Chapter II

The ABCs of Designing Campus Portals

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the fundamental design requirements for building Internet portals, in particular building portals for educational institutions or so-called “campus portals.” The focus of the chapter is on understanding portals and their design requirements from both functional and technical perspectives for educational applications. It is meant to offer understanding and to share know-how and experience with those who are involved in various aspects of the design, development or implementation of portal projects.

INTRODUCTION

When the Web was introduced to colleges and universities in the mid-1990s, one of its initial applications was to create campus homepages as gateways to the institution’s few and generally disparate websites. Higher education’s early websites were very simple to use, but only a limited amount of information was made available on the top-level campus homepage. A campus homepage initially consisted of a nice big picture of the campus or the chief executive and a few links to general brochure-like information. It was designed mainly to provide information for outsiders and for prospective students, and its links were limited to perhaps only a dozen secondary pages. A visitor could explore all the pages of a campus website in less than an hour.

Very soon, however, institutions realized the potential of the homepage as a gateway into the vast information storehouses that universities are. Our homepages
became cluttered collections of nested menus linking to hundreds of campus Web pages. This profusion of options made our campus homepages difficult to use, and the typical campus website became an environment unfriendly to users. As a remedy to this, schools began to put search engines on their homepages to help users find their ways to desired information. Quickly, however, the search engine, even one with advanced search features, became useless. Campus websites simply offered too much information and their homepages offered too many links.

The year 2000 witnessed many schools switching to a new design framework for campus websites in order to reduce the usability difficulties. The new scheme categorized information and resources for different groups according to their specific roles and interests. For example, prospective students are a group of visitors who are mainly interested in information such as admission requirements and degree programs; current students, on the other hand, come to the homepage looking for registration information, online library resources and news about what is happening on campus. Many campuses changed their campus homepage designs to include a prominent menu of links to homepages custom tailored for major user-role groupings, including prospective students, current students, faculty, staff and alumni.

In January 2000 and 2001, I conducted surveys by visiting 100 randomly selected university websites. In 2001 found a 15% increase in the number of top-level homepages offering role-based links. Nevertheless, again because information is being added to websites at a near-exponential rate, this role-based homepage design reduced Web usability problems for only a short period of time.

Even as some website designers were trying to redesign their campus homepages with role-based, menu-driven interfaces, a few campuses began exploring a completely new concept, which would come to be known as the Internet portal. The concept was simple but innovative. Using new programming tools such as common gateway interface (CGI) and Active Server Pages (ASPs), campus Web designers developed interactive services linked to their campus back-office database systems. To use a typical portal application of this kind, the user was required to log on. By looking at the user’s log on information and comparing it with the information residing in a campus database, the portal immediately identified the user as a member of the campus community, identified the user’s role and dynamically presented him or her with a role-based Website that was appropriate and optimized for the user’s needs. For instance, users with student status could be directed to a page optimized for student use. Users with faculty or staff status could be directed to different pages, optimized for faculty and staff needs. In a matter of weeks, a programmer could write programs that not only would identify a user and link him or her to an optimized page, it also displayed personal information such as the list of courses that the specific user had registered for, the number of e-mails in
Web Portals as an Exemplar for Tourist Destinations
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