**Overview**

This proposal outlines a plan for building a support website for students involved in online learning at USFSP.

**Section I. Overview/Proposed Report**

**Purpose**

Students involved with online courses at USFSP currently have all the information and tools they need to complete their studies successfully. However, because this content and these services are spread across many systems and presented in different (and sometimes conflicting) ways, students encounter various roadblocks and frustrations. The student portal we propose to build will remove these hurdles by providing a central, personalized, easy-to-understand hub.

Students will be able to track key components much more quickly and easily, as the information from multiple sources will be consolidated and presented visually in the form of progress bars. At a glance, students will be able to tell whether they are on track to complete registration, orientation, advising, and more.

By incorporating information from multiple sources such as DegreeWorks, OASIS, Canvas, and more, we can build on data already available to students by:

1. Streamlining content and drawing attention to the most important data
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 cellphone or tablet.

Note: Care will be taken to ensure that 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**

This is a portal for students involved with online learning at USFSP. This includes the following groups:

1. Students who are involved in a fully online degree program.
2. Students who are taking one or more online courses.
3. Students who are taking one or more hybrid courses.
4. Those who are enrolled on campus not yet taking online classes but considering doing so.

**Target Points of Support**

Critical to our goals is the construction of a system that supports students throughout their academic careers. 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. Students of all levels, including both undergraduate and graduate students, working toward a degree.

Note that students will not be the only beneficiary of a platform that organizes information from diverse sources and presents it in an easy-to-understand format. Support personnel, including academic advisors, professors and librarians, will also benefit from this new resource.

Also note that faculty and staff are not the intended audience for this portal; their training and professional development needs should be addressed elsewhere.

**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 to his/her chosen academic program. 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 next and final level, the third level. In effect, the experience that a student goes through in the Second level serves as a kind of “training” environment, but with a safety net, before progressing on to the Third level, in which the student launches fully into his/her academic program.

At the Third level, the student is expected to have a NetID, 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.

**Section II. Assumptions & Functional Requirements**

**A. Assumptions**

1. The site should assist students in all aspects of their online learning experience, as a convenient, but powerful, supplement to the current process. The student will be able to access this information 24/7, thus making the process extremely convenient.

2. This experience provides a possible top-level navigational structure for the site. The intention is to align the technology to extant offices, simultaneously dovetailing USFSP assets to SACS requirements where possible:

**About Online Learning at USFSP**

**Orientation**

**Registration**

**Advising**

**Financial Aid**

**Research & Study**

**Technology Support**

**Taking classes and Exams**

Looking at these navigational structures a little more, some important facets that would be included under the above major areas are the following:

**a. A list of classes currently enrolled in, with links to access those classes in Canvas.**

**b. 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.

**c. Integration with the Canvas “Conversation” system, which allows students to send and receive messages with instructors and classmates.**

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 for this technology will change as we coordinate with stakeholders, process owners, and responsible organizations to integrate data into the platform.

**B. Functional Requirements:**

The platform for the site should be a library-hosted WordPress site. The platform will be enhanced with customization to take advantage of extant technologies, and to be able to integrate with outsourced applications, and/or be able to connect with Degree Works, OASIS, Canvas, and more in order to take complicated, convoluted information and be able to present it in an easy-to-understand visual presentation.

We are considering additional Communications/Information tools Possibilities, such as creating a Q&A feature, such as the Facebook group that accomplishes some of this now, or third party chat possibilities, such as Google Chat or Oohlala. At this time, however, we feel we can offer a better deal than chat, because the platform would provide 24/7 information, and provide a more “official” channel than one on Facebook, which is a great resource, but does not always carry accurate information.

**Section III. What Others Have Done**

There was a wide variety of approaches, but a common thread was to separate the portals by audience. Common audience groups were undergraduate, graduate, freshmen, transfer students, veterans, and international students. Although in the early stages of investigation we considered portals for professional development courses, we found that typically, such portals were not bundled together with portals for traditional 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, and therefore, made the process easier on the student.

Several universities used a form of chat technology to provide on-the-spot assistance to those who were “lost”. We thought this was a terrific idea. Any website dealing with providing a roadmap through an academic career is a complicated one. The information may be out there, but knowing how to get to the information is more challenging than generally recognized by those already familiar with the system. In a sense, a “chat” system is a technology that allowed a portion of the “advantage” of an ombudsman (a student could be routed to the proper location of information within a site) without necessarily incorporating the expense of a high-profile position of an ombudsman. 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.

Note: Although we found quite a few universities used chat technology, we need to make note of the disadvantages, including of course the cost of the technology, and adding the workload of chat responsibilities 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.

**Section IV: 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 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)**

**Section V: Key components of the envisioned 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.

Combined WordPress Account / NetID Login System

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 personalize the experience. It will allow us to filter and prioritize content based on the individual needs of the student. We will do this in two ways:

a. By tracking how the student uses the portal after logging in with a PID.

b. 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.

a. 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.

a. 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.

b. 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.

a. In this scenario, the student can log in directly with their NetID. They can also log in with their original PID.

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.

Login states include:

1. Not Logged In – (Limited personalization, no progress bar)

2. Logged In – Unlinked NetID (Some personalization, restricted progress bar)

3. Logged In – Linked NetID (Full personalization, unrestricted progress bar)

**Section VI. Ongoing Support Needs, Possibilities**

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.

**Section VII. What We Need To Know and How We Plan to Find Out**

We need to know what the pain points are for students as they progress through their academic programs, and remove them where possible. We will find out through surveys, incorporating the following components:

1. Conduct surveys through specific classes

2. Demographics

3. Experience with online learning

4. best/worst part of the experience is?

5. Are there tool that would help the regular experience that could occur online? (Online supplements to classroom-based experience.)

We will assemble a list of processes (which may cut across various departments) that students undertake (registration, for example). Then, 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 of a survey question follows:

*For each of the following tasks, indicate how easy or difficult you have found the process to be:*

***Registering for classes***

*Works perfectly, relatively easy, i’ve had some problems, i’ve had many problems, impossible to use*

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