

OFFICIAL WEB SITE GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOLS AND DEPARTMENTS

Graduate Student Enrollment Management
The George Washington University

Web sites are one of our most important contacts with prospective graduate students. They not only often provide that crucial first impression; they have been listed as a source of information by 99% of students completing the Admitted Student Questionnaire. The overall appearance, ease of navigation, and clarity and accuracy of the content not only affects prospective students' perceptions of the University, but can impact their decision to apply and/or register. Given the importance of web sites in the recruitment and admissions process, schools and any departments/programs offering graduate certificates and/or degree programs should meet the guidelines outlined below.

The primary goal of any GW college/school site should be to highlight and publicize their academic programs. Academic department/program web pages are considered a component of their school's web site and, as such, should contain similar design and navigation. The school/college must provide strategic as well as technical support in designing/redesigning and maintaining any sites under their umbrella. We make a bad impression when it is difficult to tell that related programs belong to the same school and university.

There are a number of university resources available to assist in creating or revising web sites. The GW Interactive Media Applications Group (IMAG) maintains an online center for web information providers (www.gwu.edu/~rcenter/) that includes online tutorials, web templates, the official publishing guidelines, best practices, and tips on increasing your web site's visibility on search engines. IMAG can also provide evaluations of current sites, including usability, accessibility for people with disabilities and consistency with University branding initiatives. IMAG also produces the University's Network Publishing Guidelines (helpdesk.gwu.edu/misc/networkglines.html), providing policies that should be used in conjunction with any Web initiative. Generally, the guidelines that follow are meant to complement those of IMAG.

Official web sites are those created for the following units within the University: officially constituted schools; academic departments, programs, centers, and institutes; administrative departments; the Faculty Senate; and official faculty, administrative, and library committees. Affiliate and/or personal sites are outside the scope of this document.

General Guidelines

It is important to identify the web site's key audience(s). In most cases, the primary audience will be current and prospective students, and secondary audiences would include faculty, staff, friends and families of students, the media, and the general public. As the primary goal of the web site is to interest, inform, and serve prospective and current students, it is important to focus the design, content, and navigation on what these audiences most want to know and to convey it positively and enthusiastically. The best way to confirm that you have achieved these goals is to pilot-test the site: have members of the target audience review and critique your web site before going "live."

The overall design and navigation schemes should have a professional and polished look and feel. As prospective graduate students are visiting your web site for information, not entertainment, it is more important that the site looks simple, clean, and elegant, rather than dynamic or colorful.

Web sites must contain current and accurate information and links and provide intuitive navigation. Generally, web sites lose visitors who aren't able to find what they want within three clicks or two minutes, so it is always a good idea to ensure that the most important information is a minimal number of clicks away from the front page. You should also always keep in mind that prospective International students may be viewing your site as well. Content should be appropriate for a global audience.

The layout of the web site is obviously very important:

- Based on research on eye scanning patterns for both new and experienced web visitors, the first place people look on a web page is the center, then to the left, and finally to the right. Generally speaking, the most important information should be in the center of the page, with secondary data on the left.
- As click-thru rates are directly related to an item's position in a list, sections and links should be listed in order of importance, rather than alphabetical.
- As with printed materials, content "below the fold" gets significantly less viewership and click-thrus than the first part of the page. For web sites, two-thirds down the page or the point at which vertical scrolling is required is considered "below the fold."

Web sites with dead links and inaccurate or out-of-date content present a negative image of the department, the school, and the University and are a major source of complaints and confusion by prospective and current students. Whenever a school or department/program's web address is changed, the new URL should be promptly forwarded to Clint Williams (cmw@gwu.edu) in the office of Graduate Student Enrollment Management (GSEM) to be promptly updated in GSEM's searchable database and alphabetical directory of schools and programs.

Security and Accessibility

GW web sites use appropriate safeguards to ensure the security, integrity and privacy of information collected online, consistent with the policies of the University and the laws and regulations of the District of Columbia. However, GW does not guarantee the security of any information that is disclosed on GW sites and is not liable for any damages that may arise by submitting the information on GW sites.

An accessible web page is a web page that can be used as effectively by a person with a disability as by a person without a disability, while performing similar tasks. Some tips to make accessible web sites are listed below.

- When using images, use the alt attribute to describe the image.
- Give alternatives for video, audio or multimedia such as providing audio transcripts.
- Utilize Cascading Style Sheet (CSS) for style and layout.
- Use meaningful names for links. For example, avoid "click here".
- Provide contrast between background and text colors for easy reading.

For more information, visit the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) web site: www.w3.org/TR/WCAG/.

If you have any questions about web security or accessibility, please contact IMAG (www.gwu.edu/~imag/).

Design

The web site should present a professional, polished image and be aesthetically pleasing. It should be simple and efficient, rather than overly encumbered by heavy images and graphics. To ensure the quality of the web image, it is wise to invest in a professional designer and/or programmer if possible, rather than take the cheaper route of having the page designed by faculty, staff, students, or friends. IMAG (www.gwu.edu/~imag/) provides in-house web design and development, and GW Graphics (www.gwu.edu/~graphics/) offers graphic design services.

When beginning the design or update process, start by creating a site map to serve as an outline for the site. When selecting a color scheme, think about what would appeal to the age, sex, income level and other demographic indicators of the audience. In most cases, the overall look and feel should project an academically strong image, without being too hip, or too traditional. The graphic designer creating/updating the site should be able to give creative insights in regard to specific fonts and design style. As always, your design should stay within the University's graphics standards.

Navigation

Navigation should be intuitive, consistent across the different levels of the web site, and also appropriate for your target audience. The true test of an efficiently navigable site is one where viewers are able to find the information they're looking for very quickly. Otherwise, they are often tempted to abandon the search.

Primary Navigation

As primary navigation provides an outline “at-a-glance” of what is provided to viewers, the terminology should be immediately understandable to the target audience and provide a quick overview of what viewers will find behind the buttons. For instance, admissions information should be called “Admissions” or “How to Apply” and not be buried within sections entitled “Graduate Programs” or “Academic Information.”

Primary navigation buttons should NOT be listed alphabetically, but rather in their order of importance. Although some sections are dependent upon the characteristics of individual schools and/or departments, the following sections should always be included. (Details on the content to be included for these sections are provided under “*Content*.”)

- Admissions (criteria, access to an application)
- Academic Programs
- Faculty (and their research), Staff, Students, Alumni
- Graduate student funding (RA/TA information)
- News and Announcements (Please note that the GWeb Portal currently provides a content management and syndication system which allows non-technical staff to create news and events on the portal and have the same content show on the departments' web sites.
- Frequently Asked Questions (*optional, but usually very popular with prospective students*)
- Welcome from the Chair (*optional*)

Secondary Navigation

Some suggested sections for secondary navigation include:

- **Sign In/Request Information.** Encourage prospects to complete the online inquiry form to receive e-mail updates, invitations to open houses and other events, and/or to request admissions materials and program information be mailed to them:
<https://inq.applyyourself.com/?id=GWUGRAD&pid=414>
- **Apply Online Now.** Schools using the online application form should include a direct link to that web page:
<https://app.applyyourself.com/?ID=GWUGRAD>
- **Contact Us.** The address, telephone, fax numbers and e-mail department, preferably with a specific listings for admissions, student services, and department administration. A link to the webmaster for your page should also be included here, along with the date of the most recent revisions to the site.
- **Site Map.** Site maps provide a clear, no-frills outline of the organizational structure of the site and can be a big help in facilitating navigation.

Content

It is crucial that web sites contain current and accurate information and links. While web sites should ideally be updated on a continuous basis, they *must* be updated at least twice each year. As stated previously, because a primary goal is to interest prospective students in what GW has to offer and serve current students, it is important to think about what these audiences most want to know and convey it enthusiastically. It is also important not to overburden important sections of your site with content of little or no interest to prospective or current students (e.g., mission or vision statements, text-heavy descriptions of the history of the program, detailed explanations of the organizational/administrative processes of the department).

There should be a clear distinction between the content maintained on a school/college web site and that provided on department/programs web pages, avoiding redundancies whenever possible. Web pages should include links to the appropriate pages on official sources of information rather than repeating material that is officially maintained on other web sites (e.g., *University Bulletin* copy, registration guidelines). When it is felt important to restate or duplicate content, care should be taken to maintain consistency and accuracy across the multiple web pages, following high editorial standards.

Authors of web sites are responsible for the content of their own pages. Photographs of individuals or personal information about an individual must not be included without the permission of the individual. (A copy of the current Photography Release form is attached to these guidelines.)

The following are key sections that should be listed on the front page of the web site.

1. Admissions. Clearly and succinctly state the basic information of interest to all prospective applicants: admissions requirements (minimum GPA, professional experience, course prerequisites); necessary supporting documents (transcripts, test scores, resumes/portfolios, recommendations); and application deadlines. The terminology and details must be consistent with those stated on the school web site and in University publications. The page must also include links to online and downloadable forms and complete contact information for the admissions office.

For the schools using the common graduate application (College of Professional Studies, Columbian College of Arts and Sciences, Elliott School of International Affairs, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, School of Business, and School of Engineering and Applied Science):

- As a paper version of the graduate application for admission is no longer being printed, the admissions page should **strongly** encourage prospects to use the online application when applying for admission and include a direct link to the online application:
<https://app.applyyourself.com/?ID=GWUGRAD>
- To enable prospects to provide us with contact information to enable the University, school, and program to stay in touch with them and to request an application packet and program information be mailed to them, the admissions page should also include a direct link to the GSEM inquiry form:
<https://inq.applyyourself.com/?id=GWUGRAD&pid=414>

2. Academic Programs. Schools/programs and departments should list and provide key information about all degrees and certificates, as well as a description of each program's focus and goals in terms of student employment and/or competencies gained. Translating a degree or program into a real world scenario (e.g., describing specific activities students undertake, highlighting positions held by alumni) is especially useful for programs that are not generally understood by the public.

3. Faculty, Staff, Students, Alumni. List faculty members, with their areas of expertise, research interests, and relevant staff. In order to personalize the overall message and highlight exceptional work, consider including student and/or faculty profiles along with quotes, photos, etc.... Include success stories and other information that would highlight where GW students or programs have made unique contributions to the department, the profession, or society as a whole.

4. Student Financial Assistance. Include a web page with information on teaching and research assistantships, fellowships, and any other forms of graduate student support available, along with application instructions and deadlines. Always provide a link to the University's web site for graduate funding opportunities:
www.gwu.edu/~fellows/index.html

5. Welcome from the Chair or Program Director. If appropriate, consider including a personal greeting to visitors – something to make them feel that your department/program is a warm, welcoming place. But keep it brief.

6. News and Announcements. This section should be used to highlight recent success stories, upcoming events, and other current information. To draw prospects back to your web site, new items should be added regularly, and old information should be moved to other parts of your web site as appropriate or deleted.

7. Cost of Admission While this is information that we would often like to bury, it is usually a critical piece of information for which prospective students are looking. If you don't list the detailed information here, we suggest linking the information on the gradinfo web site:

www.gwu.edu/~gradinfo/Grad_tuition.cfm

8. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). This page should address common concerns raised by visitors to your site, with links to other sections of the web page, as appropriate.

9. Links to Related GW Programs. Working toward the goal of optimizing the fit between program and student is clearly in the best interests of both GW and the prospective student. By including a section that lists other programs offered at GW in related fields you can help ensure that the student finds the program that best matches his or her career goals and interests. At a minimum, list the name of the program and the degree/certificate offered, with a link to the program's web site; if possible, also include brief descriptions that highlight the differences between related programs.

The primary navigation on the department home page may also include links to other important sections:

- Academic policies/guidelines for current students
- Details about current research projects
- A list of useful links, either internally or to professional associations or other resources relevant to the discipline
- Publications

By asking what prospective and current students might most want to know and making that information easily accessible and interesting, you stand to increase your pool of good applicants, the quality of students you attract, and enrolled students satisfaction with their GW experience.

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