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What to Do (and Not Do) When Redesigning Your University Website



**Your university website might be the only interaction a prospective student or donor has with your institution—which is why it’s so important that the site is meeting the needs of your various audiences.** And the reality is that every three to five years a website becomes outdated due to constant developments in the world of digital marketing, information architecture, and user experience design. That’s why it’s all the more critical that when the time comes to redesign your university’s website that you do it right.

Of course, redesigning a university website is a massive and complex undertaking, one that should take many months. And although we surely can’t cover all that’s involved in such a large initiative in this short space, here are a few higher-level tips to keep in mind as you get to work.



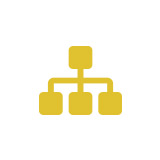
**Find a good digital design and/or development partner.** This might depend on how large your budget is, but since it’s often a high-priority initiative, the institutional website is typically worth the investment of resources. If you work with a design or development partner, it’s crucial to do your homework and make sure you find the right partner(s). For one, review their work portfolios closely to confirm that the agencies you’re considering have higher education experience. Also, ask them if they would be willing to share contact info for former clients so that you can reach out to those clients and inquire about their experience. Have your core marketing team meet with their team to get a sense of how you will mesh and what a collaborative partnership might look like as well. Don’t rush this step—make sure that the design and/or development partner you select is truly a good fit. Realizing you aren’t happy with a partner after you’re already six months into the project and owe them tens of thousands of dollars is not a situation you want to find yourself in.



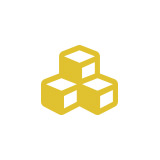
**Conduct in-depth user research.** Whether it’s interviewing prospective students and parents or using a platform like [Usertesting.com](http://usertesting.com/), it’s critical that you understand the needs, challenges, and expectations of your audiences. What if prospective students don’t understand terms like “adult degree completion programs” that you plan to boldly include in your main menu? What if most students are curious about scholarship information that you had planned to remove from the site? Of course, this kind of research is a major step and can require a lot of time and effort. However, it’s worth doing what you can to make sure you’re presenting the right content in the right format to best meet your various audiences’ needs.



**Audit and eliminate unnecessary content.** Redesigning a website affords a good opportunity to remove outdated information like old syllabi and defunct student club pages. When redesigning your website, intend to eliminate all outdated or unnecessary content that doesn’t ultimately serve your audiences. Every single page on your website should correlate with a larger goal, whether that’s providing prospective students with financial aid info or informing donors how they can support the university. If content isn’t helpful or important to your many audiences, then it’s only distracting them. A smaller and cleaner website is always better than a bloated and clunky one.



**Work in conjunction with other campus departments and offices.** A university website often has dozens of stakeholders invested in its content. This is perhaps one of the most difficult steps of a university redesign, but a very important one. If possible, meet with all major departments and offices to work with them on their respective areas to make sure the content is serving your audiences. It might mean having tough conversations with a faculty member or director of admissions to convince them that certain content is not necessary or helpful, but it will also give them the opportunity to voice their concerns and ideas to you. This is where it’s also helpful to clearly articulate your intentions by referring to best practices, user testing findings, or analytics reports.



**Don’t start from scratch.** Most university websites already have helpful and valuable content. Even if you’re redesigning a website as part of launching a new brand, there is likely still a lot of content you can re-use, even if it has to be tweaked a little. Maybe you have copy from a brochure or landing page that can be repurposed and added to the website? Perhaps you have an Instagram account featuring captivating photography that you can pull onto the homepage? You will most likely have to produce new content when redesigning a website, but audit the content you already have—both online and in print—and think through how you can use some of it and save time and resources.



**Tap into your student body.** The work of migrating content from one content management system to another, tagging every photo with certain keywords, or writing descriptive copy can be a time-intensive and monotonous endeavor. The good news is you can temporarily employ student interns to help with some of this work. Not only can they offer you a pair of hands, but you’ll be working with a group of students who might have some great ideas worth adopting into the new website.



**The launch is only the beginning.** It’s easy (and certainly understandable!) to think that once you launch your new website—after months of effort—that you can sit back and relax. Of course, you want to celebrate the launch. But your website isn’t something to be neglected until you’re ready to redesign it again in a few years. Rather, it’s a “living and breathing” part of your marketing strategy that you should constantly be revisiting. By regularly running analytics reports, conducting new user interviews, and collaborating with stakeholders across campus, you can continue making iterations to your website so that it’s ever more engaging, compelling, and helpful to your various audiences.

At 5° Branding, we have refined a web development process for colleges and universities that walks our clients through each step of the process—empowering and equipping schools with bold new websites.

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