA-compliant and more friendly to search engines.
Behind the Scenes

The site includes a number of behind-the-scenes features ...

- Many menus are reused across the site. So if we change a
- The site includes Google Analytics, allowing us greater ability to track hits and events.
- The site’s architecture lends itself to search engine optimization
- We instituted a new Google search for the site, which gives us even more reporting ability.
- News items on the new site are in an RSS feed, which allows users to subscribe to them. We can also “syndicate” the news feed to Blackboard.
- Each page can be easily shared on facebook, twitter or other social networking sites.

Next steps

In conjunction with ITDL, the team is next looking at mobile websites and mobile apps. We also continue to build out the site and add new features. Institutional Advancement now has a full-time videographer, and we are placing videos on department pages.

We also plan additional user testing and focus groups to refine the design.

In conclusion ...

The website redesign has stretched our capabilities all across the website team: It’s challenged our technical abilities, our creative abilities, and more than anything, our organizational abilities. This has been a tremendous project to plan and implement, with what is frankly a pretty small crew. The website redesign has really pushed us to the next level.

I feel a little twinge of pride every time I launch my browser and see the home page. I feel like it gives Columbus State credibility, and really shows the world how we’re raising our game. In some small way, I think it demonstrates Columbus State coming into its own as Ohio’s flagship community college. I am immensely proud of the entire website team.

And speaking for myself, my favorite aspect of the new homepage is the large, orange “Apply Now” button. User testing indicated people didn’t know where to start, and the new site goes a long way to correct that. If I can use the site to help people find a program, get registered and succeed, then I am a very satisfied employee.