To Communicate Success and Excellence:

The Challenge for The Content of Rider University's Web Site

The Challenge for Rider University

NOTE: This was reflective of conditions at time of its writing in 2000. It is presented here as a Sample of Jim Alexander's work, and is not intended to represent current Rider University conditions or policy, nor of current general web standards.

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Executive Summary

- This report focuses on the content of Rider University's web site. Other aspects involving technical services from the Office of Information Technologies are not covered, although developments in that sector are consistent and supportive.
- Rider's Web site has much good content and reflects hard work in many areas.
- The site is not up to date, lacks continuity, is page centric rather than audience oriented, suffers from a number of weaknesses -- technical and content -- and is not alone in this regard.
- Most critically, the site does not project Rider's message "Tradition of Success and Excellence" as well as it might, nor reflect consistent marketing concepts of identity and coherence.
- Staff and faculty are genuinely eager for improvement, but often frustrated over how to accomplish it.
- Page creation and maintenance are scattered, mostly left to students and otherwise very busy staff and faculty.
- OIT merits recognition for its substantial role in the progress to date and for its professional understanding of future needs.
- Economies of scale and continuity of presentation are difficult to achieve in the face of slippage of effort associated with the need for many (changing) page authors -- using different methodologies -- to periodically reclimb the learning curve.
- Rider should focus its resources in support of an effective overall web presentation reflecting projection of message, excellence of content, and economies of scale. Steps are suggested.
- Action rather than exhaustive study is needed and possible.
- Rider has made an excellent start – let us proceed!

Background

Rider University embraced the challenge and opportunities of the World Wide Web when it published its first web site in 1997. Much has changed in the world since then, in terms of:
- the technology
- viewer habits and expectations
- an emerging understanding of web usability engineering
- fundamental changes in the conduct of business
- institutional adaptation to the phenomenon, resulting in major private-sector management changes
- web efforts by competitive institutions

Recognizing these changes, Rider University has again responded by creating the post of Web Content Manager (WCM). The post was apparently some time in the making. The WCM reports to the Director of Public Relations in the Department of Development and University Relations, with a special working relationship with the Office of Information Technologies (OIT) and liaison to the Marketing Council through its Executive Committee.

Recruitment of the WCM involved interviews conducted by the Director of Public Relations and by the Executive Committee of the Marketing Council (including the Vice President for Development and University Relations), which had played a lead role in advocating the position. Subsequently, under the Director's oversight, and in response to a suggestion by the University President for an early change in the (tired) home page, the WCM developed a series of new Web pages that were posted. The WCM has undertaken a number of steps (see Appendices) to evaluate the current web and initiate orderly improvements. These early steps also involved consultation with the Executive Committee, which was responsive, timely, and brought broad University perspectives to the efforts; and reflected outstanding cooperation and professional understanding from the Office of Information Technologies (OIT).

A major presentation was made by the WCM to the full Marketing Council on April 20, 2000, describing initial observations and work strategy in some detail. The Vice President for Development and University Relations expressed further support by convening a broader meeting with the Committee and other key Development and OIT staff. At that meeting, the WCM presented a broad overview of the state of professional web management, Rider's Web site, and anticipated issues and progress. Various strategic concerns were freely explored by the group, aimed at providing the best support for the effort within Rider's institutional particulars.

These included suggestions for variously configured advisory and working efforts, with consideration of their respective practical implications. Among the concerns expressed by the WCM was the need to continue making prompt, tangible progress with limited resources, and recognition of experience-based advice expressed to him to:

> "do, rather than study or debate," in recognition of the fast-moving nature of the Internet world and our competition.

Further, it was also recognized in the discussion that the successful projection of Rider's strengths (as expressed in its marketing term "A Tradition of Success and Excellence") requires more than simply sprucing up some web pages and updating detailed content – organizational support is needed.

Thus, the WCM was requested to draft this paper, reflecting his relevant concerns, which focuses not on page design nor work steps underway, but on University site strategy and supporting tactics. (Guiding principles of work underway are summarized in Appendix A; discussion of action is available at www.rider.edu/newsite as indicated in the recent Occasional Web Content Newsletter.)

Evaluation of the Rider Web Site

The Rider Web site as it emerged in 1997 was credible and appropriate to the time. It has become a large site, with over 7,000 pages of content today, operating on several different servers and with functional sections broadly organized along the major organizational components of the University. It is heavily used by prospective students (and their parents and counselors) checking us out, and alumni staying in touch. The site receives some 41,000 "hits" a day involving 3,700 discrete visitors – more exposure than any other means of telling the Rider message! And a growing number of e-mail inquiries (including in some cases, complaints about the site). It has potential for promoting expanded financial giving as well.

Development of the site involved much hard work. It still contains much useful information and is an important tool serving several objectives. Some sections and some uses reflect continued diligent effort. When viewed in context of today's world and professional review, however, the site can benefit from a refocusing and prioritization of audiences. As initially encountered, it suffers from other related issues, which should be regarded as opportunities:

- Its presentation reflects internal organization, rather than audience needs.
- Navigation paths are not intuitive; the major user complaint is inability to find desired information.
- In some aspects, it presents itself as an aggregation of "home pages" with different looks and feels, some to the point of not appearing to be part of the Rider site. There is a clear need for institutional "branding," while retaining full respect for academic and professional content.

- Much material is out of date and often shows it.
- Parts of it present a stale feel of unchanged design and layout.
- It does not provide organized follow-through paths in support of advertising for graduate and part time students.
- It does not aggregate thematic information (e.g., resources for the community) nor spread cross-functional themes (e.g., faces of success and excellence) into the various sections.
- Despite some patterns of thoughtful design, much of the site does not observe standards of design, architecture, and user orientation. Rather, it shows the visible influence of a changing array of (often student) page authors who have done what they genuinely thought best in the absence of institutional guidance.
- This list is continued in Appendix B.

Rider is not the worst nor alone:

> "In most institutions the use of the World Wide Web has evolved over the past few years from an informal collection of personal or group home pages into a semiorganized collection of sites listed in one or more master home pages or 'front door' sites. Ironically, universities and companies that adopted the Web early are often the least organized, because each department and group has over the years evolved its own idiosyncratic approach to graphic design, user interface design, and information architecture." -- Patrick J. Lynch and Sarah Horton, Web Style Guide -- Basic Design Principles for Creating Web Sites. New Haven and London, Yale University Press. 1999.

Several additional observations have emerged from intense initial review of the workings of the web site, over thirty interviews with faculty, staff and stakeholders, and much informal discussion:

- **OIT deserves credit** for supporting much progress that has been made. There is clear evidence of efforts to apply sound architecture to the site, but this has not been an easy task in the face of multiple perspectives, the nature of an academic environment, limited resources, and other constraints. There is some fragmentation of server ownership and other prerogatives that OIT has had to contend with, which affects outcomes. OIT recognizes that the web front is much broader than just a series of technical issues. OIT has demonstrated a highly professional understanding of the web challenges, and will continue to be an important partner in the contemplated progress, especially with respect to technical and internal efficiency issues.
- **There is a thirst for improvement**, widely and genuinely expressed.
- However, **doing the work to achieve improvement has been hampered by lack of institutional focus and very heavily by web activity being a low priority for individuals in face of other demands.**

- It has been difficult to determine who is responsible for maintaining and updating some sections of the web. In many instances, it is some departed employee or student. (See Appendix E.) **Identification of the key "workers" and some continuity or central focusing of skills and responsibility are essential to any hope for widespread improvement, and to the necessary efficiencies of training/collaboration efforts.**
- There is potential for widespread **slippage of energies** resulting from scattered persons, at diverse frequency, with differing skill levels, attempting to "get up to speed" and do web pages without the tools at hand and the efficiencies of experience in place. This can be very frustrating for motivated but very busy people.

Focusing on the Web site's Message and Objectives

Fundamentally, the message of our web site should be the portrayal of **respect for Rider University's tradition of Success and Excellence**, and to support our goal of becoming the **premier career preparation university in the region**. (See Appendix C – Some Basic Considerations.) The web site cannot simply parrot the words; it must reflect this in form and content. All efforts must be consistent with that marketing strategy. Viewers know what they see, and they move through the entire site, not just single pages.

There is no valid reason why these objectives cannot be achieved. Broadly stated, we want the web site to help produce:

- Students
- Respect
- External support
- Internal efficiency

How Does Rider Pursue this Goal?
In creating the position of WCM, Rider has taken an important first step. Focus, organized identification of needs and approaches, and catalytic efforts are now possible. Progress is already underway, yet the magnitude of the need is so broad that full realization of goals cannot yet be assured. It is recognized that resources are limited, but essential elements are at hand. They need to be effectively organized and efficiently utilized.

Major elements required for further progress include:

- **Mission Advocacy** -- creation of a small, action-oriented, cross-functional, customer-oriented cadre of Rider leaders to work with the Web

Content Manager in developing institutional support, reviewing (only) strategic upper level content and providing marketing focus. Such a group needs to be small (six or so) yet capable of understanding our audiences, devoted to marketing to the audiences at both the University and programmatic levels, and committed to action.

These people should be those who can understand and represent the major categories of our site's interest groups as delineated by the emerging Audience Buttons. (See Appendix D.) However, they do not have to, nor should they, directly represent in an organizational way, the dozens of campus constituencies, as that would become unwieldy. Rather, respective departments will speak for themselves as their web sections are contemplated.

The Executive Committee of the Marketing Council has filled this role, drawing on the community-wide representation of the full Council. Its broad, strategic marketing perspective is appropriate, and the recent progress on the web site has reflected its focused support and leadership. This group, including the Vice President for Development and University Relations, serves to provide strategic marketing direction and advocacy of the function at the University policy level.

- In addition, a **Web Advancement Group** of about ten persons is being assembled on a pilot basis. This group, chaired by the WCM, will address several goals:

    o "Spreading the word" to designated areas of the community, be available for ad-hoc collaboration with the WCM on fast-action needs, serve as content resource experts for certain issues, and in some cases may play a role in (encouraging the) revamping of their respective areas' web sections. As the group is diverse in their functional responsibilities, they will be encouraged to communicate directly with the WCM as issues come to the fore.
    o Discuss ideas, develop suggestions for the WCM's consideration, and bring particular sensitivities, knowledge and experience to the table. Given the overall focus on achieving prompt change to the web site, the group will not promulgate policies nor perform administrative responsibilities.

    The Web Advancement group is not a substitute for the Page Doers discussed below.

- **The Page Doers**

    There is no shortage of ideas, there is a shortage of doers -- individuals able to perform page (re)design and construction on a consistent, reliable, institutionally organized basis. These should be people who can devote major and reliable time to the tedious work of

creating content and modifying pages. The present loose array of students doing pages if and when they are available, or the occasional faculty/staff member who squeezes out a bit of time, following a host of varying methodologies, not being harnessed into common university site focus, and confronted with frustrating (re)learning curves, cannot assure necessary progress, consistency, and site currency.

Although progress is already underway and will continue, a web site of some 7,000 pages cannot be effectively tended to in all of its detailed manifestations under the current allocation of resources. Patterns of activity for the web should not automatically follow patterns appropriate for other technologies and circumstances, because the web is a new technology with its own characteristics, some of which are just being recognized through user engineering and other studies.

Several approaches to the "doing" are possible:

- **Create several full time page writers** to function under the Web Content Manager's (WCM) direction, addressing priority needs as well as more routine maintenance. This is what organizations competing in the marketplace would do – it's that important. Significant economies of scale and faster progress are possible. Further, this would promote the development of audience-oriented, University-themed web efforts, as contrasted with the current page-centric model. This might not require a net addition of resources, but rather a reallocation, justified by the advantages of centralization. (And, the various organizations would still be free to pursue their respective content, but with a streamlined cadre of talent available.)

- Should this not be possible, another (less productive) approach would be to **(re)allocate five or six available student slots**, have these persons trained by the WCM and perform assigned page work in a coordinated manner. Given student turnover, perhaps half of them would be "up to full speed" at any given time, although a long range recruitment effort might result in students being available for several years. (Naturally, content of pages will be subject to respective authorities.) Currently, there is a backlog of identified projects awaiting only dedicated, supervised, labor. Supervision and training of the students in itself would represent a work task, such that this option would make best sense when combined with addition of one full time staffer of the type envisioned in the full time page writers option.

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Rider – A story worth telling!
(See reactions to our initial progress in Appendix F.)

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APPENDIX

A.   Guiding Principles of Work Underway by the WCM

- Understand the rapidly changing World Wide Web, how it works, professional standards, trends and issues, in light of Rider University's strategic and particular needs.
- Remain strategic – deal with selected targets of opportunity but avoid excessive focus on the multitude of "nice to haves."
- Emphasize branding and marketing of the site.
- Retain an outside (customer) perspective.
- Underlying emphasis on the Admissions function (broadly defined), promoting external Support, and respect for the University.

   Pursue:

- Accuracy and relevance of content
- Currency - up-to-date in today's real-time Internet world
- Ease of navigation - without it, the best message may be lost
- Coherence - the whole site should fit together in pursuit of the University's strategic needs
- Appearance - reflect University theme and identity
- Visitor orientation - not us looking outward
- Respect for academic expression

B.   Continuation of Observations on Existing Web site … (opportunities!)

- Reflecting that the web is still in its infancy, many sections reflect the assumption that to design a web is like producing a written document – often a brochure. It is not. How it works and how it is seen and what viewers expect are different. (What would the Gutenberg Bible have looked like if hypertext and the mouse had existed then?)
- There is a tendency (not limited to Rider), in discussing the web site, to frame it in terms of personal home page and surfing experiences, rather than seeing it as an essential means of communicating Rider University's institutional face to the world. This reflects the fact that most people start their web design work by learning basic mechanics, not the architecture nor the human interactions that ensue between a viewer and their computer. Thus, discussions of strategy can become clouded with suggestions of things that caught one's eye, so why can't we do it…. (Many such ideas may have merit, but may not contribute to strategic direction; furthermore, it we focus on the nice-to-haves, we'll miss the big picture.)
- The Rider web site is typically perceived by Rider people as seen on campus, as fed from the Rider servers over the very fast local Ethernet

(similarly, the T-1 connections produce very fast downloads from the web), and also through Netscape browsers which are no longer in predominant use outside.

- Is housed on several different servers, with differing account procedures, making total management more difficult, and precluding some site management capabilities that might otherwise be possible. Further, different physical location and ownership of several servers hampers central efficiency.

- Some sections have (with the best of intentions) focused on fancy technology, which is often regarded by viewers as annoying or impairing their pursuit of information, contributing to excessive download time or requiring installation of plugins, rather than focusing on quality of message.

- Does not make consistent use of (selected) pictures for visual interest and illustration. Many image files on the site have not been sized for optimum web use, resulting in an unquantified but likely impact on server capacity and related costs.

- To meet pressing needs, several major sections were developed by outside contractors without apparent benefit of university standards and are technically difficult to maintain and administer, as well as not being inexpensive. In order to avoid vastly complicating the maintenance of the Rider web site, any future outsourcing of this nature should be authorized only upon the concurrence and technical guidance of the WCM in consultation with OIT, and pooling of resources should be considered.

- Some areas show a propensity to use poor visual design, such as colored fonts against colored backgrounds, background wallpaper that is hard to read text against, distracting animations, required plug-in downloads, sounds not contributing to message, too many images (causing excess download time) ….

- There are a host of "under the hood" technical factors that appear to have been largely neglected, ranging from META Tags (to facilitate search engine cataloging) and lack of Alternate Text Tags for photos (for visually impaired and browsers with images turned off).

- A search engine that searches only the main server and often fails to turn up relevant pages (this partly attributable to how the pages were assembled in the first place) and produces user complaints.

- An events calendar that is sometimes missing events (resulting in complaints) and which is visually old. This appears to suggest both a new system and emphasis on timely data entry by multiple offices.

- Pages are created by at least six different software programs, which can all do basic functions, but which make institutional support, communications and efficiency difficult and often frustrating.

C.   Some Basic Considerations

Why do we have a web site?

Different organizations and people have web sites for different reasons. The answer will guide much that follows.

We have a web site NOT as:

- a commercial enterprise focusing on sales for profit, nor
- a forum for expression of personal opinion (academic expression and personal home pages are OK, of course) or ego extension, nor
- an entertainment vehicle

We have a web site as a means of conveying information and seeking organizational respect.

Who is our audience?

Several, actually:

- Potential students – this is the most important – this means the whole site, not just the admissions pages must be in synergy
- Alumni and supporters, reflecting our commitment to them and our need for financial support
- Current students
- Internal staff and faculty
- General public, specific reference to teachers and counselors, accrediting organizations, those whose respect we need.

D.   The "Audience Buttons" Approach

Web authorities now realize that a Home Page is essentially a customer interface. A home page should provide a quick "feel" for the organization, then get the visitor to the information they want. But who is the visitor?

> "The more you focus your site on its goals and the more precisely defined your target audience is, the more efficiently and effectively you can present the information." Robin Williams and John Tollett, The Non-Designer's Web Book. Berkeley, Peachpit Press. 1998.

Recently there has been a clear shift of university home pages to feature a small number of "big buttons" representing the major audiences, instead of the organization-oriented buttons. Allowing the users to classify themselves will help us to present them with the most likely links to various pages, no matter how they may be organized department- or file-wise. While the matter is still under study (and will be piloted by mid-Summer), it is apparent that the "big buttons" must be limited in number and will likely include:

- Prospective Students (which in our case includes not only traditional undergrads, but part-time, continuing studies and graduate)
- Visitors (variously called About, General Information, etc.)

- Current Students
- Alumni and Friends (parents, benefactors)
- Faculty and Staff

These buttons then point to a cross section of pages including academic, student life, athletics, administrative, technology, etc. They mirror the targets of our web communication and under-gird our intended impact as discussed elsewhere in this paper.

Since the effectiveness of the button approach rests on the same requirements that currently exist – timeliness, accuracy, appropriate content, branding, feel, etc., results will depend on ability to orchestrate the necessary actions to present a site that says "Tradition of Success and Excellence." Critical to this effort is an understanding of the attitude of web visitors today, and of the "real time" world. Actions to enhance and maintain the web site need to be prompt and timely, or visitors will complain or turn away to other sites.

Thus, the effectiveness of the Web Content Manager's efforts will be strengthened by the recommended steps suggested above – dedicated to the importance of the web site, representing an understanding of its needs, able to communicate and help orchestrate appropriate cooperation.

E.   Who Does the Pages Now?

In a preliminary effort to measure basic information about who currently maintains web pages, their software, etc., a survey was mailed to sixty-five campus leaders, including executive staff, department chairs, etc. Fifteen responses were received. The limited response, plus notes placed on some of the responses, indicates that this is not a precise measurement.

However, the answers to "who actually prepares/modifies your pages?" were:
- 8   A faculty or staff member.
- 6   A student, only one of whom was currently assigned the task.
- 3   Not known.

General discussions with faculty and staff suggest that there is substantial lack of identification of responsible parties, and many who acknowledge responsibility for a page's content do not know how to go about changing them, or express a hope that a student can be located to do the work. In the face of other pressures, maintaining pages just doesn't make it to the top of most people's list. This is not a matter of fault, but of reality, because the best intentions are clearly present.

 Related to this is the fact that when somebody does undertake to do "page work," there is often a major learning curve, a lack of commonality of technical approach that makes simple tasks more difficult and time consuming than desirable, and a lack of broad site-wide understanding. **A "page centric" approach to the task cannot be expected to produce an effectively**

marketed, audience-oriented presentation. These factors are a major reason why the Rider Web-site has not been up to date in terms of real world "Internet time."

F.   What's Underway

Rider has taken the initiative. We are not building the web site; we are rebuilding it while it lives and breathes. We are not performing a case study of the web site nor conducting debates about fine points of page design while our competition pulls ahead of us.

We are not afraid of an occasional misstep. While we plan carefully, consult freely, and avoid the reckless, the nature of rapid change in the Internet world demands initiative. We have demonstrated that in the course of five weeks a new University Home Page could be designed and published, with ancillary new-theme pages such as the Campus Tour, initial modification of navigation items. And four weeks later, a revised theme Home Page with more new pages such as a celebration of the success and excellence of students and graduates. And a Summer 2000 summary page. Many existing pages have been placed into the "new look" template.

> "I wanted to commend you on a handsome redesign of the Rider University site. The Rider site was in need of an overhaul and I'm impressed by what I see." – A Rider graduate '86, employed by Microsoft

> "I am actually tempted to browse the site now, whereas before I wasn't. A very great improvement over that tired older version." -- Current student.

> "… it looks great! I especially like the Campus Tour – it made me proud to be a part of Rider." -- A faculty member.

> "As an old and interested 'alum,' you have done an excellent job."
>   – Graduate class of '65.

We have demonstrated that it is possible to photograph an important event, be it a major reaccreditation, a visit of foreign scholars, or the student work on the lake, assemble proper narrative, and post it live on our web site with appropriate commentary within several hours.

We have interviewed over forty campus leaders, held countless informal discussions, issued a campus letter, a Web Content Newsletter, and a survey instrument. We have identified numerous targets of opportunity and have initiated discussions that will lead to audience-oriented pages. And much more.

What is now needed is the orchestration of Rider's institutional resources to maximize the fulfillment of this momentum. Rider is to be commended for the initiatives and efforts to date and for its commitment to further progress.