No Laughing Matter
Steve Kolowich
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Historically, cartoons are not a significant driver of communications and marketing strategy in higher education.

But one cartoon -- by Randall Munroe, whose popular Web comic is known as xkcd -- has resonated so strongly in higher ed circles that it has some marketing officials taking a hard look at what experts still believe to be their strongest marketing asset: the institutional website's home page.

The cartoon shows a Venn diagram with two overlapping circles -- one labeled "Things On The Front Page Of a University Website," and the other labeled "Things People Go To The Site Looking For."
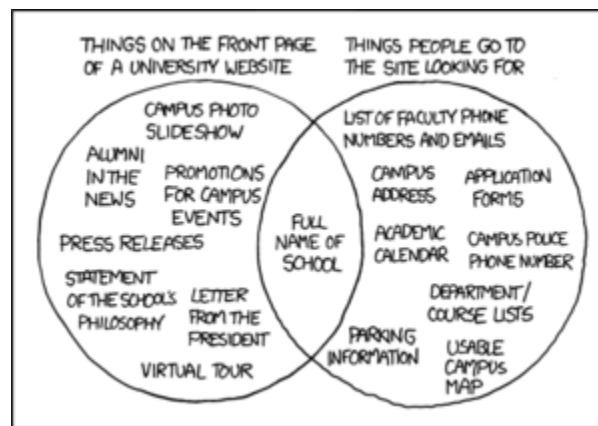

Photo: XKDC

The first circle contains: campus slide shows, alumni in the news, promotions for campus events, press releases, a statement of the school's philosophy, a letter from the president, and a virtual tour. The second circle contains a list of faculty phone numbers, application forms, the campus address, the academic calendar, the campus police phone number, department/course listings, parking information, and a usable campus map. The only piece of information common to both circles is, "full name of school."

The punch line — that university website designers have no idea what their visitors actually want front and center — has hit close enough to home to create a lot of buzz elsewhere on the Web. According to the link-tracking site Bit.ly, the cartoon had been shared nearly 8,000 times, been "liked" nearly 7,500 times, and garnered more than 5,500 comments on Facebook as of Tuesday evening.

Campus techies have also taken note. At Terra State Community College, which is in the process of redesigning its website, Web content administrator Grant Cummings has brought copies of the cartoon to every meeting he has attended since seeing it. "They need to make T-shirts!" he wrote Tuesday in a discussion forum for Web administrators.

The comic, published Friday, had made it to the desks of other experts contacted by *Inside Higher Ed* by Tuesday. "The cartoon is right on target," wrote Martin Ringle, CIO of Reed College, in an e-mail. "College website design typically focuses on what an institution wants to say, not necessarily what prospective students (and others) want to know."

Trimming the Fat

The xkcd cartoon was particularly apt in skewering three useless but nevertheless common features on a college's home page, said Mark Greenfield, director of Web services in enrollment and planning at the State University of New York at Buffalo and an associate consultant at the major higher-ed consulting firm Noel-Levitz. Specifically: the statement of philosophy, the letter from the president or provost, and the campus news feed.

Having those up there might seem like a good idea to the administrative committees that tend to dictate website content, Greenfield said, but they are rarely useful to the website's most strategically important kind of visitor: the prospective student. Prospective students are more interested in information about majors or financial aid than administrative rhetoric or photos or "pretty girls studying under trees" — a trope so recurrent that it became a running joke at last year's HighEdWeb Association conference, Greenfield said. "[Prospective students] have been marketed to their entire lives, and they are not looking for that marketing hype," he said. "They're looking for authenticity."

More to the point, they are looking to complete specific tasks, said Bob Johnson, president of the higher ed marketing firm Bob Johnson Consulting. The aesthetic of a site is not as important as where students can easily locate the information they came to the site to find, Johnson says — information on courses and departments if they are prospective students, information on transfer requests if they are graduates, and so on. That is why the confusing links and pages and ineffective search tools consistently show up as top frustrations in his firm's usability surveys. "You should be able to get to this stuff in one click," Johnson said. "None of this three-clicks stuff."

Dylan Wilbanks, a Web producer for the University of Washington's School of Public Health, agrees. "A university website is a tool for finding answers," Wilbanks wrote in a blog post. "If along the way you find out something new about the institution you didn't know before, that's gravy."

One institution that Johnson thinks has got it right is DeVry University, a for-profit institution. DeVry's home page has six boxes — one for each college — front-and-center on its home page; a visitor need only scroll over one of the boxes to see all the majors that college offers. "That's very rare on a college or university website," he says, "that you can actually see the programs being offered without leaving the home page."

Too Much Top

So what accounts for this apparent disconnect between what some colleges choose to include on their home pages and what visitors actually want to find there?

For one thing, the strategy of finding out what users want and letting that drive layout decisions is actually somewhat rare, says Johnson. "Most people don't do that," he says, adding that focus groups are often used only for tweaking the site after the fact, not to inform the initial blueprint.

Greenfield also said prioritizing user needs based on research is not currently conventional wisdom. "I think it's growing," he said, "but I think people who really practice the principles of user-centered design are still a minority."

Granted, website developers have to keep in mind the needs of several different types of visitor, Greenfield says; while prospective students are still considered the most strategic demographic, good design involves balancing what prospective students want with the needs of current students, parents, faculty, staff, and alumni. And it can be hard to secure money to buy extensive research on what all those different groups want.

But even then, some colleges' home pages are saturated with features that do not so much reflect guesses at what visitors need, but what various campus interests want. Greenfield said "home page politics" -- different departments and personalities jockeying for position -- have a strong influence on what an institution's site ends up looking like. After all, he said, if a president says he wants a letter and a mission statement out front, what Web administrator is going to say no?

The result, said Johnson, can be an unappealingly busy website jam-packed with a lot of links included for the wrong reasons. When universities first built websites, he said, the home page would include maybe six or eight links on a toolbar; a modern site is more likely to have 15 or 20, and Johnson says he has counted as many as 32 — not because visitors want or need them, but because of "internal bragging rights."

This may say more about the priorities of an institution than its stakeholders might like. "Personally, I think an institution's website is a reflection of the organization," says Terry Calhoun, director of media relations at the Society for College and University Planning. "It'd be interesting to rate them and try to guess who 'controls' each one."

Commentary
Steven Simmons
Northeastern University
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Steve Kolowich's article, *No Laughing Matter* (2010), highlights the disconnect between information found on university and college websites and information relevant to students. Using a carton by Randall Munroe, Kolowich points out that website designers and college marketing officials really do not understand what is important to prospective students. An institution's website is one of the most strategic and powerful tools to help students move from inquiry to enrollment. However, institutions of higher education, specifically community colleges, rarely engage in discovering what information and factors influence student college choice.

With decreasing state allocations, community colleges are now more than ever dependent on tuition revenue to fund the open access mission of the college (Ritze, 2006). For these institutions, moving students from inquiry to enrollment is crucial for success. This process starts with understanding factors that influence prospective student's evaluation and decision making process. Scholars and researchers have conducted this type of investigation. Research conducted by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Perna (2006) focus on student college choice and is oriented toward all forms of higher education institutions. This commentary will focus specifically on community colleges. The results provide community colleges with a basic road map for understanding what motivates or drives student choice, what information should be included in a website, and how to effectively move a prospective student from inquiry to enrollment.

Decision Making Process

There are several stages and multiple layers of influence regarding college student choice. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) break down the decision making process into three stages: the decision to continue one's education, the search for an institution, and finally institutional selection. Decisions made in each stage are influenced by a number of factors including: family, school, access to higher education, and federal/state policy (Perna, 2006). Similarly, Somers, Haines, Keene (2006) determined that students make their decisions based on economics, status or both.

According to Somers et al. (2006), economic factors include careful cost-benefit analysis whereas status factors focus on occupational and social aspirations. Often prospective students use a combination of both to make their decision throughout the different stages of choice. Factors involving student choice go beyond economics and status. Somers et al. (2006), found six themes of motivation that influenced student community college choice:

1. "They said I couldn't do it." These students enrolled into community college because they were told by others that they were not college material. They are out to prove the critics wrong.

2. "Life happens." These students viewed community college as a way to get back on track with their lives and careers.

3. "Educational aspirations." These students viewed community college as a way to test the waters of college prior to moving on to a four year institution.

4. "Influence of peers and family." Word of mouth was a big factor in deciding to enroll into community college.

5. "Price and location." This theme focuses on the economic and convenience factors.

6. "Institutional characteristics." This theme focuses on the idea that community college education is just as good as a four-year institution and a major factor in a student's decision making process.

Kurlander (2006) also explored environmental factors that influence student choice with regards to community college. His research focused on Latino students and his findings mirror the layers identified by Perna's (2006) and the themes identified by Somers et al. (2006). According to his findings, the main factors that influence Latino student enrollment into community college include: socioeconomic, degree intention, and prior academic preparation/achievement.

One factor identified by Kurlander (2006) that did not fit into one of Somer et al. (2006) themes was competition. Kurlander argued that states with limited four-year open access institutions will drive Latino students to the community college system. As such, community college marketing officials and web designers need to pay attention to competitors and the messages that those institutions convey. For-profit competitors are extremely focused on catering to a niche market of consumers, the working adult (Lechuga, 2008). Comparing their marketing focus to Somers et al. (2006) themes, for-profit institutions highlight "institutional characteristics" and "price and location". Knowing one's audience and catering to it is essential for effective marketing.

Website Design

Based on the literature review, community college marketing officials have a basic insight into the internal evaluation process of prospective students. Capturing these students' interests at the point of inquiry and increasing the number of applicants is essential for increasing enrollment (Goenner & Pauls, 2006). As the internet expands as a dominant source of information for consumers, community college websites must become a strategic tool for assisting prospective students with their evaluation and decision making process.

According to Schimmel, Motley, Racic, Marco, and Eschenfelder (2010), consumers that visit a college's website are looking for location, programs, course offerings, and the campus map. These items fall in line with what cartoonist Randall Munroe depicted featured in the article *No Laughing Matter*. Community college marketing officials and website designers must ensure that the information they provide is the same information that prospective students need in determining their college of choice. This requires a concerted and unified effort on the part of the college.

Website design can lead to internal politics with different departments competing for real estate on the college's website. The decision regarding content and message must be owned by a single source such as the marketing or enrollment management division. This will ensure that the website is being utilized for its most strategic function, enrollment of prospective students.

Conclusion

College choice is a major decision for thousands of prospective students. It will impact their careers, earning potential, and future decisions. As community colleges become more dependent on tuition dollars to balance the budget, the decision of students to enroll is even more important (Schimmel et al., 2010). Community colleges must focus on students at the point of inquiry where their recruitment efforts will have the most influence on a student's evaluation and decision making process (Goenner and Pauls, 2006). The college's website is an effective tool for assisting students, but the information provided must be based on what the student wants and not what is important to college officials. Although market research is expensive and time consuming, community college marketing officials can use Somers six themes of motivation to plan the layout of their websites for maximum results.

References and Suggested Readings

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Discussion Questions

For those that may wish to use this article for teaching and or professional development related purposes, here are some guiding questions that may be helpful:

1. Explore Somers' et al. (2006) six themes and determine what marketing message or information should be included on an institution's website?

2. How should the target audience or demographics of a community affect the website design?

3. How much of an influence do family and peers have on a student's decision making process? How does this affect the message on the website?

4. How much of an influence does race, ethnicity and/or gender play into a student's decision making process? How does this affect the message on the website?

5. What other features or information should be included on an institution's website to lead a student from inquiry to enrollment?

6. How does competition affect a college's brand identity and information conveyed on their website? What marketing and promotion lessons can be learned from for-profit institutions?