

Alpha Phi Omega

Transitioning Feedback

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Position: Webmaster

(Please attach any documents, files, fliers, or related material regarding your position along with this worksheet)

1. What was your best experience(s) in this position?

Definitely, having the immense flexibility and variety of opportunities to do what I wanted with the web site was a joy. You can see the changes you make instantly, and you can get quick feedback. You have the opportunity to make changes on the fly, and build upon your past successes to create more useful features. There is just so much that you can do with the web site, that it's a powerful opportunity. You get to exercise your personal vision in a way that benefits dozens of people. And all the skills you learn (both technical and interpersonal) will serve you well into the future. I think of the position as an internship on steroids, because you have an existing product that you get to learn about and refine. In the process, you come to understand the technology and design thinking that went into the product. And furthermore, you're not limited by corporate standards or rigid expectations. It's a very free-flowing process, with give and take. There's a lot of individual opportunity, and chances to prove yourself. Seize the opportunity.

2. What tips could you give your successor to make things smoother for next year?

I feel that my actual accomplishments – the things I added to the web site, and the coding I did – were valuable and served important needs. However, the way I went about planning and implementing changes could have been much better. I have an abrasive personality, and I have strong opinions. It's a good thing in many circumstances, but it's also important to deal carefully with some issues. If anything, you have to adjust the way you act in different circumstances. When you have something you believe in strongly (e.g., I think the web site should have a page on recent updates because it would have these specific benefits...), it's important to be assertive and clear about what you want. At the same time, when you interact with other people you need to be sensitive and careful. Considering and valuing feedback will give other members a more important role in the chapter, and will help craft the finished product (the web site) into a more robust one. Understanding people, ironically, proved more important than the technical skill of Web programming. That's an important life lesson.

3. What is the most effective way to work with other E-board members?

I love email, and email lends itself well to quick messages that you can expand upon. So, for example, if you have a concern with the Membership VP about APO LEADS, you can email him or her about that point and probably get a quick response. Then that response blossoms into a wider conversation. And pretty soon you're getting into

some fundamental and important questions. I strongly advise you to deal with problems and opportunities as soon as they present themselves. If you have a concern, bring it up right away and continue discussing it until it is solved. Dealing proactively with topics of importance to you will make the process easier for those involved, and prevent bigger issues from developing in the future.

4. What did you gain from the position?

Learned a ton about coding. Became skilled in PHP. I also figured out how to navigate and modify MySQL databases. Really, the technical skills you learn if you put a lot of work into this position are going to serve you well. The learning can be difficult, but it was absolutely rewarding. Now I walk away from the position with the skills and the confidence to take on a variety of different programming tasks. I find it to have been a valuable process, and I would gladly do it over again. If I gained nothing else from the position, the joy of discovery and figuring things out for myself was memorable.

5. What did you find most difficult about this position?

Dealing with so much negative, contradictory feedback. Also, being unrecognized for the things I did. It can be frustrating and tiresome to deal with all the complaints. People may ignore your successes and focus on your weak areas. It just happens. Try not to let it get to you. I'm telling you this now because you should know it upfront. People can be whiny and quarrelsome, and demand ridiculous things that wouldn't necessarily benefit the web site. Be levelheaded and calmly explain your side of things. Engage in a productive conversation. And most of all, keep yourself sane. You deserve to have a positive experience in this position. You should learn and build your character as you go along. So make sure you're getting the most of the experience, regardless of what other people may throw at you.

6. How did you utilize the President, Emeritus or other E-board Members? How do you recommend utilizing these people in the future?

Didn't use the emeritus. Linda will be graduating but you can always contact her, because she's a role model and an exemplary leader. She can help you out with a variety of problems.

Worked a lot with rush co-chairs at the beginning of the semester to plan the rush web site. That was a very productive relationship, although it was strained at times. The rush co-chairs and I were at cross purposes sometimes, with different ideas. Navigating those disputes is essential to making a finished rush web site that pleases most people. Also, be sure to stay in touch with the Publicity Chair. That person will play a key role in making the graphics and design themes that you will use for the rush web site. If that person is not particularly dedicated to or involved in the task of creating publicity materials, the task of making fliers and logos will fall on the webmaster and the rush co-chairs. Sometimes that happens, and I suggest you go with it. Make the most of the opportunity and throw out some of your own creative designs. Even if the Publicity Chair is very proactive, you are fully entitled to your opinion, so be sure to share it during the rush theme design process.

Later in the semester, I worked extensively with the philanthropy co-chairs to create the yard sale web site. There were many small details and changes that went into its design, so be conscious of specifics. Whereas rush is mostly an in-person system, where you get to meet people and talk extensively about a wide variety of topics, yard sale information is mostly confined to the web site. So the web site needs to be specific, accurate, and organized. That will make sure that the people who visit are getting the most of their experience.

Also contacted the president regularly to talk about general topics. Stacy will be an important resource to you, because she can bring together different parts of the organization to use them more efficiently. She's basically the central controller, allocating people to certain tasks and making sure people are using their skills effectively. Contact her regularly, because I'm sure she'll be willing to work with you on the project you're currently involved in. Linda was also a great emotional resource for me, because she understood the wider picture of Alpha Phi Omega and could help me put things in context. Since she works regularly with each of the different members of the executive committee, she understands the dynamics and relationships at play.

For rush and yard sale, feel free to reuse any of the resources I created for those events. For example, you can take the basic design of the rush site and modify it to suit your needs. Or, if you want the practice, it is helpful to design a site from scratch. In fact, you can never write too much code from memory. Becoming fluent in the conventions of HTML and PHP without needing a reference manual will help you understand the foundations of the sites and pages you build.

7. What was the best resource you used during your tenure (email, online, peers)?

Feedback from members was incredibly useful. Seriously, develop and maintain good relationships with all the brothers you can. When other people feel they can trust you, they are more willing to offer honest and useful feedback. Constantly ask how people feel about the web site, offer your explanations about features, tell people what you're working on, and maintain communication even if it's not about the web site specifically. Developing an open-minded culture where ideas flow freely will really help you make positive changes. That extends beyond just your position. Encourage the entire chapter to be honest, straightforward, and genuine about their opinions. When every perspective is valued, people will in turn share more helpful tips about the web site.

8. Which committees did you collaborate with that worked well?

I only worked with Communications Committee, which did not work out.

9. Which, if any, committees did you collaborate with that did not work well? How do you recommend improving this relationship?

Working with Communications Committee was a good idea in principle, but it didn't pan out. People in the committee had very little feedback, and most of them didn't care about the web site enough, or didn't know enough about technology, to really provide

valuable feedback. I suggest you create a sub-committee / focus group that discusses problems with the web site and offers suggestions. I kind of did this, but you can do it better if you empower your members to actually do things, and get their hands on some code. That way, you can all learn together. You may actually want to pass out signups for Webmaster Committee at the GBM, so people can sign up for that area specifically. Then, you can plan meeting times of your own where your small group can get together on their schedule. That way, you can have a more relaxed and open-ended environment that's more useful to you, and you're not wasting time on irrelevant Comm matters.

10. *How did you utilize your committees to further your goals? How did you encourage Actives or Pledges to get involved?*

I encouraged people to get involved in designing the web site, but got little feedback. It might help to offer incentives. You can work with Eric Chao to provide membership points for people who design graphics for the web site or provide repeated, valuable feedback. And people who edit the code themselves could also receive a point. Any way to incentivize contributions should help your goals.

11. *What were your goals coming into the position? How did you accomplish them or how did they change?*

I was focused from the beginning on making the web site more useful and usable for people. I think I succeeded in that regard, simplifying and clarifying the navigation and adding useful features. It's always important to keep your end user in mind, because they are the ones who are going to benefit from the changes, and they deserve your utmost effort.

12. *Please list and describe the projects that you were working on that you would like to see continue.*

Making the web site a replacement for the master doc. This is an important project that's actually not terribly difficult. You just have to make sure the calculation of credit and hours is accurate, and that the features from the master doc are available on the web site. I got started with this with weights for each signup, which determine how much credit the person gets for that event. The weight serves as a multiplier – so a weight of 2.0 on an event worth 2 hours will give that signup a total hours count of 4 hours. If someone flakes and gets a -0.5 weight, they will be credited -1 hour in this case. To expand the credit tracking features, one of your key goals should be to bring the table of events for each type to the web site. I'm talking about the type-specific pages on the master doc. So, for Fellowship events on the master doc, there's a page that lists the event names as the header row in the spreadsheet. Then, down the left side, it lists the names of all the members. And the individual cross-section cells, where header row and side list meet, you see how much credit that person gets for that event, if any. Bringing that to the web site wouldn't be too difficult, and would be very useful. If you're at all confused about what it should look like, just copy the master doc exactly when you create the features on the web site. Then you can play around and improve it. Small feature additions can come later. The key in the short term is to make the functionality robust.

Also, you should work on optimizing the navigational process for users. See what pages users click on the most and what is most important to them. Then, present those options at the forefront so people have them at their fingertips. The key is to design the navigation with the user in mind. Be sure to check out the visit counts for the various different pages on the web site, and make sure the most-visited pages are polished. The event listing page and the individual event pages are going to be the most visited, so I worked hard on improving their functionality and design. From there, work on making the smaller pages more useful, so people start using them more. Every page has potential. It's just a matter of making the design pop and the features work well together. Here is the page listing the hit counts for different pages on the web site. It takes a while to load but will prove a useful resource.

http://www.apousc.org/hit_admin.php

13. Please list and describe the projects that you would like to see started.

Normalizing the database – This is a big one that I only briefly touched on. Basically, the problem with the current database is that it's not designed in the most optimal way. You can read all about normalization online, but the basic idea is that you break tables in the MySQL database up into the smallest possible components. For example, instead of having a massive events table in the database, you can have a main events table and several smaller supporting tables. Let me give you an example: On the events table, you should list the event name and date. But you probably shouldn't list the event type. Why? Because events can have more than one type. So the event types can be stored in another table. In the event type table, you can list the event ID number, and next to that, list the event type. You can have multiple entries for every event ID. So one entry would say, event 464 is type 2. And another entry would say, event 464 is type 6. This allows you more flexibility, so you're not stuck with (for example) one type for each event. Furthermore, in this case you would have a third table that lists the definitions for the event types. It would list the event type ID in one column, and another column would actually spell out the name of the event type. So sample entries would be 1, Service / 2, Fellowship / 3, Interchapter. Why is this preferable? First, it allows you to use numbers to refer to the event type, which saves space in the database (speed is important). And second, if you want to change the meaning of "event type number 2," you can just edit the 2, Fellowship entry and the change will be propagated throughout the system. So, if you wanted the Fellowship type to become the Membership type, you can just change the name, and the web site will display the new type instantly. Normalization helps ensure your data is stored correctly, and it makes the relationships between different tables more clear.

14. Were there any projects that were tried during your term or prior that failed? If so, why? Should they be tried again? How can they be more successful?

Re-designing the web site went very poorly. I'm not sure that my design skills were up to the level of making fundamental changes to the web site, and thus there was a lot of backlash. People were dissatisfied at the loss of a lot of the vibrancy of the old web site design. They felt the new design was very bland and colorless, and I kind of agree.

There is definitely huge potential for a re-design, because the web site doesn't look great yet. If you decide to go that route, be sure to brief members on changes before they happen and solicit tons of feedback. Have a really polished design before you go changing things randomly. Just respect the process of design and make sure you are thorough and thoughtful in your planning.

15. *What is the most important lesson you have learned in this position?*

Learn to take the feedback you get from other people. Don't take it personally, embrace what they have to say, sort through all the opinions to find the ones that really matter to you. Then check in with the people who made the suggestions to make sure they are satisfied with the direction the web site is going. Sometimes you will have to backtrack on things you implemented, and that's okay. The key is to be making steady progress in improving the web site over time.

16. *Is there anything you wish you knew when you started the position?*

How to deal with people. I emphasize that so much because other people can play a big role in how smoothly your tenure goes. Building strong relationships with your brothers is essential.

17. *Do you think the active chapter knows of your position and the services you provide? How could this be done better?*

I think a lot of the time, the role of the webmaster goes under-recognized and under-appreciated. It's very helpful to present slides at EBM and GBM so people know what you're doing. Otherwise, they may be overwhelmed by all the changes and get frustrated at you, or alternatively they may not notice what's going on and miss out on some really cool new features. Take ownership of what you make, and be proud.

Resources

Web Page

I created a page on the web site with information about being webmaster

http://apousc.org/webmaster_info.php

It has a lot of helpful introductory tips as well as longer-term ideas.

Please update it as you go along in the position!

Then it can be a helpful resource for future webmasters.

Private Information

I will email you the passwords and such for the APO FTP, GoDaddy, MySQL, and other accounts.

Please do not share this information with anyone else unless they specifically need it!

If you ever need a password and you're not sure if I gave it to you already, just email me.

Personal Contact Information

My phone number is (425) 495-4696.

My email is caseypenk@gmail.com.

Feel free to contact me any time! I'm here to help.