



NAGAP

The National Association of
Graduate Admissions Professionals

P E R S P E C T I V E S

A Newsmagazine for Graduate Admissions Professionals

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AS THE LEADER IN GRADUATE ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

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NAGAP 2006 PROMOTIONAL EXCELLENCE AWARD RECIPIENT “WINNING STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE WEB DESIGN”

Regent University School of Psychology and Counseling

By Stephen I. Bruce, Jr., Director of Marketing and Recruitment and Victoria Walker, Web Developer/Instructional Designer

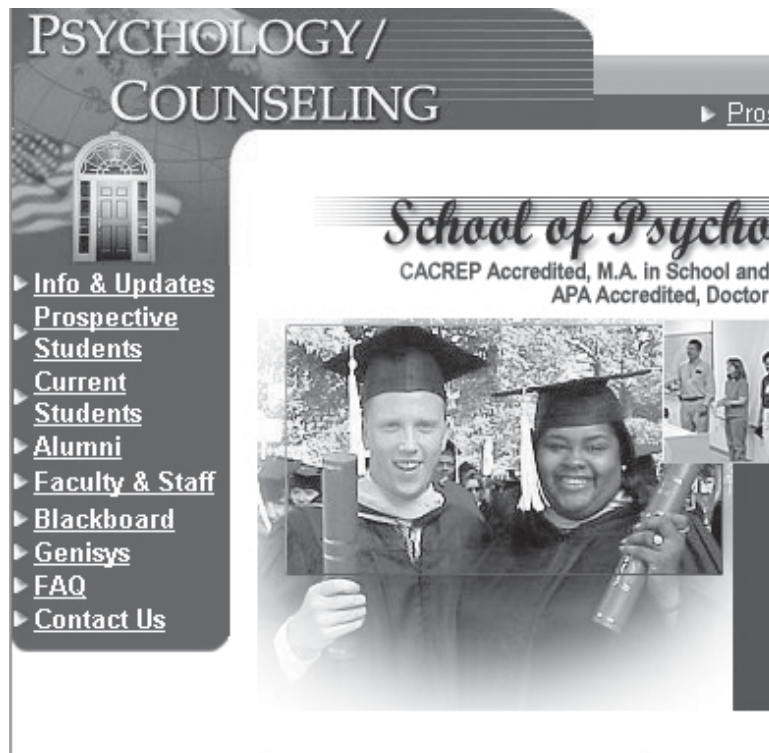
Web Address: www.regent.edu/psychology

When considering the redesign project for our website we had to first identify our end users and their distinct needs as they would interact with the new site. These users included four main audiences: Prospective Students, Current Students, Faculty/Staff, “Friends of” (alumni, partners, peers, colleagues, etc.). These users defined our site design more than the content found in a certain portion of the site. For example, there are elements of interest to a current student that would also benefit a prospective student. So, rather than using a writing style that varied by audience, content would be presented in a clear, concise, and consistent manner, but be compartmentalized so that a user type would have access to all of the information that they might need during their visit to our site.

Our motivation for changing the site was that it had become cumbersome, outdated, and lacked a cohesive design and purpose.

Content was not managed and was frequently added to the site without ensuring that it matched the current tone of the site. Navigation was not intuitive, and information that was of the greatest interest to our audiences was frequently several layers into the site if it could be found at all.

Recognizing this, our desire was to reorganize the site in a way that would acknowledge that there are multiple user types, arrange the information in a more logical manner, and create a look and feel (colors, images, text) that would augment what exists in other school media and apply it consistently throughout the site.



Regent University School of Psychology and Counseling website prior to redesign.

While there are innumerable visible changes to the site, the area that deserves the greatest attention is the care and detail that has been taken in the architecture (coding, optimization techniques, development of consistent templates, use of CSS for design and ease of style updates, etc.) that went

into the redesign. Our school web developer realized that the key to how the user interacted with the site was the construction of the site itself (more on that later).

On the user end, the main navigation was changed to highlight our programs and faculty (our main products) and to position “admissions” as a link to

be considered after the prospective student was informed about our product. Main navigation was applied consistently throughout the site, appearing to the left on the main page, with sub navigation appearing when a main navigation link is selected. On secondary and tertiary pages, the main navigation is still available, but moves to the top of the page to allow room for content specific navigation on the left. For example, if a prospective student clicks on Academics, the navigation menu available on the main page for that portion of the site relates specifically to the academic programs, and so forth throughout the

different layers. While this provides a content specific experience for the user, they can also select from the original main menu within the same site (top menu) instead of having to back out and start all over. Default options like “Home”, “FAQ”, “Site Map”, and “Contact Us” appear on all pages as a failsafe.

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In addition to the site construction and navigation changes, all content and images have been updated both to ensure that they are current and accurately portray the school, but to also match the site to the collateral materials utilized in the school's marketing and admissions efforts, creating an integrated marketing communications system.

One of the biggest changes made was creating a site that could be updated with greater frequency. The old site had become static. A website of the size and complexity of ours (3000+ files) is difficult for any one person to keep current. In designing the new site, specific areas within certain pages were created that would allow for updates to text, images and links by individuals (contributors) other than the web developer. This allows for a more "real-time" update of key information, while also providing security and reliability by restricting access to the actual design elements (templates) of the site. In addition, by using Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) changes that need to be made and appear throughout the site or in certain sectors of the site can be made in one place and each relevant page connected to that template will be updated.

Our web developer conducted the majority of the research used in the re-design. This included evaluation of more than 150 different educational websites from the point of the consumer. By asking questions like "how did I get here" (starting point), "what do I see" (too much information/too little), and "where do I want to go" (navigation) it became quite clear which types of design elements worked, and which did not. Different members of the school staff provided

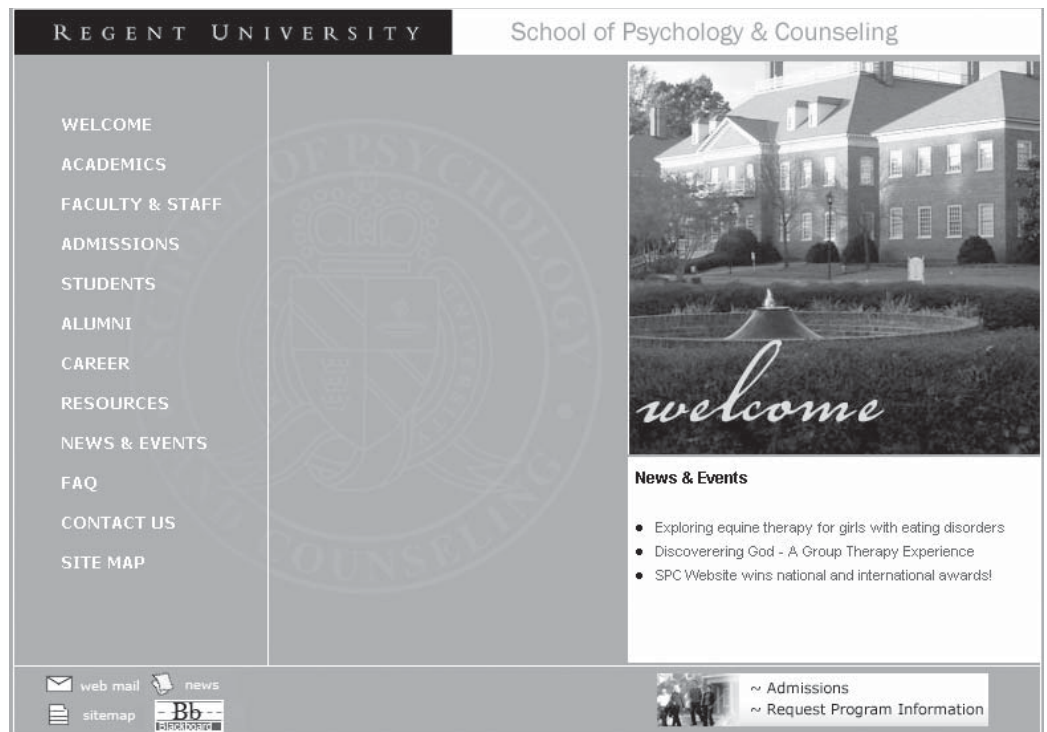
feedback on sites the web developer forwarded as examples of sites that seemed to work well, and the web developer then created a template that incorporated the best elements of those examples while incorporating the areas perceived as necessary to our particular school and/or required by the University. In addition to this, the web developer undertook training to augment her extensive experience in graphic and web design which provided some additional technical expertise that would be necessary in the construction of the site.

The project began in July 2004, and the new site was launched in May 2005. It is important to mention that the new site launched without any areas "under construction". All necessary elements of the site were completed and tested prior to the new site going live. Ancillary or "wish-list" areas of the site were and continue to be developed, but none of the areas under development were/are available to the public while under construction.

A key consideration during the design of the new site was user accessibility/ interoperability. The web developer incorporated recommendations and guidelines of the W3C (World Wide Web Consortium) in the new site design to achieve the objective of having our information available to the end user regardless of the platform/technology they used, and in the way we intended for the information to be presented. Color contrasts, font sizes, alt tags for images, and design layout were all taken into consideration. For example, the text in content areas is designed for users with vision impairments and allows for fonts size increases by user browser specifications or by pressing the ctrl key and using the mouse wheel.

Data available through the university web tracking software (Urchin version 5.0) reveals the following:

(Data provided compares February 2005—prior to launch—to February 2006)



Regent University School of Psychology and Counseling website after redesign.

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NAGAP 2006 PROMOTIONAL EXCELLENCE AWARD RECIPIENT “WINNING STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE WEB DESIGN” *continued*

- Average hits per day have increased 75% (can be misleading if considered by itself, but certainly indicates increased activity)
- Total monthly pageviews have increased by 56.8%
- 404 (File not Found) Errors are down from 67,451 in Feb 2005 to 3700 in Feb 2006
- Sessions (defined by Urchin as a series of hits to your site over a specific period of time by one user) are up 26.5%
- Referrals to our site are up 26.5%
- Referrals from “the big two” (Google and Yahoo) are up 8.5%
- Visits to the alumni pages increased by 616 page views in February 2006 as compared to the same month last year
- The “Apply Now” Feature (leading to the on-line application) was accessed 191 times in February 2005. The same page was accessed 656 times in February 2006, a 243% increase!
- Admissions related pages were requested 35% more in February 2006 than a year ago
- Academic program pages were requested 200% more than a year ago
- Faculty/Staff Pages were accessed 8,747 times in February 2006, vs. 4449 times the same month last year, a 96.6% increase

As evidenced by the previous data, our goal of making information more accessible appears to be working. Also, our desire to position our programs and faculty with greater prominence has been achieved. Separate from the web data but likely related, applications for admission for this Fall are up 19.9%

compared to the same week last year (as of 3-6-06). Anecdotes we have received since the new site launch suggest that users are pleased with the ease of access to frequently needed information.

The new site is almost a year old. We have been pleased with the response by our consumers, and continue to look for ways to refine the information contained on the site and the way in which it is presented. It's hard to remember what

the old site was like because this one is nothing like it. And, the design feature that allows for contributors to update information on an as-needed basis is utilized regularly: the site is truly live. In a way, the project has not ended; it has just entered the next phase. We welcome comments about our new website and our web design process. Please contact Stephen Bruce by email at stepbr@regent.edu.

NAGAP TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY COMING SOON!

In 2007, NAGAP will observe its twentieth anniversary of service to the graduate admissions profession. We would like to mark our anniversary in various ways, particularly starting with some special events at our twentieth conference in Orlando.

But to celebrate our special year, we also need your help. If you have ideas about events you might like to recommend, or special articles in *Perspectives*, or other ways to honor our organization's history, please let us hear about your suggestions.

If you want to assist by writing an article, or helping us plan an event, or just suggesting ideas, please e-mail either John Bury (john-bury@utulsa.edu) or Carolyn Payne (cspayne@iastate.edu).



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