Academic Web Site Design and Academic Templates: Where Does the Library Fit In?
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Academic Web site design continues to evolve as colleges and universities are under increasing pressure to create a Web site that is both hip and professional looking. Many colleges and universities are using templates to unify the look and feel of their Web sites. Where does the library Web site fit into a comprehensive campus design scheme? The library Web site is unique due to the wide range of services and content available. Based on a poster session presented at the Twelfth Annual Association of College and Research Libraries conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 2005, this paper explores the prevalence of university-wide academic templates on library Web sites and discusses factors libraries should consider in the future.

College and universities have a long history with the Web. In the early 1990s, university Web sites began as piecemeal projects with varying degrees of complexity—many started as informational sites for various technologically advanced departments on campus. Over the last decade, these Web sites have become a vital part of postsecondary institutions and one of their most visible faces. Academic Web sites communicate the brand and mission of an institution. They are used by prospective students to learn about an institution and then used later to apply. Current students use them to pay tuition bills, register for classes, access course materials, participate in class discussions, take tests, get grades, and more. Online learning and course-management software programs, such as Blackboard, continue to increase the use of Web sites. They are now an important learning tool for the entire campus community and the primary communication tool for current students, parents, alumni, the community, donors, and funding organizations.

Web site standards have developed since the 1990s. Usability and accessibility are now important tenets for Web site designers, especially for educational institutions. As a result, campus Web designers or outside consultants are often responsible for designing large parts of the academic Web site. As Web sites have grown, ongoing maintenance is an important workload issue. Databases and other technologies are used to simplify daily updates and changes to Web sites. This is where the academic template fits in.

An academic template can be defined as a common or shared template used to control the formatting of Web pages in different departments on a campus. Generally, administrators will mandate the use of a specific template or group of templates. This mandate includes guidelines for such things as layout, design, color, font, graphics, and navigation links to be used on all Web pages. Often, the templates are administered using content management systems (CMSs) or Web development software such as Macromedia's Contribute. These programs give different levels of editing rights to individuals, thus keeping tight control over particular Web pages or even parts of Web pages. Academic templates give the Web site administrator the ability to change the template and update all pages with a single keystroke.

For example, the Web site administrator may give editing rights to content editors, such as librarians, to edit only the center section of the Web page. The remaining parts of the page such as the top, sides, and bottom are locked and cannot be edited. The result of using templates is that the university Web site is very unified and consistent. This is particularly important in creating a brand for the university. Well-branded institutions have the opportunity to increase revenue, improve administration and faculty staffing, improve retention, and increase alumni relationships.[1] But what about the library?

Libraries are one of the most visited Web pages on a university's Web site.[2] Thus, the design of the library page can be crucial to a well-designed academic Web site. The library Web site can set a tone for an institution and help prospective students get a feel for the campus. Belanger, Mount, and Wilson contend it is important for the image of an institution to match the reality.[3] If there is discord between the two, students may choose an inappropriate college and quickly drop out, lowering a campus's retention data. The library Web site can also be important in the recruitment of new faculty members. In addition, libraries use their Web sites for marketing, public relations, and fund-raising for the library.[4]

Library Web sites are crucial to delivering data, research tools, and instruction to students, faculty, staff, and community patrons. More than 90 percent of students access the library from their home computers, and 78 percent prefer this form of access.[5] Today, the Web site connects users with article citations and databases, library catalogs, full-text journals, magazines, newspapers, books, videos, DVDs, e-books, encyclopedias, streaming music and video, and more. Users access subject-specific research guides, library tutorials, information-literacy instruction, and critical evaluation tools. Services such as interlibrary loan (ILL), reference management programs such as Endnote or RefWorks, and print and electronic reserves are also used via the Web. Users get help with doing research by e-mail and virtual chat. In addition, libraries are digital repositories for a growing number of digital historic documents and archives.

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How common are academic templates in library Web sites? What effect do they have on the content and services provided by libraries?

Methods

For the purposes of this study, a list of doctoral, master's, and bachelor of arts (BA) institutions (private and public) based on the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education was created and a random number table was used to select a sample of Web pages (n=216).[6] Home pages, admissions pages, departmental pages, and library Web pages were analyzed. A similarly sized sample of each type was selected to give a broad overview of trends—18 percent of doctoral institutions (n=47), 19 percent of master's institutions (n=115), and 23 percent of BA institutions (n=54). The following questions were asked:

- Does the college or university Web site use an academic template?
- If yes, is the library using the template, and for how much of the library Web site?
- To what extent is the template being used?

Primarily, a Web site was determined to be using an academic template based on the look of the site. For example, if the majority of the Web elements (top banner, navigation) all matched, then the Web site was counted as using some sort of template. Use and nonuse of content management system (CMS) software behind the Web site was not considered in this study—only the look of the Web site.

Results

A majority of college and university Web sites (94 percent) use an academic template. Fifty percent of the libraries surveyed use the academic template for at least the library's home page. Of that number, about 34 percent of libraries use the template on a majority of the library pages. Roughly 44 percent of the total libraries surveyed did not use the academic template, and approximately 5 percent of academic Web sites do not use any sort of unified academic template. Smaller BA institutions are more likely to use the academic template on multiple library pages than doctoral institutions, which tend to have their own library design or template (see table 1).

For those libraries that did not use the academic template on every library page, the most commonly used elements template were the top header (which often has the university seal or an image of the university), the top navigation bar (with university-wide links), and the bot-
tom footer, which often contains the university address, privacy statement, or legal disclaimers. Less frequently used elements were the bottom navigation bar, and the left or right navigation bar with university-wide links (see tables 2–3).

Discussion

While many colleges and universities use academic templates, only about half of their libraries follow suit. Libraries using the template often use selected parts of the template, or only use the template on their home page. Though not considered in this study, there may be a correlation between institution size and template use, as larger institutions are more likely to have library Web designers and thus use the academic template only on the library's home page. While academic templates can cause libraries many problems, there are also many benefits to be considered.

Problems with academic templates on library Web sites

The primary concern with any template is how much space is available for content. For example, there may be a very small box for the page content while images, banner bars, and large navigation links may take up most of the real estate on the page. This problem can be exacerbated for libraries because there are so many different types of content such as the library catalog, databases, tutorials, forms, ILL, and other library services delivered via the Web. Libraries can be caught between the design imposed by the academic template and the rigid size requirements from outside vendors such as database companies, ILL or reserve modules, federated search products, or others.

Academic templates are usually mandated by administrators without a full understanding of the specific content and uses of the library Web site. Many problems can occur when trying to fit an existing library Web site into a poorly designed academic template. It can be very difficult to modify the template effectively for the library's purposes. An example of one specific problem is confusing links on the template, where a link on every page to the "university catalog" links to the course catalog and not the library catalog, which is very confusing for users. Another example is a search box as part of the academic template—what are users searching? The university Web site? The library Web site? The library catalog? The World Wide Web?

Another drawback to using academic templates for library Web sites can be the time involved in training librarians, staff, and library Web site administrators. The existing

Table 1. Percentages of occurrences of academic templates

	No academic template (%)	Library not using template (%)	Library using template—transition or top page (%)	Library using template—majority of pages (%)
Bachelor of Arts	4	37	13	46
Master's	6	48	12	34
Doctoral	6	45	28	21

Table 2. Occurrence of templates in academic and library Web sites

	No academic template	Library not using template	Library using template— transition or top page	Library using template— majority of pages	Total sites analyzed
Bachelor of Arts	2	20	7	25	54
Master's	7	55	14	39	115
Doctoral	3	21	13	10	47
Total	12	96	34	74	216

Table 3. Percentages of occurrence for institutions using the academic-wide template for first page of library Web site or libraries using modified academic template

	BA (%)	Master's (%)	Doctoral (%)	All Colleges and Universities (%)
Top header (no navigation)	100	94	94	91
Top navigation	75	82	82	76
Bottom header (no navigation)	83	65	76	72
Bottom navigation	25	18	18	20
Left navigation	42	18	18	24
Right navigation	8	0	0	2

content must be fit into the new template—a huge project, given that many library Web sites contain one thousand pages or more. Generally, a decision to use a template is accompanied by a decision to use a CMS or new Web-page editor. This takes yet more time to train individuals on the new software in addition to the new template.

Benefits of using academic templates

One of the benefits for libraries using an academic template is the ability to exploit the expertise of the Web site designers who created the template. The academic template often incorporates images, logos, and branding that the library may not be able to design otherwise. Many libraries do not have professional Web designers on staff; even if they do, there often is no one person who designs and maintains the entire library Web site. Instead, different parts of a library Web site are designed and maintained by different individuals with varying degrees of Web site ability. As a result, many library Web sites are a mix of styles, which can be disorienting for students who are familiar with the university's "look." Web site uniformity has a positive effect on usability since familiarity with one part of the Web site helps students, faculty,

and staff navigate other parts of the Web site. Even Web site basics such as knowing the color and style of the links and how to navigate to different pages can be helpful.[8]

Another benefit is academic templates are generally ADA compliant as required under Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.[9] As usability and usability testing become more prevalent, academic template designers may also test the template and navigation for usability. Such testing will improve the template and thus the library Web site as well.

Trends in academic and library Web sites

Colleges and universities are responding to a new generation of students, the majority of whom have grown up with computers. In trying to meet their needs and desires, many academic Web sites have high-quality photographs, quotes, and testimonials from the universities' students on their home pages. More and more materials are being placed online to allow both prospective and current students to do what they need to do twenty-four hours a day, from registering for classes to handing in research papers. Many Web sites have interactive elements such as instant polls or quizzlets or use instant messaging to connect with tech-savvy students. For example, prospective students can chat with admissions staff members or current students about what it is like to attend a particular university. A large number of sites also highlight weblogs written by current students or those studying abroad. These features allow students to use the technology they are comfortable with to maximize their academic experience.

Numerous library Web sites are changing as well, featuring a library catalog, article database, or federated search box on the home page to allow users to search instantly. Additionally, library sites are beginning to include images of students using the library, external or internal shots of the building, Flash graphics, icons, and sound. Many incorporate screen captures to help users navigate specific databases or forms. In addition, an increasing number of libraries use weblogs to give more of a dynamic quality with daily library news and announcements.

Strategies for using academic templates

Based on comments received in April 2005 during the poster session, and in recent electronic discussion list postings, many academic libraries are dealing with these issues. Libraries should work on creating a mission statement and objectives for their Web sites that expand upon the library's mission, the institutional Web site's mission,

and the institution's overall mission and brand. Librarians must be knowledgeable about Web site usability and trends in Web site design in order to communicate effectively to designers and administrators. Librarians should also become members of campus Web committees and be a voice for library users during the design process.

Teaching administrators and campus Web designers about the library and the library Web site's prominence are important tools to successfully deal with any proposed university-wide academic templates. For example, a librarian could mock-up a few pages, conduct informal usability testing, and invite administrators to learn firsthand about potential problems library users could experience with a template. Librarians could also propose a modified template that uses a few key elements from the academic template. This would maintain the brand but retain enough space for important library content. Connecting with other librarians and learning from each other's successes and failures will also help bring insight into this academic template issue.

Conclusion

The use of academic templates is only going to increase as institutional Web sites grow in complexity and importance. Libraries are an important part of institutions both physically—on campus—and virtually—as part of the campus Web site. Academic templates are part of a unified design scheme for colleges and universities. Librarians must work with both library and university administrators to create a well-designed but usable library Web site. They must advocate for library users and continue to help students and faculty access the rich resources and services available from the library. Library administrators need to allocate resources and staff time to improve their Web sites and to work in concert with academic Web site designers to merge the best of the academic template to the best of the library site while not sacrificing users' needs. The result will be highly used, highly usable library Web sites that attract students and keep them coming back to access the fantastic world of information available in today's academic libraries. ■

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