

**How to Evaluate
Web Content Management Solutions for Higher Education
...and Avoid Overspending**

A white paper outlining the solution evaluation process including an in-depth needs assessment, the areas that can lead to overspending, and the essential features required of a web content management solution for higher education institutions.

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Your Guide

Introduction

Purchasing a web content management solution can be a lengthy and costly process if proper steps are not taken to ensure the best fit for your institution. Overspending and delays often occur when a poor fit is selected, and unexpected costs arise to transform that solution into a workable system. This paper offers a general understanding of web content management, an in-depth outline of a web content management needs assessment, typical areas of overspending, and essential features required of a web content management solution for higher education institutions.

1. Understanding Web Content Management

A web content management solution simplifies the process by which content contributors create, publish, and update website content. Web content management solutions enable more than just the web team to maintain website content by distributing the effort into the hands of the content contributors who are ultimately responsible for the content. Put simply, a web content management system:

1. Simplifies the process of creating, publishing and updating web content,
2. Enables both non-technical and technical staff to participate,
3. Decreases the time and costs associated with web content maintenance.

What's important to note is that Web Content Management is a framework that includes people at its core. Usability is the key – or the killer. Acceptance and adoption is driven primarily by ease of use. The return on investment of any Web Content Management system is zero if no one accepts or uses it.

The importance of website content

Like it or not, an institution's website has become a primary communication tool, and the information, or content that it contains is critical to the students, parents, faculty and staff who visit each day.

For **higher education** institutions, the website is often the first influence on prospective students, their parents, alumni, and donors. Websites are key support for key student information, public relations, recruitment, and a growing number of mission critical services. Delays in posting new information can result in erroneous information, visitor frustration and ultimately lost confidence in the institutions key stakeholders.

Website visitors must be able to gain **accurate, up-to-date information** in order for the site to be a valuable resource. If it is unreliable, both the site and the institution lose credibility.

To compound matters further, many services that were once handled by print technologies are migrating to the typical institutional website. The migration of new on-line services is greatly outpacing the available resources tasked with maintaining them. Often by necessity, the core communication vehicle for the institution is left behind, and this is simply not acceptable long term.

The benefits of a web content management solution

Increased Efficiency -- Produce more with less cost

A web content management system should lower the cost of maintaining an effective web site by reducing the coordination and production time to implement new and updated content. This is typically achieved by eliminating bottlenecks within the current process by distributing the content updates across multiple content contributors throughout your organization. This should also reduce the need to hire additional IT staff, and allow more timely updates to occur.

Better and Faster Communication

Quicker content updates enable you to improve communication to key stakeholders. If implemented correctly, a web content management system can eliminate outdated or incorrect website information, ultimately improving your overall image and web strategy.

The Results

- Increased repeat website visits
- Improved relationships with past/present/future students
- Increased visitor satisfaction
- Better use of technical resources
- Reduced costs
- Increased website value

How other institutions are managing web content

Status Quo

Website maintenance done using the traditional webmaster approach is probably the most common approach still used today. However, many institutions are quickly becoming aware of the high cost to this approach and the dramatic inefficiencies it affords. The computing parallel from recent history that can be easily recalled is that of the time before the desktop publishing revolution in the

mid 1980's. Similar to today's problem of publishing current information on the website, the pre-desktop publishing days were marked by costly and inefficient teams of in-house printing departments and service bureaus. These bottlenecks were ultimately displaced by desktop publishing software and low-cost printers, just as web content management systems are quickly replacing the inefficiencies of the web site management status quo.

Home Grown Solution

An in-house (or "Home Grown") solution is another option which also ultimately leads to a scalability problem. Although this approach might meet your current needs, it might not fit your needs tomorrow. This approach also requires dedicated dollars and staff to develop and maintain such a system. As commercial systems designed specifically to fit the needs of higher educational institutions become commonplace, it becomes obvious that "reinventing the wheel" is unnecessary. How many home grown word processing systems from the 1980s are still in use today for desktop publishing?

High-End "Enterprise" Systems

Several web content management systems, adapted from the word of "Document Management", have been implemented in some of the larger higher education institutions. These systems were designed for large corporate clients such as publishing behemoths, and offer a very costly solution to a much simpler problem. Because these systems were originally designed for a different market, or designed to solve a different problem, they tend to fit poorly into the majority of college environments.

Web Content Management for the Institutional Website

A select few web content management solutions are available today to solve exactly the problems faced by colleges and universities. These systems can range from \$10,000 to well over \$100,000. High-end, expensive content management solutions can cost much more than their potential saving. However, when the right solution is chosen, great benefits can be realized.

2. Choosing a Solution That Fits Your Needs

The best solution is one that fits the institution's needs. A needs assessment identifies the requirements of an organization. Then, solutions are evaluated for fit based on how they meet the requirements. This is the key to avoid overspending.

Needs Assessment

The needs assessment includes: institutional requirements, site requirements, staffing requirements, technical requirements, and implementation requirements.

Each of these areas contains questions which depending on the answers, will guide the evaluators to certain features and ultimately the best solution.

Institutional Requirements

1. How much content really needs to be updated and how often? It's important to evaluate not only what's currently being updated, but also what really needs to be updated in order to achieve the goals of the institution.
2. How many content contributors need to use the system? The content contributors are the authors and editors of the content itself. Because a web content management system can allow non-technical contributors, staff, faculty, and even students should be considered across all departments.
3. Do these content contributors need the ability to make updates anytime, from anywhere? If so, then a browser based solution will be required.
4. Will the content contributors' changes require approval before posting to the site? Workflow with authorization is necessary when an institution deems that a reviewer or editor and possibly others must approve the work of a content contributor. In fact, a multiple level authorization process might be necessary to consider different types of approval: editorial, design, and administrative. The approval sequence should allow for intermediary work and revision on the part of those in the approval chain. Alternatively, the submitted page would be disapproved and returned to the originator or prior reviewer, with the process starting again in a recursive manner.
5. What is budgeted and how critical is the cost?

Site Requirements

1. Does the solution need to be incorporated into a new site design? Does it need to fit in with an existing site architecture, or a legacy cache of static pages?
2. To what extent can the existing site be altered? Some solutions will require major modifications to existing site designs, or migration to a proprietary database back-end that can be both difficult and expensive to migrate into, and out of in the future.
3. If the institution is currently redesigning the website, will the web content management system fit with your desired new architecture, or will it require your structure to fit into its preferred structure?
4. For how many separate websites (physical or virtual) is the solution needed? This is important to determine the up-front costs associated with most web content management systems.

Staffing Requirements

1. Who are the content contributors responsible for the website content? It is likely that these people will not have a high level of web editing expertise. The system should work for the lowest level of technical knowledge.
2. How much staff training time and expense can be afforded? The costs and time of training can be significant with a complex system. If people aren't properly trained, the system will not be used, and the system will ultimately fail.
3. Does the existing staff have the expertise and the time available to implement and maintain the solution? This is critical when evaluating a web content management solution that is offered as a software solution deployed and maintained on the clients servers. These systems typically require a great deal of ongoing technical support from the purchasing organization.

Technical Requirements

1. Does the solution need to be hosted on an internal server or could it be hosted on the vendor's server? There are a variety of web content management systems available that must be hosted on the client's servers, and then there are some that can be procured as a service or hosted on the vendor's servers, and there are a few that can be deployed either way.

The next three questions are tied together.

2. Will the solution service multiple locations and multiple servers?
3. Does it need to be non-proprietary or platform independent?
4. With which operating system servers and hosts does the solution need to work?

These questions are most important when evaluating a content management system that is a software solution. A hosted application, or a hosted server solution, minimizes these technical requirements.

Implementation requirements

1. Is the solution needed for a departmental or enterprise level implementation? If departmental, then long term, does the solution need to migrate to include the entire campus?
2. How quickly do you want it to be deployed? Some systems can be implemented in weeks where others take several months – or longer! The more changes required to your site and system, the longer the implementation. Also, the longer the training period, the longer it will take to be up and running.

3. Typical areas of overspending

Do your homework. Institutions that don't do their homework often find themselves spending tens of thousands of dollars on unexpected expenses after their purchase of a web content management solution. These hidden costs are most typically in additional consulting, site re-architecture, unnecessary features, and implementation and integration cost overruns.

Training. Because most web content management systems promise to be easy to use, training costs are often assumed to be minimal or completely overlooked. Avoid overspending by ensuring that non-technical content editors give their opinion of the training time required. Have them sit in on a demonstration and see how comfortable they will be with the new system.

Site re-architecture necessities. Be aware of the potential for a required site re-architecture. Many web content management systems require substantial redesigns to the underlying data architecture while others adapt themselves and lend themselves to the website as it exists today. It can be quite costly, both short-term and long-term, to allow the web content management system drive the architecture of your web site away from open standards and non-proprietary best practices.

Consulting. Content management systems that require substantial re-architecture to the website also require substantial consulting services. Additionally, content migration (if required by the chosen system) can be a substantial cost if it's something that must be done by an outside group.

Buy what you actually need. Avoid purchasing unnecessary features. One of the most costly mistakes institution's make is that of putting together a list of features driven by the most technical administrators (or outside consultants who might know more about the technology than your user's actual needs), then sending the list out for bid. When this happens, the winning bid is often bloated with unnecessary or unusable features.

Implementation and Integration. The cost of implementation and integration with current systems should also not be assumed to be negligible. Choosing systems that embrace open standards and "fit in" with your existing legacy content as much as possible is the key. Also, keep in mind that a hosted application service can avoid many implementation and integration costs by effectively outsourcing a large chunk of this process.

Add it up. Add up all costs, and don't be fooled by low set-up costs. When evaluating solutions the total cost must be calculated from beginning through the end and must include maintenance.

4. Essential Features

Although no one can accurately tell which web content management system is right for an institution without a close examination of the specific needs, there are seven essential features that any web content management vendor should provide.

1. **Flexibility.** The web content management system should fit well and adapt to the existing website or newly chosen redesigned site architecture. Flexibility in providing proper tools for the content contributors to do their job is of utmost importance. In addition, flexibility of the content management system itself is important to avoid the creation of a secondary bottleneck. While a web content management system might facilitate updates made today, the type and scale of updates may change tomorrow. If the web content management system is inflexible, then a secondary bottleneck arises in making changes to the web content management system itself.
2. **Scalability.** If the system is being deployed for a single department today, and a campus-wide deployment is likely in the future, ensure the system can easily scale up to meet the growing institutional needs. Perhaps even more importantly, make sure the system is scalable to fit the wide diversity of content contributors across the institution – from the most technical to those who may only be comfortable using a word processor. And finally, make sure the system is scalable to embrace new technologies as “the next great thing” comes along. Systems designed around an open standards approach (rather than a proprietary structure) will help ensure this.
3. **Priced to fit.** Most website content management systems are “one size fits all”. This is a potentially troublesome situation, particularly during a pilot program, where your needs might be redefined later on. Ensure that the initial costs and the long-term costs are priced to fit your actual needs. Additionally, pay only for what you need today by making sure the system is priced to grow as you scale up with more users.
4. **Quick implementation.** Each day you wait to implement is a cost and a lost opportunity to your institution. Additionally, the longer the implementation process continues, the more likely you are to incur cost overruns.
5. **Browser-based.** This reduces the need to install and maintain additional software on the client’s machines, and allows changes anytime from anywhere. If done well, the system should also enable content contributors to browse directly to the web page they wish to edit and update it in the context of the entire site.

6. **Multi-user functionality.** It should be easy to implement and add new users, add users to groups, so the groups can be easily attached to editing rights on particular areas of the site. A hierarchical role-based system with a flexible workflow approval process is a must.

7. **Easy-to-use.** This might seem obvious but each web content management system is really very different. Some claim to be WYSIWYG (What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get) and some truly are, others are constricted to a template-based system, and still others offer the best of both worlds. The best content management system is the one that's embraced and used by those who are trained to use it. Choose systems that work best in the unique environment of higher education. Stay away from systems that were designed by engineers who focused on the needs of ecommerce or news/media sites (typically high-end database driven systems). Look for systems that fit-in with the diversity of people and assets that make up your institution.

Web Site Content Management Evaluation and Procurement Check List

Specifications: Choosing the right system

Needs assessment:

- How much content really needs to be updated and how often?

- How many content contributors need to use the system?

- Do these content contributors need the ability to make updates anytime, from anywhere?

- Will the content contributors' changes require approval before posting to the site?

- What is budgeted and how critical is the cost?

Site Requirements

- Does the solution need to be incorporated into an existing or a new site design?

- To what extent can/must the existing site be altered? Will the web content management system fit with our desired new architecture, or will it require your structure to fit into its preferred structure?

- For how many separate websites (physical or virtual) is the solution needed?

Staffing Requirements

- Who are the content contributors responsible for the website content?
- How much staff training time and expense can we afford?
- Does our existing staff have the expertise and the time available to implement and maintain the solution?

Technical Requirements

- Does the solution need to be hosted on an internal server or could it be hosted on the vendor's server?
- Will the solution service multiple locations and multiple servers?
- Does it need to be non-proprietary or platform independent?
- With which operating system servers and hosts does the solution need to work?

Implementation requirements

- Is the solution needed for a departmental or enterprise level implementation?
- How quickly do we want it to be deployed?

Essential Features

- Flexibility.
- Scalability.

- Priced to fit.
- Quick implementation.
- Browser-based.
- Multi-user functionality.
- Easy-to-use. Get our user's buy-in that it's really easy for them to use.

Cost control

- Do your homework. Have we covered all the bases of evaluation?
- Training. Do we know how we plan to do this?
- Site redesign. Are we planning to re-design? Can we do this later?
- Consulting. Are we going to need consultants? Do we have the budget for this if our selection requires consultants?
- Buy what you need. Are we buying extra features we don't need?
- Implementation and Integration. Do we understand how this will work?
- Add it up. Have we added up the bill?

Conclusion

Selecting the best solution to fit an institution's needs requires answering many internal questions that determine some key requirements of a system. There are many other factors, in addition to cost, that the evaluator must consider. It is easy to fall into the trap of overspending if these questions are not answered. The seven essential features any system should include are:

1. Flexibility
2. Scalability
3. Priced to fit
4. Quick implementation
5. Browser-based
6. Multi-user functionality
7. Easy-to-use

Look for systems that fit-in with the diversity of people and assets that make up the institution. Most importantly, remember that Web Content Management is a framework that includes people as much as it provides technological solutions. The best content management system is the one that's embraced and used by those who are trained to use it. Moreover, the return on investment of any new technology is zero if no one accepts or uses it.

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