It's Time to Re-imagine Your Front Door

The secret to updating the digital experiences your college offers is to consider how the best digital players are solving the same problems for their higher ed clients.

Elliott Mower
*Creative Strategy Director, Product
Mediacurrent*

HIGHER EDUCATION WEBSITES SERVE AS THE front door. When someone comes to visit your college or university now, it's most likely they'll be arriving online first. What does your welcome mat look like? What is it that you want a learner or prospective student to feel when they first meet your brand and website? How can you digitally recreate the feeling of stepping onto a campus for the first time and thinking, "I see myself here"?

Answering those kinds of questions – and others – may compel you to rethink your institutional design and brand expression choices.

Gen Z's in college now. These students – and the generation coming up behind them – are even more digitally engaged. They don't use websites like previous generations. That's why it may be time to adopt an app paradigm for your site. In the process you have to design an experience that is suitable for all audiences with ways to personalize and segment. You don't want to forget about staff, graduate students or others considered "non-traditional."

This goes beyond a "mobile-first" mindset. For one, there are a multitude of screen sizes, everything from a flat screen TV being used as a monitor to a smartphone in a pocket. The design for the site has to be responsive, with the experience adapted to the right screen size. For another, the approach needs to create inspiration, regardless of age.

Borrowing from the Best

Beyond navigation, there are design and content considerations. Say I'm a student in West Texas looking at a college in the Pacific Northwest. Why shouldn't the website recognize my geographic location and feed me images that reveal a distinct difference in the landscape between my flat desert home and the green, hilly campus in Seattle?

Or maybe I've been through a site multiple times, and I've shown the most interest in the college's pre-law program. Rather than showing me the same stale content every time I show up, why not make sure I see related programs, such as history or political science – majors that feed into law – and have that content surfaced in different ways because it knows I've gone that route before?

Gen Z and Gen Alpha users go online expecting constantly updated content. This doesn't mean you need to cater to a TikTok or Instagram audience; but it's worth asking, what if this campus website *were* TikTok? How would that change the way you think about site and content design? Maybe you employ more video because it can be super engaging. Maybe you share more of the experience on campus – classrooms, mock lectures, the humor found in everyday activities and interactions among students.

Universities could consider emphasizing all of the different programs and services on offer. Take a page from Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime and others that surface multiple suggested offerings they have for you to watch that match to your interest. What would the school's website be like if you used Netflix as the model? How would you organize the content and would it be on the homepage or a couple of layers down? How would you steer people through?

Or perhaps the college is a small school with a focus on community and all of the experiences that encompasses. You could tie that to the way Facebook connects individuals and creates interesting group dynamics through the showcasing of certain stories and the images used.

Where to Start

When **Mediacurrent** works with a new client on a digital transformation project, it involves revamping not just their site, but their thinking about digital experiences too – a process that ideally takes six to eight weeks. First, we spend time developing a foundation for the project as a whole: understanding the client, talking to the stakeholders (including students and parents), touring the campus (now done virtually) and understanding the environment of where the school is located.

Next, we dig into the "product" to understand the needs of users, the features, the future direction, how to highlight

the community and the breadth of offerings. We put that into a framework that can be used during the next phase, where the website will be designed and built.

The design and development phase is entirely collaborative, bringing the whole project team together – designers, technology experts, project managers, the client team and the project leaders. As we develop the components of the digital experiences, they're tested to make sure we're not moving too far away from what is understandable and usable from all audience perspectives, but also for where the institution is going.

Customers approve. As the chief marketing and communications officer for Emory University's Goizueta Business School said, "We were using a legacy CMS that didn't afford us the flexibility or functionality to deliver a modern, dynamic design or user experience. Mediacurrent helped us solve this problem through a design and user experience that aligned with our brand and engaged our audiences."

The Beginning of a New Road

The secret to staging your "front door" for the world as it is today is to consider how the best digital players are solving the same problems. Pay particular attention to the experiences that speak to *all* visitors, those who are first-generation, international or somehow otherwise non-traditional.

In the course of your work, don't get ensnared in a proprietary approach. Make sure the content management route you follow provides multilingual capabilities, accessibility, security and stability, integration with your other core systems and affordability. Mediacurrent specializes in working with **Drupal**, a highly flexible, open-source content management system. We recommend to higher ed clients that they leverage **Acquia**'s Digital Experience Platform (DXP). Acquia is powered by Drupal and was co-founded by the founder of Drupal. We have trusted this platform for 10-plus years to create meaningful customer experiences in higher education.

Don't worry too much about first-day jitters. Your new website's launch is really just the beginning of a longer journey. Nothing is ever done. Launching is like building up a muscle. It gets stronger and better with every day of effort. Your job is to think about what's next, where you want to go, where to push and where to stand back, what to learn and what to change.

*Elliott Mower is the creative strategy director of product for **Mediacurrent**, a digital agency that uses open-source technologies to create digital experiences for purpose-built institutions and organizations.*