

# University of Wyoming Website: A Proposal for Improvements

January 2020

To: UW's administration

From: Chad Baldwin, Associate Vice President for Marketing and Communications

## Executive Summary:

- UW's web presence is at a "C" level, largely because of its distributed maintenance structure; lack of a website governance policy; lack of marketing focus on the part of those who maintain most of the pages; and inadequate resources.
- A higher-performing website is essential for UW to achieve its ambitions regarding enrollment and public recognition. Lifting the website to an "A" level will require an investment of resources and other changes.
- Reducing the footprint of UW's web presence and requiring use of a centralized content management system is the best way forward.
- The website should be restructured to separate public-facing and internal platforms.
- It's time for a redesign of the UW CMS web templates, but that is not enough. The website should be rebuilt with an eye on best marketing practices and search engine optimization, which is about content.
- Creation of centralized web marketing positions to work with unit-level CMS site authors, as several peer institutions have done, provides the best opportunity to properly maintain a rebuilt website.
- We recommend creation of a UW website improvement task force and retention of a third-party consultant to lead a two-year website improvement project.

## UW's Scattered, Uneven Face to the World

The University of Wyoming's website is, unquestionably, the university's most important marketing platform. It is UW's public face to the world and the initial point of contact for prospective students, parents, alumni and the general public, while also serving important internal functions for current students, employees and others.

As one might expect for a large, complex organization, the university's website also is large and complex. The total number of pages under the [www.uwyo.edu](http://www.uwyo.edu) domain exceeds 110,000, and they serve a wide variety of functions and audiences. These pages were created with approval from Information Technology and are maintained by hundreds of individuals across the university. This is not unusual for university websites. However, UW's web presence is especially scattered and inconsistent, in part because the university has no website governance policy and has not committed sufficient resources to build and maintain a strong website.

In order to achieve the university's ambitions regarding enrollment, public recognition, employee satisfaction and other priorities, a broad assessment of UW's website is needed, likely followed by significant changes. This document is intended to describe, in general terms, the status of UW's web presence; identify some specific areas where improvement is needed; and outline a possible way forward.

## Current Situation

As noted above, there are more than 110,000 pages under the [www.uwyo.edu](http://www.uwyo.edu) domain. That includes about 45,000 pages, representing 340 sites, that use UW's Cascade Content Management System (CMS) and associated brand-compliant templates provided by Institutional Marketing Web Services. These pages are maintained by about 400 CMS site authors who have received only a basic level of CMS training and for whom web maintenance, on average, comprises a small percentage of their job duties.

Outside the CMS, there are more than 600 sites, with tens of thousands of pages, under the [www.uwyo.edu](http://www.uwyo.edu) domain – as well as other sites with unique subdomains the university hosts under uwyo.edu. It is not known how many people are involved in maintaining these non-CMS pages and what level of training they've received. While a small percentage of these non-CMS pages are dynamic and of high quality, most are not. A large number are static pages using Portable Document Format (PDF) technology, which is not optimal for websites. It is safe to assume that many of the pages outside the CMS were created years ago and no longer serve any useful purpose. Institutional Marketing has very little information about sites and pages outside the CMS, as the unit has had no role in approving their creation or administering them. There is no process in place to monitor non-CMS sites for compliance with UW brand standards.

It should be noted that UW Athletics maintains its own website using a separate outside vendor. That is customary for universities with NCAA Division 1 athletics, and there is no desire on the part of UW Institutional Marketing to change that arrangement.

### **Institutional Marketing Web Services' Role**

In an attempt to provide a platform for units of the university to create and maintain web pages that meet a basic level of quality and follow UW brand standards, UW Institutional Marketing in 2010 procured an outside vendor, Hannon Hill, to provide a CMS platform and another vendor to build out templates within the CMS. The CMS is an enterprise-level system that is extremely flexible and efficient, allowing developers to create any kind of web page templates and provide them to content creators to create rich websites without having to write any code. While no policy was put in place requiring units of the university to use the CMS and templates, many have done so, as noted above. Basic training on the CMS is provided collaboratively with Information Technology and is a requirement to use the CMS.

Additionally, the three full-time employees who constitute Institutional Marketing Web Services provide regular open labs, consultation and online resources for CMS site authors.

In 2016, Institutional Marketing undertook a redesign of the CMS-connected web templates to address three priorities: make them responsive to mobile devices; increase compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act; and improve the marketing effectiveness and appearance of the UW website. The overall design and templates were created in house by a UW web designer, and the only expenditure for an outside vendor was \$50,000 for a consultant to assist in transferring existing content to the new templates.

The redesign largely accomplished its objectives. UW's website appearance has improved and better reflects our brand; it is mobile responsive; and the templates, when used properly, meet ADA accessibility requirements. But the redesign did not tackle issues that must be addressed to improve UW's overall web performance -- namely, search engine optimization and use of proper content for marketing purposes. In other words, while the redesign was a big step forward, we are still missing features and updates that are in line with fundamental design, marketing practices and modern web practices. Most (but not all) units in the CMS are still not leveraging the new templates, not showing imagery to showcase the campus, and not using responsive elements or providing clear calls to action.

The same problems exist, at an even larger extent, for the vast majority of pages outside the UW CMS.

That said, an audit performed by Beacon Technologies in April 2019 gave UW's website a grade of "C," or 74 percent, in comparison with other universities' websites. Fortunately, the highest grade ("B," or 87 percent) came in the category of user experience. One of the lowest ("D," or 69 percent) was for search engine optimization. Our desire is to lift UW's overall web performance to an "A"; this will be a heavy lift that must involve units across campus, as well as a commitment of additional resources.

### **Accessibility**

In 2016, UW was notified by the federal Office of Civil Rights (OCR) of a complaint that certain pages of the UW website were not accessible to students and adults with disabilities. This has been the case for universities across the country. Because of the work that had been done to address accessibility issues in the 2016 UW website redesign, the university has been able to address the complaint without an overwhelming expenditure of money and resources.

UW entered into a Voluntary Resolution Agreement with OCR that, among other things, has resulted in UW:

- Adopting a campuswide policy requiring that new websites be accessible.
- Requiring accessibility training for all CMS site authors.
- Acquiring a tool to assess accessibility of existing UW web pages.
- Hiring six part-time student employees to deliver accessibility reports to CMS site authors and help them address concerns.

The university has submitted a report to OCR showing that we have met the terms of the Voluntary Resolution Agreement. However, meeting accessibility requirements will require a continuing commitment by the university that cannot be met under current staffing of UW Institutional Marketing Web Services, which has carried the largest burden in addressing the OCR complaint.

This process resulted in a good number of UW's non-CMS sites moving into the CMS, but an overall website governance policy is still needed to make use of the CMS a requirement, with a provision for functionality exemptions.

### **Search Engine Optimization**

Search engine optimization (SEO) is a methodology of strategies, techniques and tactics used to increase the amount of visitors to a website by obtaining a high-ranking placement in the search results page of a search engine – such as Google, Bing and Yahoo. This requires both technical and content improvements on current web pages, along with elimination of unnecessary and outdated web pages.

As noted above, UW's website has significant room for improvement in SEO. This is important particularly in the area of student recruitment and enrollment. Prospective students, traditional and nontraditional, use search engines to a large extent. UW's desire to provide more distance education options for students in Wyoming and beyond accentuates the need for improvements here.

Recognizing the need for SEO improvements on the UW website, particularly in program-level pages, Associate Vice Provost for Enrollment Management Kyle Moore secured \$80,000 in 2019 to enlist the services of Ruffalo Noel Levitz (RNL) to create search engine-optimized pages for 20 UW programs and 10 other admissions-focused pages. Institutional Marketing has led the effort in working with academic departments and RNL to create and deploy these pages. A number of units, including Graduate Education, have dedicated funding to create such pages for additional programs, and that work is underway right now.

Still, with about 200 academic programs and other units in need of SEO web pages, the current effort with RNL will only scratch the surface.

Institutional Marketing Web Services has made a recording of RNL SEO training available to CMS site authors across campus, and a few dozen have participated. But, because website maintenance is such a small percentage of the job for so many of the site authors, it's unlikely that the current efforts will succeed in major SEO improvements for the UW website overall. Remember, only about a third of UW web pages use the CMS, and most of those pages are not search engine optimized. It's safe to say the other two-thirds needs major SEO help as well.

This situation is a result of the university's decentralized publishing model; content authors with different writing styles and technical skills; stakeholders with conflicting priorities; and innumerable siloed units creating web content. This results in poor representation of the university brand and a less-than-desirable user experience.

A simple website redesign will not address this issue. It will require a content strategy initiative.

### **Public-Facing vs. Internal**

A fundamental challenge to improving UW's web presence is that fact that the website is not used for marketing purposes only. Data storage, student and employee interactions, and other important functions take place on UW web pages that are accessible to the general public. That is a major drag on the website's SEO performance.

We suggest consideration of creating an Intranet – a web platform that is not public-facing – to separate those internal functions. A number of universities have taken that approach. Institutional Marketing acknowledges a major blind spot when it comes to the non-marketing needs currently served by the UW website, so other divisions of the university would have to be at the table in undertaking such an effort.

UW faculty and staff are familiar with working with an Intranet. Most functions found in WyoWeb, such as WyoCloud, WyoRecords and Banner, are essentially an Intranet. Duplicate information already found on these internal platforms, as well as other information targeting only internal audiences, should be removed from the public-facing website as a matter of policy.

### **Time for Another Redesign**

As noted above, UW's last website redesign took place in 2016. In the world of higher education websites, redesigns take place every 3-5 years. Over the next year, Institutional Marketing desires to start work on another redesign. However, unlike the 2016 redesign, we would like to secure the services of an outside consulting firm to help create the new templates, work with our constituents across campus and execute successfully. This desire dovetails with the need to create a UW website governance policy; explore separation of public-facing and non-public-facing web platforms; improve our SEO performance; carry forward our accessibility commitment; and boost UW's web presence to the "A" level. In other words, rather than merely a redesign of our templates to accommodate what's already on all of the pages of the UW website, this would be a major project to, in many respects, rebuild the website.

### **Reducing the Web Footprint**

As part of this redesign/rebuild, a model website structure should be created and used to guide in reducing the number of pages and documents used in a unit's website. This would create a more effective and manageable website. For example, most department websites could consist of the following pages:

- Prospective undergraduate – information should link to but not duplicate that found on Registrar, Admissions and Student Affairs' transfer pages.
- Prospective graduate – information should link to but not duplicate that found on Registrar, Research and Graduate Education pages.
- Research
- Faculty and staff directory
- Alumni
- Homepage

A study should identify superfluous web pages with low visit numbers and outdated usefulness. These pages should be removed or combined if needed, as part of a website policy. This would reduce the workload on existing site authors and improve the UW website's SEO performance.

### **Current Staffing**

As noted above, the one-third of the UW website that uses the CMS and associated templates is maintained by about 400 site authors who've received only basic CMS training, have little knowledge of websites and marketing, and have many other priorities and duties. Unless all 400 site authors are constantly maintaining their pages and trained in website technologies, SEO, photo editing, broken links and accessibility remediation, these issues will continue to grow and harm our search rankings. Site authors generally are guided by their superiors to add and update content without any regard for website best practices or marketing knowledge. This often results in erroneous web content and pages with no purpose or calls to action for site visitors. This also affects the user experience and can send visitors down a rabbit hole in search of information.

The three Institutional Marketing Web Services employees stay very busy in support of the site authors. In 2019, they processed 3,648 email requests sent to [webhelp@uwyo.edu](mailto:webhelp@uwyo.edu) – about 14 requests per day, or 304 per month. That's in addition to 409 emails sent to [webaccessibility@uwyo.edu](mailto:webaccessibility@uwyo.edu). They conducted 83 open lab sessions during the year, along with participating in more than 20 CMS training sessions led by IT. This is in addition to many other duties performed by the employees to keep the website running, ranging from periodic full-site republishing, to updating the templates, to posting emergency notices on the UW homepage, just to name a few.

Over the past two years, Institutional Marketing has worked with colleges and other units to create marketing/communications specialist positions embedded in the colleges of Arts and Sciences, Health Sciences, Engineering and Applied Science, Business and Education, along with Graduation Education and UW Libraries. Their duties include maintaining top-level college web pages (not department-level pages). But website maintenance is only one of their tasks – others include producing college magazines and other printed items; writing media releases; producing digital newsletters; and maintaining social media accounts. These people are not trained web marketers – their jobs require more diverse skillsets – but they've made significant improvements to the top pages. Many of them are working with RNL on the program-level SEO project. But again, they're only scratching the surface.

### **Staffing Proposal**

There's no practical way to completely move away from the decentralized model of having hundreds of CMS site authors maintain individual units' web pages. And it's not reasonable to expect that all 400 CMS site authors will be full-time, trained web marketers. However, we have surveyed a number of peer institutions and believe we have found a hybrid approach that could significantly lift UW's web performance. It would involve the creation of about 10 centralized web marketing positions to work with the CMS site authors (better term is content contributors); approve changes made by these contributors before they're published out; and have responsibility for some key unit-level pages.

Here are some examples:

- The University of Idaho has a web team of 16, with about half of these people embedded in colleges and units. There are still hundreds of content contributors, but they can't publish to the website. The web team reviews content and then publishes it.
- The University of Nevada-Reno has a web team of 14, with 11-12 web specialists embedded in colleges and other units, similar to the U of I.
- Montana State University has a web team of 11 and a policy that requires university websites to be in the CMS, with few exceptions.

- West Virginia University has a web team of 10 people who work with over 1,000 content contributors.

Creation of 10 centralized web marketing positions would necessitate elevating UW's current website strategist position to that of a director of web marketing development, to reflect the additional supervisory responsibilities and new demands/expectations.

Identifying funding resources is essential to adding web/marketing staff personnel to oversee website quality. Some colleges, departments and programs are paying for contract work to support website development. Although it's not known how much is being spent in this manner, these funds could be identified for consolidation in helping create the proposed positions.

## **Recommendations**

We recognize that creation of new web marketing positions would be a significant investment of resources at a time when UW revenues are flat or declining. To assure that such an investment would produce the desired results, and recognizing that the issues needing attention likely go far beyond the perspective of Institutional Marketing, here's what we propose:

- Form a UW website improvement task force including representatives of Information Technology, Institutional Marketing, Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, Human Resources and others.
- Hire a third-party consultant to work with the task force and:
  - Assess UW's overall web presence.
  - Explore separation of marketing and non-marketing functions of the UW website through creation of an Intranet platform.
  - Help develop a plan to reduce the number of pages under the [www.uwyo.edu](http://www.uwyo.edu) domain.
  - Work with Institutional Marketing to redesign UW's public-facing web presence.
  - Provide insight on the optimal structure to maintain UW's public-facing web presence, including the idea of having more centralized web marketing positions.
  - Help the task force develop a website governance policy for the university.

We anticipate that, to address all of these items, the cost of a third-party consultant would be at least \$500,000. A request for proposals would, of course, allow us to nail down the actual cost.

We also anticipate this would be a two-year process. The first would include formation of the web improvement task force; issuance of the RFP; hiring of the consultant; and completion of the assessment. The second year would include completion of the website redesign; hiring of new web marketing staff; possible creation of the non-marketing Intranet; and creation of the website governance policy.

## **Conclusion**

For the University of Wyoming to reach its full potential as a high-performing institution, a high-quality website is essential. This is especially the case in today's ultra-competitive student recruitment environment. To lift its web presence from mediocrity, UW must develop a website governance policy; provide top-quality web templates tied to our CMS; eliminate outdated and poor-quality web pages; and create the correct structure to maintain web pages, and staff it appropriately.

What we want to achieve is a more powerful online experience that reflects our brand at all levels and creates a positive impression, from the homepage down to the smallest department.