
THE WEB PORTAL AT FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

The use of Portals is becoming increasingly popular among universities because of the versatility they allow when functioning as the primary web presence to members of each institution. The traditional way of representing a university on the web has been with a relatively basic design that provides access to general information that, while functioning adequately as a guide for one who is just getting acquainted with the school, doesn't convey personalized information or meet other purposes of the web presence. The traditional web site does not make specific information about more in-depth aspects of an institution readily available, requiring the user to sift through search results or use other means to find what he is looking for.

This is where portals come in. They increase the usefulness and effectiveness of obtaining information online dramatically. Portals allow each member of the university's community to customize his own web page, so that the information needed the most is most easily accessible. Beyond mere convenience, this type of system is important because it better communicates information that more than likely would have been missed or overlooked in a standard static format, and as a result stimulates more interaction with the community. In addition to offering information relevant to each user, portals offer information *specific* to each user; that is, grades, class schedules, files, portfolios, and other content that previously costly to track and convey.

TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS

Portals can be broken into two categories, both of which solve several problems in a university setting. The first is customization, which allows users to easily access the general information that they care about. The second is services, which allow students and faculty to easily access personal information.

In the first category (the "general" category), we want to bring personalization to the user. There is a wealth of information for the general public accessible through FSU's web site, but it is often difficult to find. As the work of students and faculty at a research university is often specialized to a specific major or area of study, efficiency would increase if users had easy access only to those topics relevant to them. The portal allows us to move away from the typical homepage and move to a customized area that can lead the user to all of his interests. It replaces the classical homepage and traditional navigation techniques (bookmarks, URLs, and menus) with a homepage containing all of the user's links, interests, and content. For example, instead of following a *home page* →

academics → *undergraduates* → *honors program* path each time she logs in, the honors student will have honors college information on her home page. Because this information is not relevant to a non-honors football scholar, he would have athletic information on his home page instead.

The other category (“personal”) addresses the need of the university to centrally manage information about each user. Up-to-date schedules, financial aid, housing agreements, parking permits, etc. should all be accessible through the internet. The portal should also offer interactive tools to students such as course information, registration, and admissions applications. The benefit of using the portal for these systems is tremendous to everyone involved: users have 24/7 access to tools without leaving their workstations, while the university saves on data entry and communication costs.

The web portal also offers new solutions as a file store for personal and shared reports and other projects. As storage space cost declines, content management systems allow all users to store computer files on servers so they are universally and securely accessible at all times. Again, this increases the efficiency of researchers or students working in groups or on different workstations.

By far the most common solution to the web portal idea is the BlackBoard Academic Suite System. Offering both a course management system for scheduling and class information, as well as a content management system for data storage and retrieval, this customizable system offers a unique set of tools necessary for any large educational institution. BlackBoard, Inc. recently acquired its largest competitor, WebCT. Other online learning portals include OLAT, moodle, and Dokeos, but none are as comprehensive as BlackBoard.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Interface design is absolutely pivotal to a successful portal. It needs to be simple enough to not frustrate or deter the user, but complex enough to allow any level of user to tailor this site to his needs, all the while being visually pleasing. This includes all aspects of the portal; the course management system should make it easy to access courses and information within a course, while the content management system should make it easy to upload, modify, and share files.

The customization and sensitive information contained by definition in a portal system presents many issues, primarily funding and security. A database with information and files from 41,000 students is quite expensive to setup and maintain, but currently the system at FSU is freely accessible to all users. Hackers, troublemakers, and curious users can wreak havoc if precautions are not taken.