

Colorado College
Information architecture

ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS: General IA & Content Recommendations

Academic department and program sites are a crucially important source of information for prospective students— and one of CC’s biggest recruitment opportunities. One thing we know about prospective students— especially top prospects— is that they pay much more attention to academic department sites than to more conventional “marketing” pages. They may have one department in mind, but often visit several to get a general sense of the faculty, courses, student research and opportunities, etc.

A devoted student of German will come to the CC site with only one destination in mind— the German department. In fact, she’s even more likely to simply Google “Colorado College German,” and her first experience of anything CC-related will be on the German department homepage. If that page isn’t effective— or doesn’t provide an easy pathway to continue learning about CC—the student’s very likely to move on.

If it’s not easy (or possible!) to get from one department to another, this makes a particularly poor impression to faculty as well as students. In fact, we heard many comments about this from current CC students; they read the varying quality and unpredictable organization of CC departmental sites as a sign of disorganization, rather than diversity or distinction.

We believe the current departmental differences actively undermine CC’s student recruitment efforts. And they run the risk of baffling your current students as they explore their course and major/minor options.

The current situation— in which one departmental site is “copyrighted” 2000, some have Web addresses outside coloradocollege.edu, and one doesn’t even include the College’s name at all— has arisen from a lack of available support resources from the College. In the absence of clear guidance or assistance, departments have gone their own way; not all the results are subpar, as some departments have developed quite nice websites. But the disconnection between them is a real problem, and now that the tools and resources will be available, we believe it’s immensely important that CC departments be brought into the general institutional fold.

This definitely does **not** mean that all departments should look the same, or be boxed into a confining “template” with no personality. Quite the contrary: as primary destinations for prospective students and faculty in their areas of study, academic sites should have considerable leeway to present themselves as they see fit, making photography, style, and layout choices that best suit their needs and personalities. The English department might want to present podcasts from poetry readings; the biology department might want to post a photo gallery of the herbarium. A good content management system (and a thoughtful content strategy) should accommodate all needs of this nature.

Some standardization will be needed to make the departmental Web sites work better for CC. And there are some basic best practices that apply to all kinds of pages. In general though, departmental content managers should call most of their own shots and the personality of a department should be easy to read at a glance.

The goal should be to produce friendly, well-written, consistently organized, richly dynamic academic department and program sites that benefit all constituents. On top of this, the sites should feel clean and uncluttered; all information should be appropriately compartmentalized and presented, easy to quickly digest.

General Recommendations

1. **All academic departments and programs should be encouraged to adopt a single yet flexible design, IA, and content structure.**

Currently, CC’s department and program sites fall along a wide spectrum of content presentation with a few using a standard template. The IA nomenclature differs from site to site and similar content is found under many different categories.

As we mention above, prospective (and current) students flip between departments and programs when comparing colleges and universities, deciding which courses to take, looking into the resources in various departments, trying to decide on a major, etc. Because of this, the information on all of these departmental and program homepages should be succinct, engaging, and similarly organized. It should be easy to compare and contrast options and to find the same information on each site.

- a. **Instituting a standard yet flexible IA for academic departments and programs.**

Department and program navigations should use a common (yet flexible) nomenclature and link order, and the sites ought to offer similar information as a basis for comparison. Some CC departments employ a

common set of links that may be part of a basic template – so this idea is not entirely new. But the current approach does not limit the number of links in the navigation or, it seems, specify the order.

Departments should also be able to have unique links in their top-navigation as long as they follow general IA best practices and the standard exceptions, noted below. As departments and programs work out their navigational structures, there will be a fine line between keeping consistency and allowing for necessary differentiation.

b. Adopting the same basic homepage content strategy (more details on this below).

Many of the current academic department and program homepages are little more than staid descriptions of an area of study or, better, the department's approach to the discipline. While explaining these things is important, it's more important to put that information in context. This means pairing brief descriptions with content that highlights what it means to study a particular academic discipline in practice.

Providing real examples of department activities, research, and events will ground abstract learning outcomes in reality and give a prospect a concrete idea of what they will be doing while studying in a particular subject at Colorado College.

The biggest challenge here is when a department or program has few resources or is uninterested in their online presence. Our designs and content strategies should help alleviate this problem; we will provide designs for relatively "content-poor" departments and programs in addition to dynamic and wired ones.

2. A clear navigational path between all departments/programs should be part of the design template.

A "department switcher" will help visitors switch from one department to another easily. We envision an expandable/collapsible list of departments/programs that is integrated into the design template. Web visitors will also be able to navigate back to the Departments & Programs page, but this will allow site visitors to easily navigate between departments/programs.

3. **Show and tell.**

One of our general recommendations for the CC site is that it do more *showing* than *telling*. There is obviously some telling to be done on a departmental site, as your students need to know about requirements, policies, and so forth. But we highly encourage you to *show* what your students are doing as much as you tell about it.

The majority of the text on CC's site simply *describes* the topic at hand, rather than using real life examples to validate it and put it in context. These static descriptions do not actively engage site visitors. This is in part a function of current static approach to content management: once there are new tools for managing dynamic content, it'll be easier to tell and share stories.

As the content on the new site takes shape, we recommend you constantly seek out creative ways to incorporate video, audio, candid photography, blogs, Twitter feeds, and stories generated by your community itself.

Even the style and tone of the writing on a page can be edited to add a more personalized and friendly feel. Examples that feature current activities can help break up the blocks of text.

4. **Keep it simple.**

Don't bite off more than you can chew over the long haul. Starting small with fewer pages to maintain is infinitely better than rolling out a large and brilliant website that looks great this year but quickly becomes dated because you can't maintain it. Updating the website needs to be a regular part of someone's routine. And even if you stay on top of things like events or news, make sure to schedule a few times each year (or at least once) to go over your entire site looking for dated information.

5. **More content is not necessarily better. Engaging content is better.**

While the goal of presenting similar content on each of the department and program sites is important, it is even more important that pages within a department's site be thoughtful, relevant, well written, and interesting to your audiences. Incorporating a page that has little more than old catalog copy is not going to help engage your audience and won't compare well with another department that is actively updating its content.

Ideally, departments will embrace their sites as an important means of communicating with prospective and current students as well as with a global community of scholars and develop a web presence that mirrors their real life activities.

6. Review and revise internal department pages with a focus on tightening up the content and making it more vibrant, succinct, personal, rich with department-specific examples, and more web-friendly using in-text links.

Many of the current department inside pages are cluttered and overburdened with text. This text is often an exact copy of the course catalog and lacks the excitement and energy these sites should be conveying. The Web is a different medium from the print Catalog. It presents an opportunity to show the department as an active, alive place with real people and up-to-date information as well as use web functionality like links within the text to guide visitors around.

Heavy blocks of text are also hard to read. Please refer to our *Best Practices* document for suggestions regarding sub-page headers and other tactics to break up information.

7. It's okay. Let it go.

Dated material needs to be reviewed and either transformed into content relevant in an archive or simply deleted from the public website. An archive should not be a bottomless pit of Web pages that are simply moved **as is** to a different section of the site. Ideally out-of-date pages/content would be edited to replace present with past tense and to add a wrap-up/synopsis/lessons learned section before moving it into the archive.

You may want to keep the content of a page around for your own reference, but seriously consider if it's at all relevant to your web audience today and the impression it makes.

***Example:** Your department started a newsletter 7 years ago, published it quarterly for 3 years, and then stopped. Your News page still lists the newsletters with the most recent issue being 4 years old (and counting).*

At best your site visitor will think you've forgotten to update this page but at worst they will think other parts of your site are not credible because no one seems to be maintaining them. The newsletters, to continue with this example, could be kept on the site if you add an introduction that recognizes them as a lapsed effort, point out (and link to) a few things that might still be interesting, and mention any new locations for department-related news.

Otherwise, it's time to clean house. It'll feel good.

8. Communications staff should assist with maintaining department and program homepages.

The interest and capacity of each department and program to create and maintain content varies widely. Given the need for over-arching consistency, we suggest a strategy of ongoing assistance by Communications staff to monitor and maintain homepages, any dated material, and the top-level IA.

Beyond these areas, we feel departments and programs should retain independent control of the rest of their content.

Homepage Recommendations

Homepage—general introduction

The homepage serves as the gateway to the department as a whole. It should be energetic, clear, articulate, and representative of the department. No matter what the subject, it should make a visitor *want* to learn more about it – to dig into the interior pages, take a class, read a research paper, become a major, and so on.

Departmental homepages should incorporate both static content (a welcoming, introduction to the department) and dynamic content (news, events, blog headlines). The goal is to illustrate the field of study and CC's particular take on it.

The static homepage content should include:

- A short **opening paragraph** in large type that offers a basic welcome (a brief sentence: not entirely necessary, use it if it's already there, can be very simple) and a fact or real-life example from the department that helps pique the interest of the site visitor and starts to offer a glimpse into what happens in the department—research, outcomes, activities, etc.
- A few additional paragraphs that provide:
 - General description of the field of study using real examples—what *is* the study of Comparative Literature, Southwest Studies, etc—(1-2 sentences) and / or philosophy of the Department—our take on the study of Biology—(1-3 sentences).
 - Some reference to the most important internal site content with **in-text links** to those pages. But don't over-do it—the effectiveness of links is lost when everything is emphasized.
 - Something about the actual work being done in the department, whether that's majoring, examples of interesting theses, unique experiments students have conducted, internship examples, ground-breaking research being done by a professor, etc. (2-3 sentences).

Homepage—News & Events

Department and program homepages should have dedicated real estate for news and events. This is one of the easiest and best ways to *show* the department in action in an ongoing way with the additional benefit of having a high-profile area to post department events, lectures, talks, symposia, etc.

The design should allow for flexibility, though. Not all departments will have events and there will be downtimes for all departments; as a general rule, most academic units can be expected to generate far more news items than events, and the former tend on the average to be much more interesting.

Site administrators should also be able to populate their homepages with other dynamic content such as Twitter feeds, RSS-driven general or academic CC news, departmental blog posts, etc. For those departments/programs without an active content manager or very little news or events at a particular time, general academic news and events or College-related news or events can be fed to the homepage automatically with RSS.

The introductory text should be between 50-200 words. Adding to that other dynamic content, you should strive for around 200-300 words total in the main content area of the page.

Homepage—Media

Departments and programs should have the capacity to present video, audio, and department-specific images on their homepages. Images and video should be of relative high quality, with bright colors and good composition. They should capture students and faculty in action or show images related to the area of study. Photos of the CC campus can always be used, especially when the locations depicted relate to the department's activities.

Some departments have a greater need to present images and other media—Art, Drama & Dance—they should be able to do so easily within the new design options.

Homepage—Other Features

Related Links will be a common feature throughout the CC site. When choosing to use this navigational pathway, be sure these links are truly related and relevant to the department. For instance, the Biology and Chemistry pages might have links to a number of the Pre-Professional pages—Nursing, Medicine, Dentistry, and so on. Related Links should expand one's understanding of opportunities connected to a department.

Writing Style and Tone

The writing on the academic department/program homepages should strike a balance between formal and scholarly (but not staid) and conversational and welcoming (but not glib). Most sites currently have static content that is bit dry and not very inviting. If an occasional sentence seems overly academic, that's OK— especially on inside pages of departmental sites, whose audience will likely be more explicitly interested in the department's field of study— but readability and friendliness should be the primary concern.

The language should reflect the high caliber of scholarly work being done at CC while being written in a way that is clear and easily understood by someone without knowledge of that area of study—remember prospective students (first-years and even sophomores) are just starting to learn what it means to study within a particular academic discipline. The language should entice the reader to explore further and get them excited to learn about the activities of the department or program.

These pages can incorporate the first person (you, us, our, we), though falling back on “Colorado College students...” rather than “you” is fine too. On occasion you should address the audience directly, as we want prospects and interested current students to be able to envision themselves as part of the department's community.

The style should also reflect the personality of the department. CC is such a close-knit place where students have incredible opportunities to work hand-in-hand with professors on research and other projects. We want this quality to come through. If a department is known for its quirky group of professors, let's make sure that comes through on their website.

Navigation / Information Architecture

General Guidelines

Academic department site navigation should follow the same IA guidelines as presented in the *Best Practices—IA & Content* document. In reviewing the current IAs for departments and programs, we've found a few of these to be particularly relevant:

- **Keep navigation lists under control.** Sub-page navigation lists should be no more than 8-10 links long. Many sites have more than this. The shorter the better.
- **Link only to pages within the section.** With few exceptions, the navigation should link to internal pages only. Links that are part of the primary navigation should never lead to another site or to a PDF or other downloadable file.

Recommended academic department top-level navigation

The links we propose below represent categories of information found on many of the current sites. We tried to use the most common terminology among the departments to maintain consistency with the current sites. To help students easily find similar information across departments, these links should appear in the same order.

All departments should have:

People
Courses
Major/Minor Requirements
Resources for Students
News & Events

Optional additional links noted in [brackets] plus ability to add department-specific ones, totaling no more than 10 links:

[About Dept or Program name]
People
Courses
Major/Minor Requirements
Resources for Students
[Research]
[Facilities]
[Our Alumni]
[optional department-specific links]
News & Events

As noted above, the navigation for all department/program sites should have a good deal of similarity, making it easier for students to find the same information when flipping between these sites. There should also be room for some deviation from the set of standard links. It can be hard to find a perfect level of conformity and individuality. A good rule of thumb is that information common to all departments – Courses, People, Facilities, News & Events, etc. should all be given the same link titles.

Those departments with unique programs/attributes or less content should be allowed to edit the standard IA. For instance, language programs should be able to incorporate a Study Abroad link, English will need a link for the Visiting Writers Series, and Biology should continue to link to the Herbarium.

The [bracketed] links denote optional pages/sections, so departments with less content may have only 5 links when the site launches. Individualized department links should be added above News & Events.

Notes on departmental architecture and content

HOME PAGE	<p>A link back to the department or program homepage will be included in the new design. Many departments currently use a Home link in the navigation. This will be unnecessary. The homepage should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A brief introduction as described above.• The opportunity to incorporate dynamically generated news, events, blogs, twitter, and other content feeds• Image gallery and/or other multimedia• Department Contact Information <p>Related Links: Affiliated programs Interdisciplinary programs Registrar</p>
[About Dept./Prg Name]	<p>It is not necessary but a few departments currently provide more detailed information on an About or Our Department page. In keeping the homepage content as succinct as possible, this optional page offers a space for more elaboration and details.</p> <p>If departments choose to include this page, the content here should serve to make the case for studying this particular field and highlight unique opportunities available in the department, elaborating on any teaser content from the homepage. Ideally, it should strive to be just as engaging as the homepage and not be a repository for heavy blocks of descriptive text.</p> <p>Potential sub-pages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Traditions• History• Employment
People	<p>Many departments maintain information on faculty, staff, and current students. The amount of information and form it takes should dictate if this is a single page or includes sub-pages.</p> <p>Use the single page format if all you'd like to present is a list of names, titles, simple contact info (linked to profiles) under general categories—Faculty, Staff, Students.</p> <p>If you'd like to include more info on each individual such as names, short bios, and images, we suggest you use this page to list faculty with sub-pages added for Students and Staff. Link to the Alumni page from here.</p> <p>Related Links: Our Alumni</p>

Courses	<p>Most departments/programs currently have pages for Course Descriptions. Some incorporate their course descriptions onto a page, others link to a word or pdf file, and some link directly to the Course Catalog.</p> <p>Course information should be presented here (not as a link to the catalog or requiring a download). Ideally, the content would be dynamically generated (pulled directly from the registrar database), indicate when a course is being offered, and be searchable by block.</p> <p>Potential sub-pages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Course Schedule (add only if Course page is not searchable)• Seminars• Course Sites• Syllabi• Course Evaluations <p>Related Links: Registrar Course Catalog</p>
Major/Minor Requirements	<p>We recommend creating a single page here that lists out the requirements for majoring and minoring. If a department has multiple minors or specialties, add sub-pages here that provide details.</p> <p>Potential sub-pages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Handbook• Senior Thesis• [Thematic Minors] <p>Related Links: Registrar Course Catalog</p>
Resources for Students	<p>All departments should have at least a basic list of resources available to their students. This page should include a description of these with links to sub-pages containing details (if necessary). This page should be as useful to current students as it is for prospective.</p> <p>Information here should include unique programs or opportunities, special collections, competitive prizes, scholarships/fellowships, connections to a broader network of scholars, "additional links," course materials, links to external research info, summer job and internship opportunities, links to course sites and blogs, etc.</p> <p>This is one of those umbrella categories that will most likely have a number of sub-pages that are specific and unique to departments.</p>

	<p>Potential sub-pages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Funding Opportunities• Student Advising• Forms• Reading Lists• Prizes & Grants• [links to external research info]• [summer job opportunities]• [internships]• [certification information] <p>Related Links: [relevant preprofessional program pages] Tutt Library Resources</p>
<p>[Research]</p>	<p>This is an optional page for features on research by faculty, students, and faculty and students.</p> <p>Obviously, research happens every day in every department but the ability to put that information on the website will vary from department to department. Some already highlight this work.</p> <p>For those who do not (and even those who do), we encourage you to see this as an opportunity to show the activities of faculty members and students. Most of this content should be delivered in the form of stories that are entered in the CMS news system, so the same story presented here could be featured on the Department homepage, CC's general Research page, or even the College's homepage. Research-related events be posted here as well.</p> <p>This page could also list the current research interests of faculty members, link to papers or conference presentations by students and faculty, etc.</p>
<p>[Facilities]</p>	<p>In general, science and arts departments will have more extensive information about their facilities and special equipment than will humanities and social science departments, though we were surprised and delighted by the Anthropology Department's Facility page (http://www.coloradocollege.edu/dept/AN/Facilities.htm).</p> <p>This optional page is the place to feature photos and descriptions of your facilities and equipment.</p> <p>Some facilities are so well known or high profile they may have their own place in the navigation such as The Hulbert Center for Southwest Studies or The Press for English.</p>

[Our Alumni]	<p>A number of department sites currently have an Alumni page. We recommend this optional page be a place for listing what current alumni are doing as well as general career/professional school information.</p> <p>The content here should point to <u>outcomes</u> and help answer the question: What will I do with a _____ degree? This could be accomplished by reporting what recent graduates are doing or by more general descriptions of what one can do with a degree in the field.</p> <p>Ideally, this page would also include a news feed featuring any related alumni stories (working in conjunction with Alumni Relations to tag stories with departments to make this easier).</p> <p>Related Links: Alumni Relations Office</p>
[optional department-specific links]	<p>As mentioned above, departments will have the opportunity to incorporate their own specific links into their IAs as long as they don't fit into the established categories.</p> <p>Any number of links can be added as long as the total does not exceed 10.</p>
News & Events	<p>This page should provide a fuller listing of news stories and departmental events. (News and Events feeds should also be listed in brief on the homepage). If a program does not have its own news and relies on general academic news, a separate page for news and events listings is unnecessary.</p> <p>News Archives can be added as a sub-page when necessary.</p> <p>With the new CMS, departments should consider transforming their "newsletters" (often pdfs) into more consistent news stories that feed onto their pages and can be shared with the rest of the College.</p> <p>Potential sub-pages here:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• News Archives• [Department Event Series]• Newsletter Archives <p>Related Links: CC Newsroom Campus Calendar</p>