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Need for faculty review of university web site design and content

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Approved by the Senate: 2/15/2007

Not Approved by the Senate:

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Need for faculty review of university web site design and content

Submitted by David Robinson

1/23/2007

Question:

What process of review has been used in the past, or is currently in place, to provide opportunities for formal faculty comment on the university Web site design and its academic usability?

Rationale:

There is sentiment among the faculty that the recent Web site redesign has resulted in a Disneyfication of the site in the interest of attracting new students. The usability of the new site for the university community is also problematic. If the answer to the question posed above is "None," the Senate may need to look to establishing, in cooperation with appropriate administrative offices, a review process to promote the academic mission and insure that it is prominently part of the image projected by the site.

Response:

Pat Humphrey (Senate Moderator) spoke with Steven Ward about the site redesign.

The redesign was discussed in the Strategic Planning Council, Enrollment Management Committee, Marketing and Communications Council, as well as the President's Cabinet before it was accomplished. Therefore, there was opportunity for faculty input. In addition, the proposed structure of our web pages was compared with many other colleges and universities.

Marketing and Communications is starting to get good data on how the site is used. Their information is that there are approximately 8,200 on-site "hits" per day to the main page, and 34,500 off-site "hits" per day. Obviously, one purpose of the pages is to make us attractive to prospective students and the general public.

--pbh

Minutes: 2/15/2007:

A Request for Information and a motion from David Robinson addressed the new University web-site design. Humphrey reported that the design had been presented to the Strategic Planning Council, Enrollment Management Council, and so on. Marketing & Communications really drives this web-site design; the goal is attracting students to it. She reported that Stephen Ward (Director of Marketing and Communications) would talk with the Enrollment Management Council about the possibility of a web council to advise them about design of the web pages. However, such a council would involve only a small number of faculty members. Humphrey announced that Ward planned to attend this meeting of the Faculty Senate.

David Robinson (CLASS) thought that the response presented on behalf of Stephen Ward raised more questions than it answered about the new web-site design. Specifically, the examples of opportunities for faculty input were the Strategic Planning Council (SPC), the Enrollment Management Council, the Marketing and Communications Council., and the President's Cabinet. He wondered how many total faculty members, without administrative posts, are involved in all those committees together. He asked if any senators "fed into that web-site design."

Patricia Humphrey (COST), Senate Moderator, stated that there had been significant discussion in the SPC.

Jerry Wilson (COBA and SPC) reported that Ward had made a presentation about the new web design. He added that SPC members had “spent a good bit of time in a two-hour session asking [Ward]

questions and making recommendations, and about half the makeup of the SPC is faculty, so I would consider that faculty input.”

David Robinson (CLASS) expressed his concern that, on the web site, “there is no item that actually represents the academic interests of the faculty and the actual user community within the university here.” He did not understand why the Senate would not have the responsibility ultimately to oversee issues such as this and added that, in general, we really need to reassess how these decisions are made:

“Marketing has its prerogatives, and that’s wonderful, but it’s perfectly possible to balance those against the academic mission and the usability by people here in the university community.”

Clara Krug (CLASS) reminded senators of an e-mail message related to David Robinson’s RFI from Candy Schille (CLASS and SPC) on the Senate Listserv on February 8, 2007, 10:28 a.m. It stated, “I was at the SPC meeting where this was presented. I say presented, rather than discussed, since (like so many matters brought before the SEC, at least in my opinion) the revision of the website(s) seemed to be handled as an information item, rather than a matter on which our input was requested.” Jerry Wilson (COBA and SPC) responded that that email from Schille elicited a flurry between him and Schille. After reviewing Jayne Perkins Brown’s minutes of that particular meeting, he had decided that “there were a number of parts of that discussion that both Candy and I forgot.” He reminded senators that minutes of SPC meetings are available on the web site. He encouraged senators to read the SPC minutes to find out what that group does. He added that there had been “a great deal of discussion about the web site.”

Norman Schmidt (COST and SPC) agreed with Wilson that there was discussion. Whether Marketing and Communications was there just to present the web site to the SPC and how much they were there looking for input, he couldn’t say Ming Fang He (COE and SPC) remembered that, when the plan for the web site design was presented

to the SPC, “We did have a very heated discussion, and we had some suggestions for the changes, and Page 7 of 15I did see some change occur afterwards. Still, I guess, it’s a work in progress, and I appreciate that they make the effort to do some changes.” She specified “two big issues” about the web site:

1. The “modification aspect” of the web site. Do you want to make education really become business mo-jo?
2. The lack of ethnic diversity. The first time that they (Marketing and Communications) presented it to the SPC, most of the pictures featured on the web site were white teachers/ white professors teaching students. It was very mono-ethnic. At that time, He mentioned this concern and emphasized that GSU is not supposed to advocate segregation. She noted that this aspect of the web site has now changed in some respects. He continued: “I would like to advocate for more attention to that aspect because, when people across the world access our web site, this is the first image they are going to see about Georgia Southern.” She added that it has a lot to do with our ideology level, about how much attention we want to pay to recruiting a diverse student body, faculty, and staff.

David Robinson (CLASS) advocated inclusiveness in designing or revising the design of a web site. He added that some colleagues have strong objections to the aesthetic qualities of the site. He recommended that Marketing and Communications staff have focus groups that include not only “the three-quarters of people who by their statistics are outsiders accessing the site, but also ... the one-quarter who are people inside the university community using that site. There shouldn’t just be focus groups looking at students out there who are actually fictitious students ... prospective students. There should also be focus groups and usability studies for people inside the university using this site. This is a working site. It is not a billboard. It can be both, but, at this point, I think that there’s been a lapse in understanding the full importance of the site to the community here.”

There was no additional discussion.