

Lewis & Clark College

ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS:

General Information Architecture & Content Recommendations

Introduction

Websites are first place most people go for information. They **expect** to find accurate, interesting content. If your pages are out-of-date or severely neglected, they won't assume it is because you are too busy or understaffed. They will think that your site accurately reflects the department, its people, and activities.

Does it?

Academic department and program sites are an important source of information for prospective students, and one of Lewis & Clark's biggest recruitment opportunities. One thing we know about most prospects is that they pay close attention to department and program sites, often more so than to conventional "marketing" pages. Some may have only one program or department in mind; others visit several to get a general sense of the faculty, courses, and student project and performance opportunities, etc.

Beyond prospective students, do your current students find your site helpful? They will look to it when considering which courses to take next semester, whether to pursue a major or minor in your department, and what additional opportunities are available to them. They'll be flipping between departments too, comparing courses, figuring out how to meet their general requirements, and so on.

Finally, academics from across the world—prospective faculty, journal editors, conference organizers—will search these sites to find out more about the character and caliber of work being done at L&C.

Our goal is to help you produce friendly, well written, consistently organized, and engaging academic division, department, and program sites that benefit all constituents.

Content Strategies: General

1. Tell *and* show.

One of our general recommendations for the L&C site is that it should do more *showing* than *telling*. There is obviously some telling to be done on a departmental site, as your students need to know about requirements, policies, and so forth. But we highly encourage you to *show* what faculty and students are doing. Some departments are already doing this very well with photo galleries, news stories, and event listings. Others need some help.

Showing real department activities, research, and events will ground abstract learning outcomes in reality and give prospects concrete ideas of what they will be doing while studying a particular subject.

The majority (though not all!) of the text currently on academic department sites simply *describes* the topic at hand, rather than using real life examples to validate and put it in context. Consider where adding a real example to your body text will help illustrate your claims. Study Abroad, Research, and Internship information are all good examples of areas that would be vastly improved by adding short, real life stories: these could be photos (with great captions) of student adventures and studies, links to faculty blogs, or even just one sentence descriptions of recent internship experiences.

We recommend you continually seek out creative ways to incorporate recent department achievements or activities through stories, video, audio, candid photography, blogs, Twitter feeds, and so on.

2. Reduce the noise. Diversify.

Just because it's there doesn't mean your intended audience will read it. Too much text or many links on any one page can be overwhelming. Instead of using a department homepage as a repository for any info about the department, try to create a thoughtful, dynamic balance of different types of content that, together, present a compelling picture of the program.

What do your photos or other visuals do for your communication efforts? How do your news and events feeds capture a visitors' interest? Don't miss the opportunity to link photos to longer stories or pages deeper in the site.

Integrate "Related Links" menus—ensuring that they're not duplicating pages easily found elsewhere—to guide visitors to useful information deeper in the site.

3. Keep it simple.

Don't bite off more than you can chew over the long haul. Veer away from incorporating too many moving parts. Keeping it small with fewer pages to maintain is infinitely better than trying to keep up a large website that looks great this year but quickly becomes dated because you can't maintain it.

More content is not necessarily better. Engaging content is better. While we'd like to see similar content on each department site, it is more important that your pages be thoughtful, relevant, well written, and interesting to your audiences. Incorporating a page that has little more than old print brochure copy is not going to help engage your audience and won't compare well with another department that is actively updating its content.

Updating the website needs to be a regular part of someone's routine.

And even if you stay on top of things like events or news, make sure to schedule a few times each year (or at least once) to go over your entire site looking for dated information.

4. It's okay. Let it go.

Dated material needs to be reviewed and either deleted from the site or transformed to fit into an archive. Archived pages should not simply be moved **as is** to a different section of the site. Edit out-of-date content to change verb tense, adding a synopsis/lessons learned section before moving it into the archive.

You may want to keep the content of a page around (off-line) for your own reference, but seriously consider if it's at all relevant to your web audience today and the impression it makes.

***Example:** Your department once offered a minor or student organization that no longer exists. The information remains on your departmental site, either because it represents the hard work someone put into it several years ago, or because no one has bothered to take it down.*

At best your site visitor will think you've forgotten to update this page but at worst they will think other parts of your site are not credible because no one seems to be maintaining them. Only keep old content on your site if you add an introduction that recognizes it as a lapsed effort and links any new places to go for related activities or info.

Otherwise, it's time to clean house. It'll feel good.

Content Recommendations

Department Homepage Content Strategy

The homepage should act as a guide to detailed information deeper in your site. It should be clear, articulate, and representative of the department. No matter what the subject, it should make a visitor *want* to learn more about it – to dig into the interior pages, take a class, read a research paper, become a major, consider a minor, and so on.

The homepage should incorporate both introductory text (a welcoming overview of the program) and, if possible, dynamic content (news, events, photo gallery, blog headlines). The goal is to briefly illustrate L&C's particular take on the field. For departments with no capacity for dynamic content, a simple introduction with a few specific examples, reviewed each year, should suffice.

The introductory text should be between 50-150 words. Adding to that other dynamic content, you should strive for around 150-300 words total.

Static Text

The static homepage content should include:

- A short, friendly **opening sentence or paragraph** in large type that in some way captures the essence of the department.

IDEAS: A catchy synopsis of the department or field; an example of real work (research, activities, outcomes) being done right now in the department; an example of L&C's unique take on the field of study; or another means of drawing the reader's attention to the department.
- **A few additional paragraphs** that provide:
 - General description of the field of study using real examples—what *is* the study of Rhetoric and Media Studies? (1-2 sentences)—and/or philosophy of the department—our take on the Environmental Studies (1-3 sentences).
 - Some reference to the most important internal site content with **in-text links** to those pages.
 - Examples of work being done in the department, whether that's faculty publications, unique student projects, internship or research examples, etc. (2-3 sentences).

NOTE: Learning goals, while helpful guideposts for your department and students, do not make for compelling written web content. We recommend incorporating learning goals into the text across the departmental site.

News & Events (dynamic content)

News and events feeds provide some of the easiest and best ways to *show* your program in action, with the additional benefit of having a high-profile area to post department events, lectures, talks, symposia, etc. A many programs already incorporate some news onto their sites, but there is room for improvement. As we mention above, incorporate visual content when possible and curate the feed to show off the breadth and scope of work being done in your program. Most importantly, make sure all news and events are current. Photos and stories from 2011 (or before) should not be on the homepage.

Departments have flexibility, of course. Not all will have events and there will be down times for everyone; as a general rule, most academic units can be expected to generate far more news items than events, and the former tend on the average to be much more interesting.

Once it is entered into the system, department news can also “trickle up” to other pages on the L&C site, including the homepage, giving more exposure to department activities.

Site administrators should also be able to populate their homepages with content they are maintaining elsewhere such as blogs or Twitter.

Other Media (dynamic content)

Departments and programs should have the capacity to present video, audio, and department-specific images on their homepages. Images and video should be of relatively high quality, with bright colors and good composition. They should capture students and faculty in action or show images related to the area of study.

Some departments have a greater need to present images and other media they should be able to do so easily within the new design options.

Other Features

On the homepage and other relevant pages, we suggest incorporating a feature area for “Related Links.” It’s a great way to point out other pages of interest to the topic of the page without placing them in the main site navigation. These links should highlight something a particular audience might immediately look for or expand one’s understanding of opportunities connected to a department.

Contact information: Department or program contact information (chair) should be listed on the homepage.

Inside pages

Static Text

Many of the current department pages are text-heavy and impersonal. Much of that content should be separated into subpages, but we urge you to resist copying and pasting text from the homepage onto new subpages. You have an opportunity to create more concise, compelling written content. Web pages offer opportunities to showcase ideas through photos, video, and other interactive media and allow you to use links to lead your audiences to explore things in more detail.

Heavy blocks of text are also hard to read. Please refer to our *Best Practices* document for suggestions regarding sub-page headers and other tactics to break up information.

Internal department pages should feature brief, well written introductions, rich with department-specific examples, that incorporate in-text links. And remember: it's best to simply remove out-of-date or rote content.

Dynamic Content

Any internal page might benefit from a photo gallery, news story feed, faculty/student profile, video, etc. as a complement to the text. Do you have updates from alumni that could rotate on your "After Lewis & Clark" page?

All of these things will make your site richer and more interesting. But make sure you have the capacity to keep it up. Facilities photos won't need refreshing but other types of content will. For something like alumni updates, you need a new story every month (very minimum every 2 months) during the school year and once during the summer to consider a specific dynamic content feed of this nature. Infrequent alumni updates can simply be lumped in with general department news. Photo features need refreshing once a semester (once a year at least).

Writing Style and Tone

The writing on the academic department/program homepages should strike a balance between formal and scholarly (but not staid), and conversational and welcoming (but not glib).

Highly technical text is fine on inside pages, whose audience will likely be more explicitly interested in the department's field of study, but readability and friendliness should be the primary concern on the homepage.

Text on your site should be written in a way that is clear and easily understood by someone without knowledge of your area of study. Remember, prospective students (as well as first-years and even sophomores) are just starting to learn what it means to study within a particular academic discipline. The language should entice the reader to explore further and get them excited to learn about the activities of the department or program.

These pages can incorporate the first person (you, us, our, we), though falling back on "L&C/Biology students..." rather than "you" is fine too. On occasion you should address the audience directly, as we want prospects and interested current students to be able to envision themselves as part of the department's community.

The style should also reflect the personality of the department. L&C is such a close-knit place where students have the opportunity to get to know professors. We want this quality to come through. If your department is known for its quirky group of professors, make sure that comes through on the website.

Navigation / Information Architecture (IA)

General Guidelines

Division and department site navigation should follow the same IA guidelines as presented in the *Best Practices—IA & Content* document. In reviewing the current IAs for departments, a few of these are particularly relevant:

- **Keep navigation lists under control.** Sub-page navigation lists should be no more than 6-10 links long. The shorter the better.
- **Link only to pages within the section.** With few exceptions, the navigation should link to internal pages only. Links that are part of the primary navigation should never lead to another site or to a PDF or other downloadable file.