

# **Policy and practice implications of faculty web pages**

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## **Abstract**

Even on absence of research on the subject, there has been an initiative in higher education to sponsor professionally oriented personal web pages for faculty. To protect against liability exposure and to promote quality web publishing, colleges and universities must carefully create policy and development support that will guide and facilitate faculty in creating web pages that promote and compliment the mission of the school as well as the professional presence of the author of that personal web page.

## **Policy and practice implications of faculty web pages**

In practice, some colleges and universities allow and encourage their faculty and administration to have individual, personal web pages hosted on the institution's server. While this practice also is extended to administration, students, and staff, for the purposes of this paper, a focus on faculty will guide the discussion because of the unique ways in which individual faculty web pages interface with teaching strategies and practices.

Surprisingly, there is sparse published information or research about faculty web pages and the various practices or policies that support them. Making policy and establishing practice standards for personal faculty web pages need to be addressed in higher education because personal web pages of all kinds will become a standard feature of many schools' homepages and the implications for their unguided presence and development are risky.

Even for those institutions of higher education that already host personal pages for faculty, there is the disturbing reality that too many web hosts are building institutional policies on web sites for individuals as a post facto way of managing the many idiosyncratic sites that have already been put on the institution's home page. In too many cases, the practice has led the policy rather than the reverse. In too many schools, there is no policy at all to guide the practice. This lack of policy and planning is perhaps due to the urgency of some schools to "go digital" and to the fact that there is sparse precedence about policy-making and practice in this evolving area of web publishing.

Another reason for a lack of clear policy on hosting personal web pages may also be due to the reality that this is an issue that involves academic freedom. The hotly contested debate about the rights of faculty to exercise free, unfettered speech is an ongoing one in higher education. Placing it in the context of web practice and policy-making complicates the debate even more. Many schools cannot reach agreement on an academic freedom policy within their own traditional classrooms. It is even more challenging to reach consensus or compliance in a forum as public, dynamic, and uncharted as the Internet.

## **Categories of faculty web pages**

Before beginning a discussion of policy and practice for personal faculty web pages hosted by academic institutions, it is important to first distinguish between the categories of web pages that may appear within academic web sites hosted by specific colleges or universities. Not all personal pages are the same in purpose or function and often they have multiple purposes. The general categories of pages hosted by institutions can include a course support page that may peripherally contain personal elements about the sponsoring faculty, a business card or telephone directory style page listing essential information only, and an individually idiosyncratic personal page that celebrates themes picked by the web author.

### *Course delivery and support pages*

Web pages can provide course delivery as well as course support. Course support web pages are supplements to classroom or online instruction and often are housed in the faculty pages section of the host server because

instructors create, manage, monitor, and direct these web pages for specific teaching purposes that are tied to a specific course. Increasingly, these types of pages are not limited to online classes. Many traditional classes have faculty who are taking advantage of the digital platform to provide electronic supports in the form of syllabi, lecture notes, supplemental text, bibliographies, multi-media presentations, links to digitized materials, uploads, FAQ's, practice drills, sample tests, and study strategies. These course support pages may also host features such as chat rooms, student and teacher profiles, class lists, grading information, assistance for special needs students, e-mail feedback options, bulletin boards, media centers, and project forums and platforms. By design online classes require more cyber development and presence than do traditional classrooms; however, many faculty in traditional classrooms are increasingly using digital information to supplement traditional course content as a way of saving copy costs, making information readily available and dynamic, and expanding the whole experience of learning in the classroom. The catch phrase of "bricks and clicks" points to the coming reality that physical classrooms are taking on digital dimensions.

### *Business card pages*

A second category of faculty web page is that of the professional business card or telephone directory style page. It is the digital equivalent of the traditional print version of the same that typically includes the person's title, academic affiliation, phone and voice mail numbers, e-mail and office addresses, and perhaps even a photo. Additionally, this type of page can be expanded to include the web author's vita, professional affiliations/ links, advising information, publications list/links, and consulting/research interests.

A professional/personal page can take several forms depending on how much hypertext it uses. The homepage for the site may include many of the same elements as a professional business card page, but those elements are then annotated in hypertext. To illustrate, abbreviated or comprehensive resumes might be attached.

### *Idiosyncratic personal pages*

What moves the business card pages into the personal realm is that some faculty might include related personal activities that are not supported, endorsed, or even known to the hosting institution such as service work, consulting, and even personal hobbies or advocacies. It is this personal dimension of the page that is considered problematic by some institutions. The question becomes one of whether or how professional space such as a college or university host site can be used for personal purposes. The answer is found in how one defines "personal." The questions about appropriate content are answered, in part, based on exactly the way in which the sponsoring academic institution hosts or links to the personal information. Hosting on the server presents a very different set of liabilities and rewards than does linking to a page or site outside the server.

## **The context of personal web pages**

Besides content, what also distinguishes the different types of personal web pages is how they are attached to the hosting institution. That relationship to the college or university is key in determining what rights or obligations the sponsoring agency has to set guidelines and limitations for the pages and what liabilities are incurred by the sponsoring agency by associating itself with the personal web page either by hosting or linking to that page.

### *Hosting and linking*

Linking and hosting create two different degrees of liability and identification for the academic institution. This is not as controversial an issue for course support and business card pages as it is for personal web pages. Hosting and even linking do imply an endorsement by the sponsoring institution. Linking suggests a lower level of endorsement, but not as much if it is clear from the linked web page itself that the user audience has left the institution's home page site and is now in a separate host domain with its own standards, mission, and liability exposure.

Many schools have taken the conservative route and safeguarded themselves by hosting only a standardized version across the school's web page for a professional business card type of page. This type of page functions much the

same way a telephone directory would and therefore closely limits liability exposure for the sponsoring institution. Those sponsors then may make a separate decision as to whether or not to allow an individual web author to link his or her business card page to a personal page outside of the institution's server.

To make the distinction in sponsorship and relationship clear, many institutions employ an identifying and unique page design that clearly announces whether a site is an official page within the college or university's domain or whether the user has outlinked to a site outside the school's web site domain. The URL is one decisive indicator of location, but it may not be as clear to users as might be a distinctive a graphic standard or template that remind users that they are at pages within an institution's home page site. Icons and other signage can also help to identify a page's sponsorship. Minimal requirements such as a "return to Homepage" link would be one way to clarify associations amongst pages as being outside the server or within its domain.

### *The absence of hosting or linking personal web pages*

What is certain is that faculty/administration personal pages are not a requisite offering on home pages for all colleges and universities. One cannot assume that the absence of faculty personal web pages occurs because there is a lack of expertise, web space or desire on the part of potential web authors. It may be a conscious policy decision on the part of the university or college. Those who choose not to host personal web pages may have multiple reasons for doing so. Aside from the liability issues, there is, for example, some debate about the usefulness of the sites to the sponsoring institution as opposed to the cost in technology and support for hosting the pages.

### **The benefits of hosting personal faculty web pages**

Of the schools that do host separate, non-course related personal pages for faculty, administration, and staff, a review of colleges and universities home pages quickly shows that there is often an inconsistency of purpose and design for among individual personal pages of faculty/administration. Within these hosting platforms, this disarray can present a negative impression of the hosting institution. The inconsistency and sometimes unprofessionalism of faculty/administration personal pages may be intentionally due to what some may consider to be the individual exercise of academic freedom by the person authoring the page. It may also be just that the sponsoring institution has not addressed the inconsistencies with a policy or practice that calls for or supports standardized guidelines or that promotes professionalism in web authoring.

If an institution does provide space and support for personal pages, it is usually offered as a courtesy to those who elect to post a page. This hosting does entail responsibilities, so the question becomes one of whether that courtesy creates benefits sufficient to offset any liabilities or responsibilities for the hosting institution as well as the author of the personal page. There is, for example, the ongoing commitment on the part of the institution and the individual to manage and maintain the personal web page keeping it current, relevant, and purposeful. Additionally, web sites take up space on the server, so they represent an expense to the host.

If the institution hosting and the individual authoring a page do decide to commit to professional/personal web pages, the question arises as to exactly where personal pages belong in relationship to the larger site map of an institution's web page. Location implies importance or lack thereof. Some colleges and universities choose to de-emphasize or restrict access to the pages by posting them as a feature of the intranet. Making the personal pages an internal-only communication also reduces the liability of public postings by faculty/administration that do not comply with or compliment the mission, image, and reputation of the sponsoring institution.

The challenge to the sponsoring institution that is willing to host personal pages on its web site is that the web master or policy makers for the web must juggle the sometimes conflicting forces of academic freedom, creativity, and institutional responsibility. Both the Internet and intranets are much more public forums than is a traditional classroom, so there might have to be a more careful examination of individual, personal expression for those authoring the personal pages and the public presence of the institution. There is also the time commitment of monitoring sites and providing support for site development.

Sometimes the purposes of the host and the author can be in conflict. If there are no standards or guidelines for web page design and content, then the sponsoring institution may be flirting with a conflict between its own interests and the personal interests of the person creating his or her own web page. Intentional disregard of standards is a very different matter than uninformed mistakes by people using their best judgment when no guidance or support is provided.

The solution may be that institutions should host pages that are professional in content, design, and purpose. The problem is that sometimes the distinction between personal and professional is blurred. If such an infringement on what some people might consider to be professional boundaries occurs, then what action can or should the sponsoring institution take? This is a dilemma that there is no clear articulation of what constitutes professional web site standards. The prospect of conflict is enough for some institutions and people to avoid taking risks or trying something new.

## **The ethics of web page content**

All web pages that in any way are associated with a college or university should be professional--meaning that they follow legal and ethical standards as well as the best practices of academics. The law is still wrestling with aspects of freedom and liability on the Internet and codes of ethics are even less exact than the law. Higher education is still struggling to define the professional standards of web publishing and presentation.

But, despite the uncertainty, guidelines do need to be established that are legal, ethical, and reflect professional standards and practices. There are core values shared in academics that can be fashioned into a web guide code of ethics that governs content and design. If the sponsoring institution for the individual's web page calls for the web author to be professional in presentation of material and design, that implies that professional ethics and values will govern the content of every feature of the page. A review of faculty handbooks would probably be the best institution-specific beginning point for articulating professionalism in the particular academic setting of that college or university. Core values might include, but not be limited to the following:

- 1) operating in the institution's (including other faculty, administration, staff and students') best interests in terms of its mission and goals;
- 2) exercising the highest standards of honesty and integrity;
- 3) giving respect to the fair, civil, accurate, ethical presentation of information;
- 4) insuring that there is no conflict of interests between the sponsoring institution and other entities represented on the personal web pages;
- 5) observing the prohibition to use the personal web page for personal gain in any area that is commercial, political, religious, or otherwise non-academic, unless prior approval has been granted in writing by the sponsoring institution;
- 6) safeguarding the various rights to privacy held by individuals and institutions, including copyright law;
- 7) not intentionally and unfairly harming the reputation or safety of another individual or institution.

But probably the most important, yet debatable, standard is that the web author should be allowed the appropriate measure of academic freedom. Here lies a tangled problem. The grounds for academic freedom on the web are different than they would be in a classroom because one forum is much more public than the other. To illustrate, while all hate speech is wrong, hate speech on a web site has the potential to reach a wider, more public audience than hate speech in a classroom. The sponsoring institution's affiliation with problematic speech in a highly public forum such as the Internet can have devastating implications for everyone involved. Providing a forum implies an endorsement. Highly visible forums are persuasive just in their popularity. Authority in one area does not

necessarily transfer to other areas, but web users may not see the separation of authority. The debate of issues and the potential problems can go on and on.

The area of academic freedom in itself is a hotly debated issue no matter what forum it is given. The Internet only complicates the debate. This problematic issue alone can be reason enough for some institutions not to allow more than a business card style of page on the Internet for its faculty and administration.

## **Web policy strategy**

No matter what form of Internet web page an institution provides to its faculty, administration, or staff, there needs to be a policy that governs and guides what is published on a college or university's web pages. Some institutions' reaction to this call to committee work might be to just not have personal web pages at all. Certainly it is much easier to not host sites than to have to formulate policy and monitor practice. The question is whether the effort to formulate a policy offers a valuable payback.

The benefits to having a personal web page presence for faculty/administration are myriad. That is why some schools provide modest space on their servers for just this kind of very personal publishing. Two megabytes provide enough server space for endless pages of text or moderate text with five to six graphics depending on the format and size of the visuals. Providing a web presence for individuals is a courtesy that can have positive benefits for the sponsor and the individual web author because it allows for a personal presence on a site that might otherwise be defined by agencies, departments, and text. Professional and personal web pages can put a "face" and personality on an institution.

Perhaps the greatest benefit that personal web pages provide is the opportunity for user interactivity with the site. E-mails from alumni, queries from prospective students, contacts from parents or friends of students, and prospecting from outside industry and advisory boards for consulting purposes are all venues opened by the email or other interactive features of web pages. This function can also exist in telephone directory style pages, but personal pages prompt a personal response in humans more than a mere listing of names and numbers might.

Regardless of motives for publishing, the standards for page design and content should be professional and should also reflect the distinctive and professional nature of the sponsoring agency. It is important to note that being professional is not necessarily in opposition to being personal. One can be made to complement the other.

The policy and practice of personal web page authoring should be negotiated by all interested parties so as to insure that it is democratic and therefore representative of the people and agencies they serve. No Internet or intranet web page should ever challenge, embarrass, or harm the integrity of the sponsoring institution or the person represented on the page. While an institution should not assume that web authors it sponsors will create problematic material to be published on the Web, prudence and prevention are always better choices than policing and punishment.

The first challenge to setting web standards is to define what is considered compliant or compatible with the institution's purpose and presence on the Web. There are many excellent models for that. The definition of what should constitute a professional yet personal page is more challenging. It would probably be more prudent to publish guidelines of what is professional and leave challenges about what is too personal according to those standards to be something to be determined in a fair way on an individual basis.

One advantage that everyone concerned with web publishing can benefit from is that faculty/administration as well as institutional governing committees should already be schooled in practicing professional behaviors. One would hope that intuition and experience would be guide enough in making decisions about what is appropriate and what is not for a personal web page. Policy should not be too prescriptive and should trust the basic understandings of the professionals.

## **Purpose**

A discussion of faculty /administration web pages should examine the rationale for having the personal pages in the first place. Certainly the main argument that the web pages support course content is a valid one, but because course support pages are different in purpose and design from faculty pages, the two must be separated to examine the value of the faculty pages alone. What do faculty /administration personal web pages accomplish? Is the cost of that accomplishment a value to the institution, the faculty, and the site users?

The answers to these questions are dependent on the mission of each school, the personality of the faculty body, and the audience they seek to reach. But one universal reason for supporting faculty/administration web pages is that they put a “personal face” on an institution. The personalized touch that a web page can offer, especially if it allows for feedback, can be a valuable marketing/recruitment and instructional resource outside of coursework because it has the potential to personalize the institution and connect it to the browsing audience. For this same reason, recruiting materials for many institutions add the dimension of showcasing faculty and other people who make up the human side of a school. Professionally presented personal information about the people who make up the college or university allows the browsing audience to connect on different levels with the social environment that balances the academic aspect of any campus.

Even with this benefit, the caution bears repeating: professional web pages with personal dimensions or links to them should be governed by stated policies that protect everyone involved in the site. They should also enhance the image and function of the institution and individual web author.

## **Web page design practices examined**

Except for the colleges and universities who choose not to allot the space for faculty/administration web pages, the seemingly random approach to hosting web pages could be due, in part, to the reality that many colleges and universities are still experimenting with and determining exactly what their own institutional standards are for web page design and content. For those schools that host faculty/administration web pages, the standards may exist, but are not clearly delineated in practice or published in text for review.

Published standards do exist for commercial, professional, and personal web page design in web sites, articles, and books that articulate, demonstrate and evaluate generic and industry-specific web design standards. But higher education faculty web pages can be a distinctive category and warrant their own set of profession-specific or institution-specific guidelines, standards, and models.

Only when an analysis and dialogue about faculty web pages is begun can institutions of higher education and their faculty start to establish and assess standards for excellence. For example, several strategies can be employed to achieve consistency in design and layout:

- 1) The front page of every site could be designed using a template in a way as to assure uniformity of layout, content and design.
- 2) Variance from the recommended template would be minimal. Any individuality could be expressed in pages following the front page. Having consistent design in the front page to the Homepage of the site sponsor connects the various pages within themselves and to one another.
- 3) Sites that are distinctively individual should be created on a separate server and the institution could allow out links to those separate hosts for those personal sites.
- 4) The consistency of the linkage can be maintained by framing the page content in a template that identifies the sponsoring host. For example, having a “return to home” icon, toolbars, or menus that are consistent within and across the pages, would give a visually common reference point and look to the various pages.

5) All pages should be clearly identified with headers or footers or both so that the user knows what he or she is looking at. It would be troublesome and confusing for a user, for example, to be accessing what he or she thought was a course support page, if instead he or she came upon a personal page of the faculty member teaching the class. If that personal page housed, for example, information about hobbies, it might be confusing or even misleading to the user.

These suggestions could be talking points from which to develop standards that best express the distinctive nature of the sponsoring institution and the individuals who wish to author personal web pages hosted by that agency.

No matter what guidelines or standards are agreed upon, it is essential that a usability test be conducted to determine if the various pages are easy to use, constructive and purposeful, and aesthetically pleasing. All users should be considered in this test. That includes current students; prospective students; alumni; friends of the school; current faculty; prospective faculty; emeriti; administrators past, present and future; parents; friends and family of students; news media; etc. In creating a web page, a user might be reluctant to re-design or even scrap the page for the sake of consistency alone.

## **Design Consistency**

To meet some of the minimal standards of page design, schools should develop guidelines and resources for web page authoring. The goal of consistency is not to create a dull dearth of sameness. It should be to provide a unity and coherence in design that connects the various parts to a whole while expressing individuality. Consistency and creative individuality can co-exist.

Templates, for example, could go a long way to facilitate consistency. Design layout, standards for lettering size, menu items, integration of graphics could all be managed within a template that still allows for some measure of individuality. A well-designed template is not an obstacle to individual expression or creativity. The evidence of this is found in programs such as Netscape Composer that offer wizards and templates but still allows web authors the capability to produce individuality distinctive pages within that template. A compromise between a template for the complete page and none at all might be to create a template of the material that frames the information that is individually authored.

For those who balk at the thought of cookie-cutter page design, there could also be the option to have a “cover page” or business card style front page that would be consistent in design throughout the faculty directory of pages. As mentioned earlier, this could be the gateway to the more idiosyncratic pages that would follow this front page. The uniformity of design could be accomplished in the front page, and the following pages and links to that front page could house the more creative or individual expressions of web publishing that a faculty member would choose to use.

Another dimension of the problem depends on how exactly one interprets “consistency.” All web authors agree that consistency is a cornerstone of effective page layout and site design. But, the degree or definition of consistency is moot. Add to this the reality that the ideal is not always accomplished in reality. Numerous studies have shown that while web authors know the industry design standards, seldom do they follow them.

Another way to encourage design consistency would be to publish guidelines that detail and illustrate best practices. Prototypes or models that show the range of possibilities would make effective prompts to excellence.

Guidelines should be basic enough to foster consistency without squelching creativity. For example, the standards for color combinations typically call for not having more than three different colors on a page and no more than five in a web site. An institution could offer a pallet of colors that coordinate and are easy to access in an in-house directory for web page design. This easy “click and capture” aspect of web authoring would encourage consistency.

Likewise, according to best practices, font size should be limited with san-serif fonts such as Arial for headings and modified serif fonts such as Times New Roman for text. These types of recommendations make pages look more

professional because they follow the best practices of the publishing industry. The balance of text and graphics, and even the placement of menus and toolbars are other ways to make sites consistent.

## Resources for page design standards

If the hosting site does not want to create its own set of standards, it would be easy enough to reference one set of standards and then encourage individuals who seek to be creative to find their own expression within those general guidelines.

Numerous sites exist on the Web to support this type of instruction in page design. One that is easy to access and specific to higher education is the Florida Gulf Coast University site on Design Principles. It is located at <http://www.fgcu.edu/olinedesign/mediadev.html>. Patrick J. Lynch and Sarah Horton's Web Style Guide: Basic Design Principles for Creating Web Sites is an excellent text and very affordable. Additionally it is available on line at <http://www.info.med.yale.edu/caim/manual>. This text and site are not as easy to reference as the Florida Gulf Coast site, but both the online and print versions are very thorough in their descriptions and examples. They also offer guidance for those who wish to use sophisticated, advanced applications of graphics; interactive elements; and editing features. Allison Head's text, *Design Wise: A Guide for Evaluating the Interface Design of Information Resources* is instructive for both novice and expert in offering practical guidelines and examples for design applications.

The challenge for web masters may well be to facilitate compliance with the desired standards for a home page. The best approach would be to make clear the value of consistency, the ease of using templates, as well as the avenues for creativity and personal expression within the guidelines. Web mentors and workshops would also facilitate "consistency"--a term that is much more agreeable than "compliance."

## A key to success

To insure a better quality of web page, the institution and its faculty/administration need to invest in the systematic development and support for quality web page design. This might include a workshop based examination of negative as well as positive examples of web page design. It certainly should provide a best practices menu of models, a FAQ's forum, regular seminars and speakers, and print or online materials about how web authors can maintain their sites.

Too often institutions will create an initiative to sponsor a web presence among their faculty and administration, but once that initial effort is made, there is no follow up in terms of on-going training, support or acknowledgement of the need for maintenance of sites, or the necessity to keep abreast of new developments in the field. One key to success is to provide enough development and support for faculty members so that they may maintain an effective and impressive web presence.

One reason web pages fail is that too often they are the initial effort of a new web author. Without support for continued revision and authoring, the site stagnates while technology advances, links go dead, and content becomes outdated. For public pages on a university or college web site, this sends the negative message to users that the web author is an amateur or at least negligent in maintaining his or her web obligation. For prospective students who are visiting a site and discover that they are much more digitally literate than the novice faculty or administration web authors, they draw the conclusion that the school does not foster technology literacy. The reality is that many high school age students who have grown up with a familiarity with digital publishing cannot fathom the challenge it is for an older generation to learn digital skills to supplement the skills they may have in traditional media such as paper.

Despite all these challenges, institutions of higher education can and should foster web publishing amongst their faculty and administration. Whether that takes the form of a personal web page, a course support page, or a business card page is the choice of the institution.

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