Oglethorpe's Website Strategic Plan and Comparison to Other Liberal Arts Colleges

Web Content Development Internship

Chandler Anderson
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What constitutes an effective website? Beautiful graphics and images? Engaging, eye-catching content? A creative yet intuitive layout? Obviously, you can't go wrong with any of these things; they are all major criterion which users inevitably consider when evaluating the a website, whether it is at-a-glance as a causal web-surfer, or seriously as a potential customer in the site owner's target market. For a small liberal-arts university like Oglethorpe, it is especially important to provide curious web-passersby with an attractive online experience that leaves a lasting impression of who they are as an institution. Because small schools often don't have the name-recognition and instant clout that comes from being a major school, they must find inventive ways to get the attention of potential students and other important markets and appeal to them based on their differentiating factors from large schools as well as other small schools. In an online-connected world, Oglethorpe's website is its public face, thus the substance of Oglethorpe's website inevitably represents its standard of quality as an institution and its ability to design aesthetically-pleasing layouts and maintain it with relevant and interesting content[1]. Therefore, Oglethorpe should pursue a web strategy which supports its institutional goals, improving its online presence in a cost-effective manner while continuing to differentiate itself from other colleges.

While Oglethorpe's website should at least adequately serve current students, faculty, staff, and alumni, the university's most important target market is arguably *potential students*. This is because the tuition from enrolled students is the biggest source of dependable income for the school, and recruiting new students is an essential function of the school in order to maintain enrollment and sustain itself as an institution. As the Internet becomes increasing dominant over traditional print media, a school's website becomes a more important source of information

[1] Appendix: *Exhibit 1. Oglethorpe's current homepage.*

about the institution and a more visible representative of the school's values to the public. A 2012 study by Noel-Levitz, Inc. indicated that 52% of junior- and senior-level high school students (the largest demographic from which Oglethorpe recruits) considered a college's website to have at least a significant role in their evaluation of potential colleges. These students are seeking many things in their potential university-of-choice, but they are arguably most focused on, in no particular order: 1) quality of education, 2) quality of campus life, and 3) affordability. According to the aforementioned study, students consider the school's site to be one of the best resources for learning about these aspects of the school, with 69% using it for the school's academics (which only beat by brochures), 68% for campus lifestyle (which only second to campus visits), and 49% for cost and financial aid (which is the leader by a margin of 17%).[2] A college's website is an essential part of the evaluation process of prospective students, and by making their site attractive and easy-to-navigate, they have a clear avenue for appealing to this demographic and further penetrating this market and increasing enrollment.

As internet accessibility has spread through the last decade, visual and structural standards for websites have modernized accordingly, meaning it has become increasingly important to users that an institution has a nice-looking website with easy-to-find content. Unfortunately, colleges as a whole have moved slowly towards meeting these new standards. Joshua Johnson, editor and writer of the blog Design Shack, wrote in a 2011 article about college website design that he noticed a trend in their sites to "cram tons of information into a small space with very little effective organization. Many of them contain an overall aesthetic ripped from cutting edge web design… ten years ago." In addition, he offers an interesting insight into why colleges generally have not kept up-to-date on site aesthetics: "As aesthetic decisions

[2] Noel-Levitz, I. (2012). *2012 E-Expectations Report: The Online Expectations of College-Bound Juniors and Seniors.*

become subject to bureaucracy, inner-office politics and groupthink, the quality of the finished product decreases exponentially. I guarantee you that if you let a single talented web design student take a stab at redesigning his university homepage, he/she could easily come up with something more attractive and more effective than the building full of people the university pays to oversee the site."[3] Because colleges are inherently bureaucratic institutions, progress on secondary projects like website improvement can often be slow, and as internet users have come to expect higher quality websites over time, pre-existing college website designs have become outdated. Seeking to refine their website's look and site structure will give a school a competitive edge in appealing to students over schools which have acted slowly to implement these changes.

In addition to institutional bureaucracy, a major barrier for a small school such as Oglethorpe for initiating a website design overhaul is affording the resources to carry these tasks out properly. These resources can be divided into three categories: time, money, and expertise. Since Oglethorpe is an institution with a diverse set of primary functions, from academics and athletics, to student life and alumni relations, finding the time to plan out and execute a large project such as a website re-design typically ranks lower in priority compared to other more urgent projects on the university's docket, especially since the website serves a support function rather than a primary function. Money also is largely devoted to the primary functions of the university, thus it is less feasible for Oglethorpe to acquire the expensive content-management software and high-end server hardware that is available to institutions with higher enrollment and endowment. One school that is currently undergoing re-imagining of their website design is Davidson College in North Carolina. On Davidson's blog documenting the progress of the site,

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[3] Johnson, Joshua. *Best and Worst Design: 50 University Websites From 50 States* (2011, January 20). Retrieved May 7, 2013, from Design Shack: http://designshack.net/articles/graphics/best-and-worst-design-50-university-websites-from-50-states/

they emphasize that the new site will boast "Clean, traditional design that utilizes the Davidson red and black colors", "large, very visual featured content area focused on key themes and messaging" and "news and events area shown 'above the fold' so they will be easily viewable on smaller monitors."[4] For this new site, they outsourced design duties to BarkleyREI, a web design firm based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and adopted the IngeniuxCMS software for managing their web content.[5] Davidson, being larger and having a higher endowment than Oglethorpe ($511 million vs. $20 million)[6], possesses the extensive resources for executing such a large-scale website overhaul; Oglethorpe, on the other hand, has fewer resources and must primarily rely on in-house staff in order to plan, execute, and manage their web operations.

Fortunately, Oglethorpe is blessed with what is arguably the most valuable of the three resources it needs to devote to executing its web strategy: expertise. While at larger schools entire departments are tasked with keeping their websites up-to-date and managing web-related projects, at Oglethorpe these responsibilities primarily fall upon just three individuals of the University Communications department: Todd Bennett, Renee Vary, and Debbie Aiken. Bennet, the chief marketing and communication officer of Oglethorpe, is a veteran of the content strategy field, having served as managing director of consulting services for Dotmarketing, where he, according Oglethorpe's website, "helped the firm become one of the nation's top agencies for higher education and nonprofit website development and played a key role in the development of the enterprise open source web content management system, dotCMS." With Dotmarketing, Bennett was in charge in researching effective website designs for dotCMS, which would go on to be used by some of the nation's top colleges, universities, including Princeton, Emory,

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[4] Appendix: *Exhibit 3. Davidson College's new website design, commissioned from BerkelyREI.*
[5] *New Homepage Design Concept.* (2012, July 3). Retrieved May 7, 2013, from Davidson College - Web Redesign: http://blogs.davidson.edu/webredesign/2012/07/new-homepage-design-concept/
[6] *Davidson College* (2013). Retrieved May 7, 2013, from US News & World Report: http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/davidson-college-2918

Bucknell, and Oberlin. This background in web design makes Bennett an important, if not *the* most important, asset Oglethorpe has in pursuing a website redesign: as an industry professional, he possesses the aesthetic and technical knowledge to form a comprehensive website plan.

Bennett believes that that Oglethorpe has the capacity to carry out an effective web strategy, even if it may take a little longer than other schools with larger departments handling this work. "Yes, it can happen; it's just that it's going to happen more slowly, but you can see that we are making progress." For Bennett, it is more important to devote human resources to effective design and research simple-to-use content management software rather than hiring an entire department of developers to manage a sprawling website. "The web is a human endeavor. I can go out and hire developers all day long; [instead], get designers to build a framework. It takes people to think about the information architecture and the structure of the site. Imagine we're thinking about this on a global scale for how all of these sub-sites interact with one another and how all of the content gets used and distributed…if you don't have a good plan up front, it's like building a skyscraper without blueprints."[7] Bennett's extensive background in the web design field makes him extremely capable of strategizing a long-term plan for Oglethorpe's website, and in that plan, he aspires to create a better website by opting to effectively use Oglethorpe's current human resources to get project done, rather than hiring dedicated full-time developers or outsourcing these duties outside of the Oglethorpe community.

In order to expand the University Communications department's capacity to take on larger projects, they established Pegasus Creative, a subdivision of the department consisting of students and alumni interns and workers, in Fall of 2009. Under Associate Director Debbie Aiken, "students work within a variety of fields that directly apply to their majors, including

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[7] Bennett, Todd (2013, May 6). Personal interview.

social media marketing, web content development, public relations, video production, journalism, photography and market research."[8] When they work for Pegasus, Oglethorpe students get the opportunity to contribute to Oglethorpe's communications operations in an easy-going environment, while learning new skills and building a portfolio which will make them more marketable when looking for jobs after graduation. Both Oglethorpe's staff and students are benefitted by this opportunity: by employing these students, University Communications can delegate smaller tasks like website editing to interns while the upper-level staff handle the larger-scale tasks like strategic planning, increasing the speed at which these tasks are completed and making up for Oglethorpe's deficit in staffing compared to larger schools.

For the future of Oglethorpe's website, Bennett has a clear vision of what he wants accomplished with this additional workforce: primarily, he wants the entire website to be managed in WordPress, which is rapidly becoming one of the most popular content management systems for websites. For the past 6 years or so, the entire Oglethorpe website has been managed with Adobe Contribute, which is desktop software that allows users to manage and edit static web pages. The software is functional at editing individual pages, but because each page is independent of others on the site, they do not have a unified theme and have to be changed one-by-one when site-wide edits need to be made; this has made aesthetics and content inconsistent across the website and diminished the branding of the site.[9] Also, the software is often confusing to set up, and is only accessible through Oglethorpe-owned computers through its Citrix application server, requiring users to be on-campus in order to make edits to the site. WordPress has a significant edge over Contribute in that it adapts the content of each page automatically to

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[8] *What is Pegasus?* (2013). Retrieved May 7, 2013, from Pegasus Creative: http://pegasus.oglethorpe.edu/what-is-pegasus/

[9] Appendix: *Exhibit 2. Oglethorpe's About Us page. Static page, managed by Adobe Contribute.*

be formatted according to a user-customizable theme that is used across the entire site. Also, the administrator panel is web-based and accessible from any device with a web browser, making the managing of content much easier and less time-consuming for Bennett and his staff.

Though the majority of Oglethorpe's website still consists of static webpages managed with Contribute, University Communications has already begun to implement elements of this new strategy. Over the last year, Bennett has been working with Pegasus Creative to migrate sections of Oglethorpe's website over to individual WordPress sites. As of May 2013, the Summer[10] and the Adult Degree Program websites have been migrated: each of these sites has a theme that features the Oglethorpe black-and-yellow color scheme for branding and utilizes easy-to-use navigation bars and buttons for maximum accessibility of content. For these sites, Bennett licensed the Avada theme by Themeforest[11] and created a "child" theme which applied styling appropriate to the Oglethorpe brand (logo, colors, fonts, ect.) to the pre-existing Avada framework. While this theme has become the de facto standard for Oglethorpe's auxillary WordPress sites, Bennett said that once the school is ready to go forward with a comprehensive website redesign, he will consider commissioning a freelance web designer to design a custom theme for the entire Oglethorpe site. By delegating the more complicated aspects to experts outside of the Oglethorpe community, but leaving the maintenance and planning of the website to members of University Communications and Pegasus, Bennett keeps costs low while maintaining a tight degree of control over Oglethorpe's brand representation on their websites.

Under Bennett's long-term plan, each department will eventually receive an individual web page with a unique domain name (for example, the Psychology department will be located

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[10] Appendix: *Exhibit 4. Oglethorpe's Summer site on Wordpress…*
[11] *Avada | Responsive Multi-Purpose Theme.* (2013, April 10). Retrieved May 7, 2013, from Themeforest: http://themeforest.net/item/avada-responsive-multipurpose-theme/2833226

at psychology.oglethorpe.edu) that will be linked to from Oglethorpe's main website, which will also eventually be migrated to WordPress. Because these sites are distinct from one another, they are administered independently through separate WordPress control panels, meaning that administrators only have to sort through the pages of content for particular subsection rather than the entire Oglethorpe site. Also, each of these pages can be easily organized into the hierarchy used by the navigation bar on the tops of pages, allowing users to locate and navigate to content they need with ease. Considering that the biggest difficulty prospective students often have with college websites is navigation (in the Noel-Levitz study, 55% could not find the information they needed on a site) [12], it is essential for Oglethorpe to structure its website in a logical manner and provide users with an easy-to-understand navigation panel with will accommodate their need to find important information about the school and its programs.

In addition to making the website easier to manage, WordPress has the capability to handle all of these functions for free, as opposed to more expensive CMS services that might costs thousands of dollars per year to license. Also, most of these CMS providers use proprietary software, meaning technical support often has to be handled directly through the provider, and there is a limited number of plugins available for expanding the site's functionality. WordPress, on the other hand, has an active user and developer community with open support forums for addressing problems, and there are thousands of plugins and themes available through this community for expanding the functionality of a WordPress site for little or no cost.[13] Also, Oglethorpe could theoretically commission freelance developers from the WordPress community to design custom themes and plugins for the site if these resources are not already available, and

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[12] Noel-Levitz, I. (2012). *2012 E-Expectations Report: The Online Expectations of College-Bound Juniors and Seniors.*
[13] *The Features You'll Love* (2013). Retrieved May 8, 2013, from WordPress: http://en.wordpress.com/features/

do so at a much lower cost than a salaried developer. Thus, Oglethorpe can implement complex new functionality to the website without the commitment of a creating a dedicated WordPress development position or dealing with the bureaucracy of arranging custom content from a licensed CMS provider, as long as Bennett and University Communications can communicate the functionality they are looking for to a third-party developer. The open-ended and free nature of WordPress not only makes it a more affordable alternative to a licensed CMS, but one that is more expandable with additional functionality as Oglethorpe finds the need for it.

Another major point that Bennett emphasizes is implementing an attractive and responsive layout which will effectively fill both large and screens, especially those of mobile devices such as cell phones and tablets.[14] Oglethorpe's current website is static, so both desktop and mobile users will see the same layout when they access their site through a browser. On a WordPress site, dynamic themes will detect the browser's display size and re-adjust the layout and content automatically. This is demonstrated on the new Summer website[15]: when viewed from a computer browser, pages have a full landscape layout with an attractive black navigation bar on top, but when they are viewed from a mobile browser, the layout becomes simpler and more vertically-oriented and the navigation bar is replaced by a single dropdown box. This mobile-optimized layout makes the page much easier to read and navigate on a small screen than a full-sized webpage. Considering that more than half of students have viewed their school's site on their mobile device, it is important to use a theme which will adapt itself to a small screen and make itself easier to use for users who need information on-the go. [16] Bennett has also been experimenting with a bold new design for the Oglethorpe home page which would implement

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[14] Bennett, Todd (2013, May 6). Personal interview.
[15] Appendix: *Exhibit 4. Oglethorpe's Summer site on Wordpress…*
[16] Noel-Levitz, I. (2012). *An E-Expectations Trend Report: The Mobile Browsing Behaviors and Expectations of College-Bound High School Students.*

graphics and copy emphasizing unique aspects of the school such as the architecture and the Core.[17] By adopting new design standards, Bennett is making a concerted effort to modernize the site and give it an aesthetic look that is competitive with sites of larger schools.

Though they may have limited human and financial resources to devote to their web strategy compared to other schools, Oglethorpe relies on their expertise to expand and improve their website in a way that will impress onlookers. The University Communications department, though small in size, has the experience and talent to make Oglethorpe competitive against institutions with more resources, and while schools like Davidson have hired professional design firms and licensed expensive CMS software in improving the design and functionality of their site, Bennett has the design savvy and industry knowledge to understand how site-wide improvements can be made efficiently with fewer resources. By switching from Contribute to WordPress, Oglethorpe makes website administration less time-consuming for their limited staff, allowing them to undertake larger-scale projects, and by choosing to pursue web development in-house and using free CMS like WordPress over a licensed one, University Communications can achieve website functionality comparable to those of larger schools for less expenditure. As the school becomes more competitive in the college market with new features like the Campus Center, Oglethorpe's website needs to match their ascending reputation, and by utilizing the expertise of Todd Bennett, University Communications, and Pegasus Creative, they will achieve a modern web presence which will strengthen the brand of Oglethorpe University for today's web-obsessed world.

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[17] Appendix: *Exhibit 5. Todd Bennett's OU homepage mockup, May 2013.*

Appendix

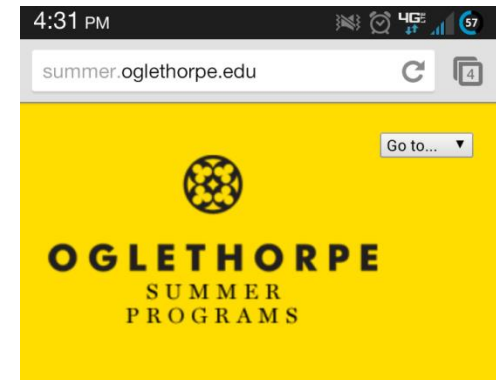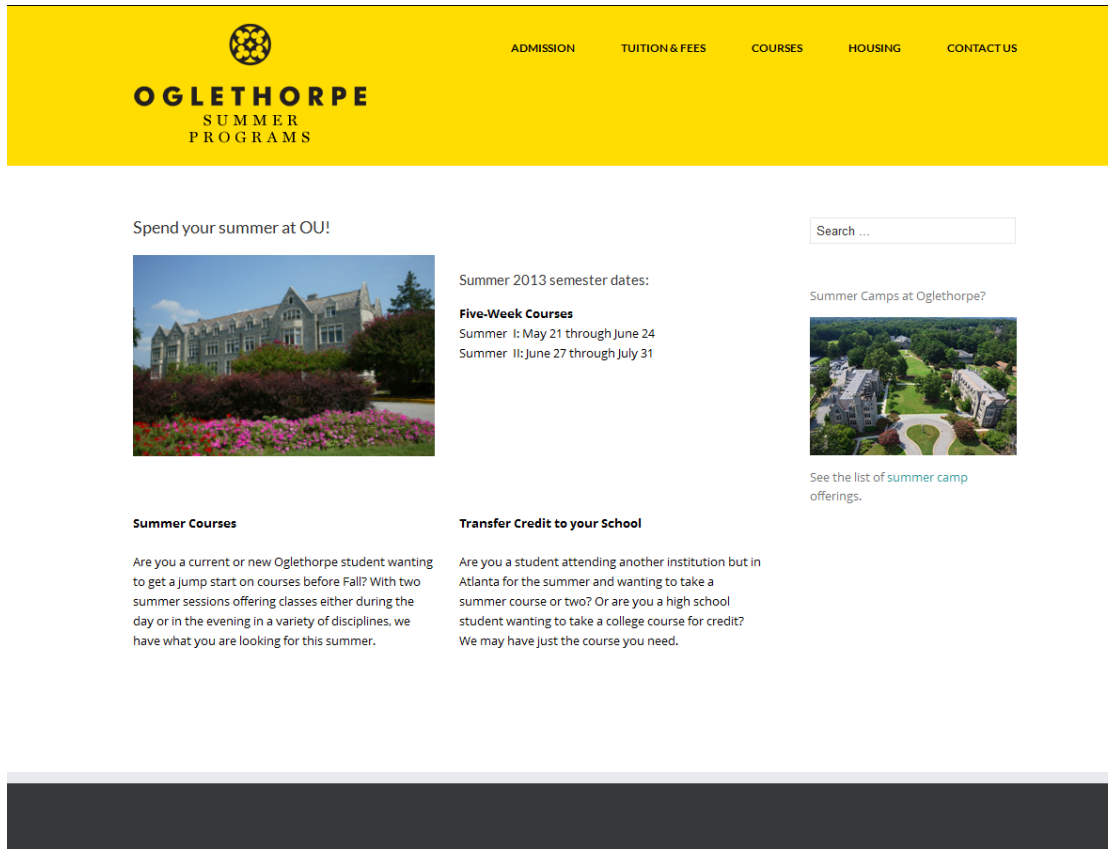**Exhibit 1.** Oglethorpe's current homepage.

Appendix

Exhibit 2. Oglethorpe's About Us page. Static page, managed by Adobe Contribute.

Appendix

Exhibit 3. Davidson College's new website design, commissioned from BerkelyREI.

Exhibit 4. Oglethorpe's Summer site on Wordpress, when viewed on a desktop browser (left) and a mobile browser (right).

Appendix

Exhibit 5. Todd Bennett's OU homepage mockup, May 2013.