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Carol Shepherd
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SPSU 6035 Information Graphics
SPSU Portal Design and Prototype

SPSU Student Portal Design and Prototype

Community, Courses, Workflow, Resources, and Alerts

Assignment: Playing the role of the client, design a web portal for IID/IDC SPSU students. Assume that the visual aspects of the portal should relate to the current marketing guidelines and the mockup provided by the web committee. Incorporate information that should be made available to students on a daily basis.



Figure 1 : Login

Interactive: The interactive design mockup is available online (<http://carolshepherd.us/assets/SPSU6305/portal/Main.html>). Content mockups are available for the first one or two items in order to convey the type of content to be found in that section. For each section we'll explore and expand the type of information or interactivity envisioned for the final product.

Readings: The definition of portal or dashboard is evolving. Pulling from my own experience, the design provided fits the definition of portal. Dashboards are usually associated with business intelligence and reporting. It would be appropriate to design a dashboard for faculty and administrators to monitor on a daily basis the activity in Vista or to allow for drill-down investigation and historical reporting for student enrolment numbers.

Portals, however, are usually customized entry points into an organization. They can pull together data from disparate systems to provide a unified view to the reader. In the idealized SPSU web world, the student

wouldn't logon to Banner, Vista, and to the departmental website — those stovepipes of information would be aggregated into one cohesive system. Additionally, the new system would pull from systems not provided by SPSU: personal blogs, portfolio sites, and social media.

This prototype does not address non-personalized external feeds into the system such as weather widgets or RSS feeds. There are a plethora of systems such as iGoogle that already perform that function. Our idealized system should produce RSS feeds, Tweets, Facebook updates, or digest emails based on user preferences. Further description of those elements is beyond the scope of this web prototype.



Figure 2 : Customize

Identify: The primary differentiator between a portal and a regular website is that the portal knows you are and something about you. A website, in contrast, might know if you have previously visited but usually can't identify you as a unique visitor. Portals also have an implied level of privacy. Figure 1 shows a logon page and figure two (accessed by clicking on the user's name after login) provides a sampling of custom information settings. The student can provide an avatar ; indicate who she considers to be a part of

SPSU Student Portal Design and Prototype

Community, Courses, Workflow, Resources, and Alerts

their student community; indicate the type of alerts that interest her. A portal isn't useful if it deluges the reader with unnecessary status updates.



Figure 3 : Landing and alerts

Landing: Alerts for new content, Figure 3, are the first stop for the web portal user. Colors (red, yellow, and gray) indicate the priority or severity of the alert. The prototype has unique content for the first two alerts; the other alerts should be styled similarly. The alert categories correspond to the customization options.

The alert content may contain hyperlinks directing the student to other web assets. Workflow alerts should redirect the reader to the next step in a process. Community alerts might lead to an off site blog entry or portfolio project posting.

Branding Assets

In accordance with the marketing standards the design pulls from two of the identity assets provided by the marketing organization:

SPSU Big.eps
SPSU HORNET B&W.eps

Visual Metaphors and Indicators

- Tabs across the top with context indicator
- Vertical scrollbar
- Page curl
- Modal dialog box
- Sliding panel
- Data list
- Rollovers
- Hyperlinks
- Social media badges
- Thumbnail images



Figure 4 : Courses

Courses: An informal survey of student friends indicated that they want to know where they stand in the program and how close they are to their goal of obtaining a certification or graduating with a degree.

The courses tab shows a mix of program catalog information obtained from two department websites com-ingled with transcript information from Banner. All of the courses available within the program are listed. An advanced prototype might show rollovers with leads to course reviews, complete descriptions, assignment

SPSU Student Portal Design and Prototype

Community, Courses, Workflow, Resources, and Alerts

descriptions — should we plan for a formal paper at the end of the course? — and example student work. The prototype uses a sliding panel to scroll the user's view. Colors indicate whether the courses are completed, in progress, or planned. This section could include a timeline that pulls together program requirements and extrapolates a proposed schedule based on projected course offerings. Course planners could use the data provided by students as input into the curriculum planning process.

Resources: Featured in this section is an interactive PDF (embedded as a SWF). Notice the page curls on the bottom left and right; they appear when



Figure 5 : Resources

the mouse hovers over the bottom left and right areas. The feature could be a bit more obvious to a new user; this is the default design produced by InDesign. The prototype shows a sampling of results from link harvesting the IDC and SPSU sites; the purpose isn't to regurgitate content available on the school's websites but to add meaning and context. For example, it isn't obvious that our IDC program is housed in the ECTMA department which is then housed in the School of Arts and Sciences.

Visual Design Specifications

In accordance with the marketing standards documented at <http://spsu.edu/identity/> the portal uses the following colors:

Green:	RGB 0, 62,40
Grey:	RGB 204, 204, 204
Dark Grey:	RGB 77,77,77
Yellow:	RGB 255,196,37
Red:	RGB 172,62,114
Blue:	RGB 95,188,255
Light Green:	Green with 27% opacity
Black:	RGB 0,0,0

The web layout is targeted at a browser window size of 1024px by 768px.

The following fonts, weights, and point sizes are used in the web design:

Futura Hv 36pt
Futura Hv 21pt
Arial (Regular) 21pt
Arial (Bold) 18pt
Arial (Regular) 14pt
Arial (Regular) 12pt

Additionally, the following fonts with varying weights are used in the design of the interactive SWF in order to simulate materials authored by non conforming sources:

Franklin Gothic Medium
Myriad Web Pro

SPSU Student Portal Design and Prototype

Community, Courses, Workflow, Resources, and Alerts



Figure 6 : Community

Community: An informal poll of classmates indicates that the best part of the graduate program is the relationship with other students. The community section, bending toward the constructivist theory of education, attempts to encourage relationships between students.

The selections on the right (inoperative in the prototype) are an attempt to group students along lines of degrees of closeness. Find students in my current courses; find students that I've experienced a course with; last, find students that are in my degree program. I chose to avoid a friend feature because it overlapped Facebook relationships.

Each panel represents a student. Taking a cue from LinkedIn's "what are you working on" the paragraph text section could be generated by a latest tweet or something entered in the customization dialog. This prototype shows thumbnails of student portfolio work (garnered from my own classmates) but it could also reflect the student's avatar.

Social badges are placed at the bottom — yet another candidate for the customization dialog. The prototype shows the badges in gray but the color could change based on whether the student had provided the necessary identification for that social media platform.

Workflow: Simply summarized, if there is a paper or PDF that Donna sends out to a student the electronic form should appear in this section.

The prototype shows a simple graduate petition form — conveniently culled from a recent e-mail. Missing from the prototype is an indication of workflow steps. What happens after the petition is submitted? Can the student continue taking courses even after graduation? What about a second degree in the IID program? While mundane this the most idealistic section of the portal design; it assumes that the organization has the ability to automate and describe the various paper processes found across campus — a rather amusing state of affairs because our school teaches students how to make this sort of automated stuff.



Figure 7 : Workflow

Authoring Tools

- Adobe Illustrator CS5
- Adobe Flash Catalyst CS5
- Adobe InDesign CS5

SPSU Student Portal Design and Prototype

Web Prototype Construction

The design began with brainstorming ideas and researching other portals. University portals weren't readily available to non-students so I used other examples. Surprisingly, MyEpilepsy.com has an award-winning community portal. AT&T wireless has a portal that uses pictures of your cellphones (four on our family plan) to serve as avatars and differentiate phone numbers.

Mindmapping the concepts came next. How to coalesce these ideas into a unified design? My initial design used a campus map and job board; I tossed those in favor of spending time developing unique assets — the community student stream and the interactive course planner.

Now that I had an idea of what to build, I worked on a layout that would hold these components. The layout, begun in Illustrator, incorporated the branding assets that I found on the SPSU marketing site. In a previous

course I encountered technical difficulties with the SPSU specific fonts so I substituted something similar. I freely confess to ignoring the work of the web committee — shades of early 1990's — in favor of a rounder, cartoonish appearance.

Flash Catalyst (FC), a new tool in the Adobe lineup, is intended to bridge the gap between graphic design and software construction. FC can import an Illustrator file to provide the foundation of an interactive web application. The tool has the ability to easily create scroll bars, data lists, scroll panels. I had to work a bit harder to create the tabs using custom components. The tool can accept objects pasted from Illustrator; it even respects the layers.

For the data list you simply need to design a single sample of the repeated item; FC is smart enough to let you enter data in a spreadsheet interface and to change the graphics displayed. The prototype becomes interactive with the addition of states and responses to events such as onClick or onMouseover. The tool produces a Flash movie and the necessary HTML to view the results in a web browser.

In order to mockup the Useful Stuff, I created an InDesign document and exported the contents to a Flash movie — later embedded into the FC project. I tried to create a working PDF using the form tool in Acrobat Pro for the Workflow section. Unfortunately the tool won't generate a Flash movie and FC can't import a PDF.

I enjoyed learning a new tool and exploring the interaction with the traditional design environments.



Figure 8 : FlashCatalyst Design Environment