**Proposal for Online Student Support Website**

**Overview / Executive Summary**

This proposal outlines a plan for building a support website for students involved in online learning at USFSP. The proposed site will serve students enrolled in fully-online degree programs as well as those taking one or more online courses as part of their studies -- in other words, virtually every student at USFSP.

The goal is to create a comprehensive, accessible, personalized resource that enables student success. The recommendations that follow are based on brainstorming meetings, background research and related efforts conducted in Summer 2014.

**Part 1: Purpose, Background & Audiences**

*Purpose & Background*

Students who take online courses at USFSP have the information and tools they need to complete their studies. However, these resources and services are spread across many systems. They are presented in different, sometimes inconsistent, ways. The result: Students encounter various roadblocks and frustrations.

The portal we propose to build will remove these hurdles by providing a personalized, easy-to-use online hub. Students will use the portal to track key information more quickly and easily. We will consolidate data from multiple sources and emphasize a visual presentation with progress bars, graphs and other intuitive elements. At a glance, students will be able to tell whether they are on track to complete registration, orientation, advising, and other key processes.

Incorporating information from multiple sources, including DegreeWorks, OASIS, Canvas and more, allows us to enhance data already available to students by)

1. streamlining content and drawing attention to the most important information
2. providing a comprehensive, bird’s eye view of an online student’s status at the University
3. optimizing data from sources that are currently not mobile-friendly, such as content from DegreeWorks, and presenting the information in a manner that students can conveniently view on a phone or tablet

*Note: Care will be taken develop a system in which those with disabilities will have access to equivalent information presented in the visual progress bars, and/or that common screen readers will be able to announce the content.*

*Target Audiences*

Critical to our goals is the construction of a system that supports students throughout their academic journeys at USFSP. To that end, the portal we design will provide assistance to the following groups:

1. prospective students interested in understanding the online learning experience at USFSP
2. students who have been admitted to the University but who have not yet commenced their studies
3. enrolled students of all levels, including both undergraduate and graduate students, working toward a degree, whether (a) in a fully online degree program, (b) taking one or more online courses or (c) taking one or more hybrid courses

Although we do not consider them a primary audience, we also anticipate that **support personnel**, including academic advisors, professors and librarians, will benefit from this new resource. **Faculty and staff** are not an intended audience for this portal; their training and professional development needs should be addressed elsewhere.

**Part 2: Assumptions & Functional Requirements**

*Assumptions*

The proposed portal has been conceived with the following assumptions in mind:

1. **The site should assist students in all aspects of their online learning experience as a convenient but powerful alternative to current methods. Students must have access to this information 24/7.**
2. **We will account for all the aspects of the online learning experience, aligning the technology to extant offices, and simultaneously dovetailing USFSP assets to SACS requirements where possible.** Eight critical areas have been identified:
   1. About Online Learning at USFSP
   2. Orientation
   3. Registration
   4. Advising
   5. Financial Aid
   6. Research & Study
   7. Technology Support
   8. Taking classes and Exams
3. **The purpose of the site is neither to recreate the functionality of existing systems nor simply link to them but rather somewhere in the middle.** In this regard, it will be both a portal and an endpoint. We will both provide information and help students accomplish certain tasks. **A key goal is to work with other content providers/maintainers to maximize the effectiveness of their resources.**To this end, we will identify key links for the initial launch that will eventually become endpoints unto themselves. One example is the OASIS-driven registration process. In the beginning, we will provide a link to the page to add and drop classes, with some helper text to assist students. This will allow us to immediately assist students by providing a roadmap to essential functions.  
     
   However, we will also consider a more elaborate approach in which we “recreate” the registration process on the portal by scraping data from OASIS. This “endpoint” approach will provide distinct advantages, for example, by making the registration process mobile-friendly, but it will also require a significant investment of time and, in many cases, coordination with other groups in campus. Additional ongoing support demands is another consideration.
4. **We will survey what resources we have now and then evaluate their effectiveness for online students.** However, we will assume that we will work within the strengths and limitations of all existing systems.
5. **The spring deadline is firm, and therefore the site scope needs to be commiserate.** To that end, we envision a platform where functionality will be established from day one, but the underlying technology will change as we coordinate with stakeholders, process owners, and responsible organizations to integrate data into the platform.

*Functional/Technical Requirements*

We have identified some important technical requirements. We will:

* host the site on a library-provisioned server
* use WordPress as the basic platform
* program additional functionality with PHP and JavaScript, as applicable
* integrate as closely as possible with third-party systems via a combination of web scraping and access to official APIs.
* consider real-time communications tools, such as Google Chat or Oohlala.
* examine all relevant social media integrations.
* emphasize the visual presentation of data.
* look for opportunities to personalize content.

**Part 3: What Others Have Done**

In an effort to understand how other universities have solved the same problems we seek to remedy with our portal, we reviewed websites from schools across Florida. We also considered a range of other support portals from universities and colleges across the country. This section summarizes our findings.

Overall, we discovered a wide variety of approaches. There was little consistency in the scope, structure or sophistication of the support portals that we encountered. Many of the portals we reviewed were mostly or entirely public. A few were only accessible to registered (and logged in) users.

One recurring theme was to offer different portals or websites for different audiences. Common audience groups were undergraduate, graduate, freshmen, transfer students, veterans, and international students.

We were surprised at how many third party applications were involved. Outsourcing made sense, due to sophistication of any application required to safeguard the sensitive, personal information of the students, and the requirement to handle the information securely. However, it also raised issues of one technology being able to shake hands with another, preserving the critical personal information all the while.

A few universities employed ombudsmen, which we thought was a great idea. It was apparent by visiting some sites that one hand did not know what the other was doing, because the “owners” of the different processes were in silos, and were unaware of the impact that each had on the others’ processes and, therefore, on the student experience. An ombudsman kept processes united simplifying the process for the student.

Several universities used a form of chat technology to provide on-the-spot assistance to those who were “lost.” We found there was some merit to the idea of using a chat system. In a sense, a “chat” system is a technology that allowed some of the advantages of an ombudsman (a student could be routed to the proper location of information within a site) without necessarily incorporating the expense of a dedicated, high-profile position. Several organizational representatives, already hired by the university, could monitor the chat and respond appropriately if they saw a question arise that dealt with their area of responsibility.

However, we also took note of the disadvantages, including the cost of the technology, and the added workload of chat duties to those already tasked with other responsibilities. Most importantly, however, we felt that as the platform is meant to provide information on a 24/7 basis, the chat experience, active only when properly-trained or paid personnel were available to man the chat, would not be a consistent experience for the platform.

**Part 4: Critical Design Decisions**

Although many specific aspects of the portal have not yet been defined -- and must be informed by a range of stakeholders -- we have determined several features as a result of our planning and brainstorming. These are outlined below.

*Content Sources*

The support portal will incorporate three kinds of data:

1. **General information about being an online student at USFSP.** We will gather this content from the University’s website. Where applicable, we will supplement existing information by consulting with key stakeholders on campus.
2. **Student-specific data.** This information will come from various third-party sources, including Canvas and DegreeWorks. We will scrape these data or access them via an API but not store them. This will ensure the information students see via our portal is current. We also will uphold students’ privacy by not storing sensitive information on this new website. (We will store students’ NetIDs, but only in an encrypted format.)
3. **Student-generated data.** In the process of using the support portal, students may generate a certain amount of original data that we will store. We will limit what students are able to enter by providing drop down lists, checkboxes and other predetermined options.

*Content Possibilities*

Based on the sections identified in the Assumptions section, we have identified content that could be included to improve the utility of the portal:

1. **a list of classes the student is currently enrolled in**, with links to access those classes in Canvas
2. **A combined academic/course calendar**. By integrating critical entries from both the USFSP academic calendar and the Canvas class calendar, we better position students to recognize key deadlines that will affect their success.
3. **integration with the Canvas “Conversation” system**, which allows students to send and receive messages with instructors and classmates

*Access Levels*

To support students at different phases of their studies, our system will provide for three different levels of access.

At the first level, anyone can browse the portal and glean information about online learning at USFSP. No login would be required. This is meant to serve as a platform by which a prospective student may explore freely. Parents, friends, and potential classmates would be free to explore the same information, and discuss this information with the prospective student, thus enabling a support system of family and friends.

At the second level, a Portal ID (PID) is generated for the student in order to personalize information important to the student’s path through his or her chosen academic program. Anyone can access the system at this level, regardless of whether they have a NetID. This personalized information will enable the platform to guide the student in a targeted manner to complete the USFSP orientation and registration process. A progress bar will be visible, with the goal of completing all steps necessary to obtain a NetID. Receipt of a NetID implies that the second level has been completed, and is ready to progress to the third and final level.

At the third level, the student must have a NetID, and the student will receive a new progress bar, leading them to graduation. The look and feel of the experience will be similar to that of the second level, but much more comprehensive and personal. We anticipate that a student, having gone through the second level platform, will understand the signposts displayed on the progress bar, and will also understand its importance as he/she progresses through the academic program. In other words, we have essentially “trained” the student how to navigate the academic system in second level, and is ready to focus on academics learning after graduating to the third level platform.

To summarize, each phase builds on the previous one while providing more comprehensive layers of personalization. A tiered system has the advantage of “training” the student to use the “progress bar” system in level two, without penalty to the student’s academic progress. By the time the student has successfully attained a NetID and has entered phase three, the student will be familiar with the tools that enable him/her to track academic requirements necessary for graduation.

Here is another, slightly more technical way of understanding these levels:

1. **A student comes to the portal without a NetID or Portal ID.** They can browse the portal and access basic information, or they can create a Portal ID. This Portal ID (PID) will be advertised as a way to target information that is relevant to the degree. It will allow us to filter and prioritize content based on the individual needs of the student. We will do this in two ways:
   1. By tracking how the student uses the portal after logging in with a PID.
   2. By reacting to the responses students provide to a sign-up survey that must be completed when a PID is requested.
2. **A student comes to the portal without a portal ID but with a NetID.**
   1. We allow students with Net IDs to login to the portal. There is no need to assign a portal ID. We require Net ID students to complete the same sign up form so we can capture that information and tie it to their portal account.
3. **A student who previously created a Portal ID now has a NetID and wants to tie the two together.**
   1. We allow students to merge the two together. If a student has created and logged in with a PID but has not yet connected a NetID, we show a prominent prompt somewhere on the site (upper-right corner, for example). This prompt says that the NetID has not been supplied, provides background on what the NetID is, and allows the student to enter her or his NetID username/password to link the NetID account.
   2. We can periodically redirect users to a page when they come to the site that asks them whether they have a NetID that they want to link.
4. **A student comes to the portal with a NetID or a PID that was later linked to a NetID.**
   1. In this scenario, the student can log in directly with their NetID. They can also log in with their original PID.
   2. The login form consists of a single username/password combination. We prompt students to enter a NetID or PID. We provide help text explaining what each is. We provide a link to create a PID for students who don’t have either login credential.

In this manner, the login states include:

1. Not Logged In (Level 1). Limited personalization, no progress bar.
2. Logged In – Unlinked NetID (Level 2). Some personalization, restricted progress bar.
3. Logged In – Linked NetID (Level 3). Full personalization, unrestricted progress bar.

*Key Components of the “Dashboard”*

A dashboard that shows an online student her or his info at a glance will incorporate the following features:

Proposed Login Levels to Work Toward for Customization.

Informational only (nothing login-specific)

Choose Role (To filter what information is shown, prioritized)

Custom Login (WP-based, dedicated account)

Scrapped Single-Sign On (Prototype in progress; probably connects to WordPress site)

Single-Sign On Login (To be explored)

Possible Dashboard Components

* Progress Bar(s)
* GPA, classification (freshman, sophomore), credits attained
* “This Semester” panel, with a list of currently-enrolled in courses, etc.

**Part 5: Relevant Organizational Units**

As success of this platform depends on integration with current USFSP organizations, we intend to work with these organizations on the platform. These are the University groups who currently provide support of one form or another to our online students:

* **Records & Registration** (Linda Crossman)
* **Academic Advising** (Joan Eldridge)
* **Cashier’s Office** (727-873-4107)
* **The Nelson Poynter Memorial Library** (Carol Hixson)
* **Arts & Sciences** (Frank Biafora/Susan Toler)
* **Business** (Gary A. Patterson, Alison Watkins)
* **Education** (Bill Heller, Lyman Dukes)
* **Office of Graduate Studies** (Donna Knudsen)
* **Campus Computing Help Desk** (Gavin Peacock)
* **Financial Aid, Scholarships & Veterans Services** (727) 873-4128
* **Academic Success Center** (CeCe Edwards)
* **Student Disability Services** (Barry McDowell)

**Part 6: Ongoing Support Needs**

In general, what kind of ongoing support is needed for the site is an important ongoing issue. We can design the platform in such a way that minimal support is needed, but that may mean curtailing certain features. The types of support needed include technical, content, administrative, logistical, and security/access. In terms of technical needs, this needs to be monitored, and when necessary, update scraping code to reflect any substantive changes to external systems.

**Part 7. What We Need To Know and How We Plan to Find Out**

We have a broad sense of the kinds of support that will be most helpful to online students at USFSP. But we need further clarity to understand the specific tools and content that should receive priority. We need to know what the pain points are for students as they progress through their academic programs so we can remove them where possible.

We anticipate three kinds of data collection:

1. **Interviews with support staff and other key stakeholders.** We plan to talk with the groups identified in Part 5 of this proposal about how they would like their departments represented on the portal. We would also like to determine what, in general, each division sees as most important to ensuring online student success. Identifying specific information and systems that we might incorporate should be one outcome of these conversations. We anticipate conducting these interviews over a two-week period.
2. **Surveys and, in some cases, interviews with students.** We will ask students involved in online learning to complete a brief survey. This questionnaire will gauge their experiences throughout the process of learning online at USFSP. We’ll assemble a list of processes (which may cut across various departments) that students undertake (registration, for example). Then, we’ll present that list as part of a survey to online students and ask them to rate how much friction they presently experience completing the task. (We will also include open-ended text box for additional comments.) An example survey question follows:  
     
   *For each of the following tasks, indicate how easy or difficult you have found the process to be:  
     
   1.* ***Registering for online classes***
   1. ***Very easy.*** *I’ve never had any issues.*
   2. ***Easy.*** *I’ve had a few problems.*
   3. ***Difficult.*** *I’ve had some problems.*
   4. ***Very difficult.*** *I’ve had many problems.*
3. **Analysis of existing data.** Lastly, we will examine existing data for clues about how to improve the online learning experience. This will include a review of previously-conducted surveys and an audit of existing technical systems, especially third-party systems like OASIS and Canvas