



WHAT DOES COLORADO COLLEGE NEED?

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE REDESIGN OF THE COLORADO COLLEGE WEB SITE

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INTRODUCTION:

THE COLORADO COLLEGE REDESIGN

We have every reason to be extremely optimistic about the outcome of the Colorado College redesign project.

We believe Colorado College is one of a small number of schools that can claim—by virtue of its academics, geographical setting and student body—to be the best place in the country to go to college. Its student body is uncommonly engaged and articulate; the faculty is first-rate; the staff we've met are opinionated and vocal yet open-minded; and the campus is one of the most picturesque we've ever seen, in one of the most geographically striking regions in the country. If the goal of a redesign is to present an authentic and accurate (if aspirational) picture of an institution, then we've got a great head start. There are very few angles from which CC doesn't look outstanding.

This presents us with an enormously exciting opportunity to do things that haven't been done before on the higher ed Web, and to project a sense of *confidence* befitting one of the world's great institutions of higher education.

The purpose of this document is to suggest some steps along that road. We have been listening to Colorado College carefully, and now intend to present a few ideas from an objective position. Although graphic designs tend to attract most of the attention, the ideas and documents that form their foundation are just as important— perhaps more.

Our goal— and the entire goal of this process— is to create something that will last, that's sustainable, and that feels like an authentic product of the CC community. We hope that what we have to say resonates with anyone connected in any way to your site redesign.

In formulating these recommendations, we have chosen to focus on proposals of two types. First, anything requiring immediate action is noted here; some of the ideas we propose will take work on CC's end, and we'd like to get you started right away. Second, we have tried in some cases to produce proposals whose content is contentious and arguable. There are some big questions to be answered in the course of this project; we're trying to ask them early on, and provoke discussion and debate about these key points, before we get too far into the design phase of the project.

A final note: We have written this document with the intent of making it available to the entire Colorado College community, at the discretion of your committee. We ask, however, that this document not be circulated outside CC.

Now let's get started!

RECOMMENDATION 1:

EVERYONE IS THE AUDIENCE

It's important for everyone associated with the CC project to understand that the CC site isn't being redesigned solely for the purpose of appealing to prospective students, but rather for the benefit of the entire community.

Of course recruitment is one of the primary things colleges do on the Web, and it's important that the new site be usable and attractive to that audience. That's non-negotiable. But there are many other audiences for the Web site as well, and the site's got to appeal to them too; in this sense, the new CC site is being redesigned to better appeal to everyone.

We understand that to some extent this is an obvious point. But during our trip to campus, we frequently heard questions like, "Will the Web site be primarily for recruitment, or will it be for students too?" We'd like everyone to understand that there is *no* audience that's insignificant in the scope of this redesign. Here are the audiences we're seeking to appeal to, why they're important, what we think they want, and how the site should serve them.

Current students are an extremely important audience of the new CC site. The most important concern we've heard from students is that they need better and quicker access to academic information, administrative sites like the Registrar's office, and communication tools like webmail and course management software. They need their interactions with online business tools to be quick and painless, so they can get on with the much more important business of getting an education.

But that's not all they want, especially in CC's case. The students at CC are an extremely collaborative and well-connected bunch, and we believe they would benefit from tools that would help them connect, and keep up with their community's stories and events, on the CC site. And they strike us, by virtue of their eloquence and engagement, as a valuable source of content and editorial services for the new site. In short: The site must give current students the quick access that they need, but it should also give them the tools for communication that they want.

Current faculty are, in some sense, the "product" of Colorado College: they provide the education that the students (and their families) are paying for. Well-educated prospective students— frankly, that means all of CC's prospects— are likely to seek out specific faculty that they might work with. So their stories are invaluable, and faculty profiles and research spotlights should definitely be a part of the new CC site.

But faculty have more demands on their time than (arguably) anyone else on campus. Between teaching and advising students (a full-time job in itself), most are deeply engaged in their own research. New faculty, who could be a great source of content and energy, are especially overtaxed: they're learning the rhythms of the Block Plan, preparing their dissertations for book submissions, grappling with tenure applications. Although we need their stories on the CC site, their time is too valuable for us to assume they'll be happy to help out with the Web site's content needs. (Some

will be, of course— we’ve already met a few professors who blog, or who would like an expanded presence on the CC site.) But it’s not something we can count on.

This means that for faculty, providing *value* in return for their self-expression is especially important. If the site is to include faculty profiles, they must be easy to update, and customizable enough that faculty who want to express their personality can do so. The profiles will have to be robust and attractive enough that faculty can use them for self-promotion, if they like— or, if professors have their own blogs or personal Web sites, their profiles should link to (and draw content dynamically from) those sites. And of course, faculty want the same quick access to offices and services that everyone in the CC community does.

Alumni have all sorts of wants and needs from the CC site. On the one hand, they have practical, informational needs— looking up alumni services, class notes, reunion and event information. But they also will use the site to make connections with other alumni, for business networking or to rekindle friendships. They might well use the site to talk about their career or life experiences. And they’ll be interested in tracking the day-to-day life of Colorado College in general, to remember their time there. Although the Alumni office is implementing its own software to offer some of these services, the entire CC site should facilitate interactions like these.

Administrative staff also need easy access to information. But we’re also likely to be depending on CC staff for the majority of content updating, so the site management tools have to be especially tailored to their needs— ease of use being the first (practically the only) concern. There aren’t many people at CC whose full-time job is to maintain Web pages— are there any?— and so the system for maintaining the CC site must be quick and easy, so as not to take time away from other equally important tasks.

Ease of use is of course subjective: what’s easy for you might be difficult for me. What we’d like to suggest is that the content management tools that power the CC site should be not just easy but *fun* to use. This is a considerably higher standard for a CMS to live up to.

Parents are of course important. They pay the tuition bills, in most cases— and can in some cases become long-term friends of the College, from a development perspective. Parents of first- and second-year students (and prospects as well) can be an anxious bunch— wanting to see what their kids are up to, whether they’re safe and well fed, and whether they’re getting an education worth the cost. But they also have less practical wants and needs from the site as well. They’re likely to be just as interested in reading about professors as their kids are. Most of them probably attended good schools themselves, so reading about the academic life of the institution will be enjoyable and engaging.

The Colorado Springs community at large should be addressed on the new site. Because CC is such an important part of the Springs’ economic and cultural landscape, its Web site is likely to get a lot of traffic from the community. This traffic might be practical— looking up contact information, browsing event listings, exploring continuing education options, seeing if the library’s open to the public— or more abstract, as Springs residents may simply want to learn more about their intellectual neighbors.

Currently there’s a section called “Community” that’s clearly meant to be the landing page for these audiences. But the fact is that these folks’ needs are quite similar to those of other audiences. They want to learn about the College and see what’s going on— those are pretty universal interests, and should be things you can learn on the CC homepage (and, in fact, throughout the site).

Prospective faculty and staff need to know the basics— benefits, HR info, policies and procedures. But they're still prospects, and if they're looking at CC, they won't limit their exploration to the HR site alone. Rather, they're likely to travel around the site as a whole, asking some of the same questions prospective students ask: would I like living here? what are the people like? how might my lifestyle change if I moved to Colorado Springs?

The news media, local and national, won't be enrolling or donating to CC, but at certain times they are an incredibly important audience. Because CC's such a good school, its faculty are a natural source for expert testimony— for example, we read CJ Pascoe quoted in a Wall Street Journal article about gay teen suicides just a few weeks ago. When media visitors come to the CC site, they should get a sense right away of CC's faculty and their areas of expertise. Often this takes the form of a "media guide" or "expert's guide," and CC currently has the latter. But this information appears to be maintained separately from faculty profiles, presumably requiring duplicative content management efforts and sometimes without direct faculty participation. The new site should integrate these functions, allowing faculty (or their representatives) to maintain up-to-date information about their research activities and interests, which in turn can feed "for the media" pages directly. And of course, media may well learn about CC faculty the same way prospective students will, by clicking through to easily accessible faculty profile pages outside the News section of the site.

Peer institutions are an important audience that's easily overlooked. But there are many reasons why your counterparts at other institutions will want to review the site— they might want to look at CC's policies for comparison with their own, for example. Faculty may want to connect and collaborate with CC professors. Because Colorado College is so successful at doing so many things, it's only natural that your site should be a useful resource for peers.

After all these groups (and of course the public at large, we're left with the two audiences that are often called the "most important" audience of a higher education site: **prospective students** and **donors**. These are the audiences that pay the College's rent, and most if not all redesign projects that we're involved in grow out of a need to better appeal to prospects and donors.

But what do these audiences want? In our experience, the concerns and interests of prospective students and donors (current and prospective) are quite similar.

Prospects and donors will interact with the CC Web site in two general ways, which we often refer to as *transactional* and *emotional*. Transactional interactions are probably self-explanatory: applying and giving. The fact that so many schools include a large "Give Now" or "Apply Now" button shows the importance they place on facilitating transactions online; and it's true that when a site visitor is *ready* to donate or apply, those transactions should be easily available.

But they're not the only reason they'll visit the site. The fact is that prospective students may not come to the site for the first time planning to apply; it'll be an informational visit where they click around to get a general sense of what CC has to offer. They'll visit departmental sites, click through faculty pages, look for photos of the campus and a general sense of what life in Colorado Springs is like. They'll want to get an impression of CC students, and of their activities and interests. They'll look for residence hall floor plans or pictures of the dining hall. And all these exploratory clicks may well happen *before* they think of themselves as prospects; they're "just looking."

For this reason, the Admission section can't be the only section of the Colorado College site where the case is made for why one should attend CC. Rather, that case has to be made *everywhere*: on primary landing pages that communicate clearly about CC's qualities and values, departmental homepages with easily accessible information about faculty and academic programs. Because every page of the Colorado College site is a potential destination for prospective students, every page should communicate clearly about CC in a way prospects will understand.

This doesn't mean that the academic pages of the CC site have to be about "marketing." In fact, the best marketing that CC can do is simply to present itself as it is: a vibrant, exciting academic environment populated by idealistic and interesting young people and a community of top-notch faculty and staff engaged in the enterprise of educating and supporting them. That's not an admissions message *per se*, but it's the message your prospective students are looking for. They want to hear *from* the community, not just *about* it.

The same is true for donors. While some may visit coloradocollege.edu with credit card in hand, we believe the great majority do not; rather, they visit the CC site to see what's going on. They may want to look at events, watch a video, or look up a score. In short, their concerns aren't that different from other external visitors to the site. CC's Giving site has fairly low Web traffic compared to the other top level links of the CC site, but we don't think that's because people aren't interested in giving; rather, the visitors to the site who might actually give are elsewhere, reading other content and doing other things, and they might not click over to "Support CC" until they really are getting serious about giving.

What this means from a marketing perspective, we believe, is that for prospective students and donors, *clicking the Admission or Support CC link is in itself a transaction*. When a user clicks to that section of the site— or visits it directly from a search engine— they're indicating that they're ready to think of themselves as part of CC's community of applicants or supporters.

Once they arrive, clear information about applying or donating is important. The "why" is just as important as the "how," in both cases, but probably more in the case of donating; it's generally considered poor form if the primary message delivered on the Giving page is "Cash or check?". In general, we believe that primary landing pages for Admission and Giving ought to deliver two separate messages. First, a simple thank you and welcome: and second, clear, concise information about how to get started.

The big picture is that all these audiences support each others' needs. Donors will want to see how CC reaches out to prospective students; prospective students will want to follow what current students are interested in. Current students want to see a healthy network of engaged alumni, who in turn can be better connected together (and eventually converted into donors) if they're exposed to the busy intellectual life of current students. Parents want to see a supportive and accessible staff. Prospective faculty want to see a community that's active and challenging (and that combines outdoor recreation with intensive study). And audiences that have never been to CC will benefit from seeing this entire system in operation.

All these audiences are important because to show a true picture of Colorado College on the Web, we need everyone on board. Much of this document is devoted to finding ways to make that happen.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

MANAGE CONTENT BLOCK BY BLOCK

The block is the primary unit of measure at Colorado College. Blocks are the organizing principle of CC life; during our visit we heard students, faculty and staff refer to “block 4, day 3” just as often as the date itself. It’s fascinating and (for those of us who visit colleges for a living) highly unusual.

At the same time, the new site has a responsibility to do a better job of communicating the Block Plan. As we heard from a few important stakeholders, there’s a perception out there that the Plan is simply an interesting detail, a “feature” of the CC curriculum— like a January term, a Wintersession, etc. The site needs to make its importance clear, and that’s hard to do by simply describing it. We propose that to capture the rhythm of Colorado College life, the editorial process behind the CC site should be driven by the Block Plan. Here’s what we mean, and some ways it might work.

- **Instead of a weekly publishing schedule, or a daily one, we propose that the entire CC content management cycle should be organized around blocks.** So with the beginning of each block the site changes— a new featured topic, perhaps; a couple of featured courses that have agreed to document their ongoing work online; events by block, etc.
- **A block-driven schedule means that a content plan for upcoming blocks can be worked out well in advance.** Featured courses, for example, could be identified several blocks ahead of time, by finding faculty open to the idea and helping them work it into their course plan (say, by having students contribute posts or portfolio pieces to an ongoing course journal or Block Blog).
- **We’d like to see the date shown prominently— maybe even in the page header— along with the “block date.”** Something like *November 15 / Block 3, Week 3, Day 1*. This should be driven by the site’s new public event calendar (proposed below), where blocks should be identified in the database. And when it’s block break, that should be identified as well (perhaps with a description of what block break is and what it means to CC students).
- **Past blocks should be archived and continually accessible.** If we’re in Block 3, one ought to be able to go back in time a block or two and review the stories, events and featured courses that were part of that block.

- **All block-related content should of course be set in context, for users new to the concept.** “What’s a block?” is a question that should have an easily accessible answer. But simply *showing* what the Block Plan feels like will, we think, resonate: especially with prospects and repeat visitors working to learn about the Plan.
- Any block-driven content strategy shouldn’t depend on an understanding of the plan for understanding. And there should of course be a plan for those parts of the year outside of the block structure: summer and holiday breaks, for example. The plan ought to include fallback strategies for when there’s not block-specific content.
- In some of our past work, our clients have found ways to work content creation directly into the curriculum: for example, getting course credit for creating and documenting research projects online. In CC’s case, we’re wondering whether it might be possible (over time, of course) to integrate Web content management into the curriculum? As an adjunct, perhaps? We know that CC students receive credit for a variety of extracurricular learning activities, and we feel that the responsibility of preparing block-specific Web stories and content strategies would be not only a valuable learning experience, but a nice line on a résumé.

If you’re interested in this proposal, White Whale will work with you to come to a clear understanding of what its full implications and responsibilities might be. We don’t believe it’s something that should impose any extra burdens on anyone; rather, it strikes us as a way of bringing CC’s Web presence and content flow more in line with the pace of life at CC, in terms of content editors and communications staff as well as students.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

LET'S REDESIGN THE INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE FROM SCRATCH

The navigational difficulties that users have with the Colorado College site are the single most frequently cited complaint about it. During our campus visit, there was hardly a single meeting where the difficulty of getting around the site wasn't mentioned— and these are *internal* audiences, the site's most frequent users. If CC's own community has a hard time navigating the site, it's bound to be much more difficult for first-time visitors.

There are many roots to this problem. But the primary one, from our perspective, is that many navigational choices seem to have been made not for the benefit of users, but rather on the basis of organizational structure (which has tended to guide navigational choices at CC to date). The Student Life section is a good example: it's got some good content, but its numerous sublinks (17 in all) generally correspond directly to actual offices on campus, and in many cases to staff listings or "about this office" pages. That's fine from one perspective— administrative offices certainly need Web sites— but a visitor who clicks "Student Life," wanting to know about the life of CC students, will instead learn about the offices on campus that manage different aspects of life at CC.

The way we propose to address the site's architectural challenges is by creating a new architecture *from scratch*: designed specifically for the needs of its many users instead of according to campus org charts. By focusing specifically on the user experience— with the help of CC staff, who know them better than we do— we can work together to design an architecture that feels truly intuitive. Here are a few implications and possibilities related to this proposal:

Our company is very experienced with higher education audiences, and we have developed a pretty good sense of what users want from a Web site. But we'll depend on CC to help us understand the specific needs of your audiences. What do students want to find on the site? Faculty? We'd like to do some surveys to determine the information that site users find most important, and use that information as the basis for an overall proposal. (We are glad that some of this work is already being done.) Here are a few more thoughts on moving toward a user-directed IA:

- **Audience-specific gateway pages are likely to play a primary role in a new navigation strategy.** Although the new homepage should appeal to everyone at CC, it's unlikely to be able to support every link that every audience will want there. So the site will likely need to include, among many other things, a "For Students" page— one place where *everything* of primary importance to CC students can be kept. (In our experience, student-specific pages like this tend to be attractive destinations for *prospective* students that want to eavesdrop on current student life.) Tools like this will help the homepage and primary forward-facing pages to represent Colorado College as a whole.

- **This approach should tend to lead conversations away from why *links* are important, and toward an understanding of why particular *information* is important.** The needs of the site's users should always be the primary concern.
- **This will undoubtedly mean that some sections of the site are managed by more than one individual, each of whom is in charge of certain pages.** As an example: Currently on the CC site, Admissions and Financial Aid are entirely separate parts of the site, with very different designs and approaches to content presentation. Nobody would argue, though, that these two topics are closely linked for most applicants— and that telling the story of CC's affordability is an important part of the student recruitment process. In the new site, these offices should work together to communicate about CC admissions, with pages kept up to date by the individuals who are in charge of those pages' information.
- **What users might *need* is getting in the way of what they might *want*.** Many content managers of the current CC site— including Financial Aid, in fact— let us know that their architectures are complex because of the enormous amount of information they're expected (or legally required) to contain. That may be the case— but the result is often that this large informational burden overwhelms basic communications goals. In the Study Abroad section— called "International & Off-Campus Programs," which might not be recognized as study abroad by a visitor— it's easier to find detailed information about policies and procedures than to find, say, a description of the countries and global experiences that study abroad offers. A user-focused approach will make it easier to keep a focus on the big picture— and may lead many content managers to keep "the content that we're legally required to maintain" in its own section, opening up more room for creativity and expression.
- **We can provide a great deal of hands-on assistance and detailed documentation to help move CC from an institutionally organized architecture to a user-oriented one.** This will include in-person workshops on content development and writing for the Web; best practices on site navigation and suggestions for solutions to common problems; and phone conferences as needed to discuss challenges and opportunities that arise along the way.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

STORIES AND EVENTS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN WEB PAGES

What's happening at Colorado College? This question can be asking one of two things: What events are upcoming on campus, and what are students, faculty and staff doing right now. We think the dynamic content of the new CC site should be all about answering that question, which means that individual stories and upcoming events— organized by block— should be the key features of Colorado College Web content.

STORIES

In our conversations with CC staff to date, we're trying to talk less about "content" and more about "stories." Content is largely static, and the process of managing it should be easy and painless. Managing content is essentially an *administrative task*. Stories are different; they come and go, they reflect where your school is at in the present moment and, collectively, they can reinforce CC's key messages in a powerful and effective way.

One of the issues that emerged in conversation is that there are several ways of defining what a story *is*. In particular, many folks we've met have assumed that a news story ought to be about the same thing as a press release— researched, sourced, and written up. There's certainly a place for those sorts of stories; in-depth feature articles are invaluable on the Web, and careful reading is a key element of the liberal arts education that people come to CC for. But small stories are important too—in fact, sometimes a headline and a Web link are enough to make a compelling impression on the site's many audiences.

Most of your Web site's visitors, especially prospective students, are used to consuming stories in small portions. But we've come to realize that this idea— that a headline and a link can sometimes be enough— can be a little foreign in higher ed news offices, which are used to considering a story as a 400-500 word piece, developed through interviews and rewrites over the course of a week or so, and approved and delivered to a specific publication. But for students who are looking all over the Web, and consuming information from many sources at the same time, short bits of information can communicate a great deal. Small stories can mean a lot to these visitors.

Everyone agrees that the new Colorado College site ought to include more stories, and they should come from more people. But CC's communications team is small, and the College is relatively large. Your communicators can't know everything that's happening at the grass roots, and that activity is what's going to be most interesting to your community of prospects and peers. So we need to create pathways for stories to travel throughout the community. Self-knowledge is a key to survival in all organisms; what CC needs, we think, is a way to learn more about itself.

- **“What are you working on?”** Colorado College students and faculty should be invited to answer this question as frequently as they like, to help CC’s communicators see an accurate and dynamic picture of what the CC community is exploring on a daily basis.
- **Stories collected from the community should be available to Communications for followup, but are useful on their own as well.** When Jane and the rest of the Communications staff find stories they’d like to pursue, they can follow up and write up a full piece on their own. In the meantime, these stories can form a constantly refreshing stream of sidebar items, “Did You Know?”-type content, and blurbs for use throughout the site. And in many cases— departmental Web pages, for example— faculty and students may create stories that live only on those pages, seen primarily by their own constituents.
- **The collection of stories should begin long before the new CC Web site launches.** Very early in the design process, we’ll be sharing some ideas about how to introduce the CC community to a story-gathering process.

EVENTS

Good calendaring tools were one of the most common requests by just about every audience we talked with, but especially by students. It’s currently *very* difficult to find out what’s happening on campus on the current CC site— to find not just the one event that’s featured today, but a general sense of what’s going on. A calendar that would gather events of interest on campus would be enormously popular with just about every person who has a stake in the site at all. The new site simply *must* be rich with a variety of campus events.

- **Anyone in the community ought to be able to submit an event using a public form.** This doesn’t mean anyone can put an event on the public calendar— that’s something that the site’s content managers should decide— but the *sources* of Web event content should be much more numerous. If I’m signing my book at Poor Richard’s this Friday, I should be able to submit that to the site whether I’m a content manager or not. And it’s entirely possible that a logged-in audience might be able to find that signing in a search for today’s events, even if no content managers have gotten to it yet. (Of course, permissions and public/private distinctions are a large topic deserving much more discussion. But the basic idea— that CC people should post events— is quite simple.) Larger entities, like departments and student groups, can be more full-featured users of the site’s content management tools, with access to many more functions, but the public form will still be important.
- **Calendaring should be part of the new CC content management system.** The current calendaring functions are driven by room reservation and internal administrative functions; the EASY system may make event planning and resource allocation simpler, but it doesn’t do any good for our author signing books at Poor Richard’s. In fact, the kind of calendaring that we believe would be most beneficial to CC is the simplest: time, date, location, description. There may be a need to connect location-specific events with room reservation functions, but— in keeping with our recommended focus on users— these requirements shouldn’t conflict with the simple goal of finding out what’s going on around Colorado College.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

HAVE KEY CONTENT CURATED (AND OFTEN WRITTEN) BY CC STUDENTS

CC students are uncommonly good writers—the student writing we’ve read is uniformly crisp and coherent, thoughtful, clever, and never sloppy. In short, the student writing we’ve read is ideal Web writing, and we propose that students be recruited to provide content and editorial services on the Web site to a degree unprecedented in CC’s target market.

Among the other things we did on CC’s campus, we picked up— and actually read— a number of student-run publications, from the *Leviathan* to the *Catalyst* to the *Cipher*. Of course we always seek out student writing during our campus visits, but in addition, each of these publications have striking front-cover designs and jumped right off the racks into our hands.

We are, honestly, shocked at how well written and impeccably executed these publications are.

When we read the *Cipher*, for example— a magazine published each block, that “investigates matters affecting the college, Colorado Springs, this nation, and the world, and strives to be a venue for creative, critical perspectives” — what we see is a source of content that would be absolutely magnetic reading for prospective CC students. It’s natural to worry about the unpredictability of student writing, but the *Cipher* gets everything right— the three articles that concern CC itself are glowingly positive (but don’t feel at all like marketing). Sure, one article uses the F-word in its title, and not everything in this issue is something we’d put on the CC site. But that’s not its purpose! We feel very confident that a group of CC students would take the role of curators and writers very seriously, and that they’d do a great job.

In particular, we think students could be very effective managers of some of those sections that— because they lack direct institutional sponsors— tend to be rather underwhelming. The Academics landing page, for example, could really represent the lively academic community at CC if there were someone in charge of it who would use it as a platform for engaging, dynamic communications. The same could be said for About CC and Student Life— sections of the site that should be more about the College as a whole than specific offices and sections within it.

- **We propose engaging Cutler Publications, the quasi-independent nonprofit at CC that’s in charge of all student publications, in a conversation about this idea.** Does it seem reasonable to think that students might write and curate public landing pages for the CC site? Would CC’s student writers be interested in this idea? Cutler doesn’t currently have any Web presence (although its individual publications all have nice sites)— we’d be interested in learning more about this group in general.

- We've already suggested that the site's content management should be driven by the Block Plan. Each block, the Web site might have a specific student curator, identified by name, who could write some content for landing pages and make decisions about content presentation. These sorts of decisions could be made a few blocks in advance, with support and buy-in from Communications, but allowing students to make a range of creative curatorial decisions.
- CC Communications does have a talented writer, who should certainly be involved in the Web content workflow; while she can of course write plenty of site content, she might also be effective in a liaison role between student curators and Communications, and can perhaps be a first filter for content that might not be approved by senior staff. (As is probably clear, we're hoping this filter would be relatively lightweight, so as to allow the real personality of the CC community to show through.)
- Students can be excellent writers and photographers, but they can also be notoriously unpredictable. Because of the many demands on a college student's time both inside and outside the classroom, they can't always be easily recruited into projects like this. For this reason, we recommend that if students are materially involved in the editorial process of the new site—as we believe they should be— it must be in an official capacity, with a designated set of contributors or representatives (which might change from block to block) who are either compensated for their work, prominently identified on the site, or both.

We also think that bringing students into the Web storytelling process can help bring a sense of life in Colorado Springs to the site. It has been said by a few people at CC that there's a general "sense of place" that's missing from the site, and that doesn't just mean pictures of mountains; one thing that visitors should be able to learn about is what it's like to live in the Springs.

While some people may have preconceptions about the Springs based on the political or religious stances of some of its population, we don't think this is a particularly widespread or challenging issue nationally; rather, it's likely that many prospective students (from the Northeast, for example) think of all of Colorado as relatively homogeneous. Engaging student writers to help tell CC's story will allow them to report from not only the campus but the Pikes Peak region as a whole, and bring that to the public audience of the site.

RECOMMENDATION 6:

USE “A UNIQUE INTELLECTUAL ADVENTURE” ONLY FOR EXPLICITLY ADMISSIONS-ORIENTED CONTENT

There’s a certain degree of hostility toward the “Unique Intellectual Adventure” slogan across campus. It’s not universal— we met several faculty, alumni and staff who feel very connected to it— but it does seem to be the case that it doesn’t resonate with a large part of the CC population, who think of it as a slogan or “marketing tagline” that’s not relevant to their daily lives. (This point is reinforced in CC’s recent brand clarification material, which notes that for large segments of the CC audience, it doesn’t resonate unless connected directly to what that adventure *is*.)

We do think it’s a powerful slogan, as slogans go, and we did hear from CC students that they enjoyed and appreciated it when going through the application process. What we recommend for the new Web site is that the slogan be used in a more targeted fashion: primarily for areas directed at prospects, and always with a sense of what the slogan means.

It’s obvious— *abundantly* obvious to you, we’re sure— that people respond to taglines in different ways. And communities can certainly grow to identify them over time; we’ve seen schools where even the most (to us) clichéd taglines are embraced by many segments of the population. In CC’s case, we simply see too much existing discontent to support heavy use of the tagline; there is clearly a segment of the population that will be less receptive to a Web design the second they see those words.

So rather than use it as a tagline in the site’s header, for example, we propose that its use be primarily in the direct prospect-oriented sections of the site: Admission, for example, possibly some key landing pages, maybe even on the homepage. And we also believe— as documented in your brand clarification research as well— that when used, it should always come with a next step: CC provides a unique intellectual adventure because _____.

Start your adventure here. Choose your own adventure. What makes you unique? Can you be intellectual on a mountaintop? There are a lot of interesting ways to unpack a slogan like A Unique Intellectual Adventure, many of which would do a better job of inviting engagement— of leading to a *next step*— than the tagline used alone. And we believe that in time— if used in interesting, compelling and provocative contexts—the community might find their way back to the line after all.

RECOMMENDATION 7:

MAINTAIN CONSISTENCY ACROSS ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT SITES

While the most frequently cited complaint about the Colorado College site is its convoluted information architecture, the most immediately *visible* shortcoming of the site that we have noted is the lack of architectural consistency among academic department Web sites.

We believe the varying quality and unpredictable organization of CC departmental sites actively undermines CC's student recruitment efforts. 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. Young people recognize marketing immediately, and while they don't necessarily resist it, they don't fully trust it either. 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 departmental 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.

One way that students explore colleges is by visiting several departments, to get a general sense of the faculty, student research, etc. 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 have heard many comments about this from current CC students; they read the current departmental differences as a sign of disorganization, rather than diversity or distinction.

We believe that the current situation— in which one site is “copyrighted” 2000, some have entirely separate Web addresses, and one doesn't even include the College's name at all— has arisen from a lack of available support resources from CC's communications office. 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 Web sites. 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. Of course there are some basic best practices that apply to all kinds of pages— short

paragraphs, frequent use of subheadings, minimal duplication of content that exists elsewhere on the site—but in general, departmental content managers should call most of their own shots, if they have the time and inclination to do so.

- Some standardization will be needed to make the departmental Web sites work better for CC. A department switcher, letting visitors switch from one department to another easily; similar nomenclature for course and faculty pages (i.e. “Our Faculty” instead of Faculty, Professors, Our Professors, People, etc.)... these things will help everyone who uses any of the departmental sites. In addition, we’d like to see a consistent placement of the College’s name and primary navigation; a student exploring biology who’d like to investigate the admissions process ought to be able to get there easily
- Many current students described a nightmarish experience when trying to find a list of **classes available this block**— some departments maintain such a list, some don’t, and some have information that’s inaccurate or outdated. In keeping with our recommendation of a block-based content cycle, we’d like to see a standardized data-driven source for classes available in a given block, and integrate this with faculty Web sites.
- Departments ought to be users of the general CC content management system, in order to take advantages of the many benefits it’s expected to offer— such as the ability to share content with the CC community, post events to the calendar, offer blogging functions to professors and students, etc.
- Some departments at CC have recently undertaken redesigns. Although we would like to see those departments come into the fold as well, decisions they’ve made in the redesign process should be maintained in new site designs as fully as possible.

RECOMMENDATION 8:

BRING CC'S COMMUNITY ONLINE

There need to be better ways for the students, faculty and staff of CC to communicate with each other, and to promote their own work, on the site. The new site should come with tools that make this possible; not only will this provide CC's current students with some functionality that they have been longing for, it can be a great way to tell CC's story as well.

The students we met at CC were typically very enthusiastic about the opportunity to take a more active role in the new Web site. We have already suggested that there might be a formal role for a clearly identified set of well qualified students in the management of key public-facing content. But community involvement with the CC Web shouldn't stop there. In fact, everyone who wants to be part of telling CC's story should be; the new site should offer a variety of tools and functions to students who want to get involved. There are a lot of ways this might come to pass; here are a few proposals and suggestions.

- **Student organizations ought to have the ability to easily create and maintain profile pages— and should be able to post stories and events as well.** These events might or might not show up on a public calendar— certain events might not be appropriate, and the public wouldn't be interested in others— but there certainly might be a pathway for prospects to check out upcoming group-sponsored events to get a sense of CC life. And for visitors on campus, or who've logged in, everything should be available.
- **While there should be a clear link to a list of student groups— possibly on a Student Life landing page, or one of its subpages— their stories and events should be just as viable a way to learn about the groups.** Obviously groups come and go as blocks and semesters pass, and some group sites may pass out of date from time to time. But the vitality of a group can be clearly seen by the quantity and nature of stories and events that it produces; in time, a "What's happening at CC?" page might be a *better* way to learn about groups than by clicking a link to a list of them.
- Students, faculty and staff will be able to log in— with a single sign-on system, we assume— and perform a variety of basic functions, from checking email to looking up courses. Once signed in, there might be community functions they could do as well. Users could tag events as interesting or important, helping them bubble to the top of a group calendar. Or they might tag Web pages as helpful, increasing their prominence in search results, or note inaccuracies or outdated content. They might even be able to create blogs, or manage profiles. All these things are possible, and begin with a discussion about the tools they'd like to have.

- **CC has a number of outstanding bloggers**— Benevolent Baking and the Spacial Cadet Society are two of our favorites— and we'd love to see these external blogs accessible in some way from the CC site. Perhaps selected (and approved) blog posts might show up in search results; more ambitiously, there might be a place at CC where posts from a wide range of campus blogs are aggregated and presented. As a general principle, there are a lot of people creating great content at CC, and we'd like to be able to harness some of that energy for the new site, whether these writers actually work on the CC site itself or on their own independent projects.
- The **Block Partie** site (ccbblockpartie.com) has been a great source of content and inspiration for us. The students who run it are creating Web content that's interesting and engaging and— much like the print publications— would be very compelling for prospects. We understand that BP's independence from CC allows it certain freedoms that its staff probably appreciate, and we wouldn't recommend that something as lively as BP be moved into the CC site. But we'd like to know if some of the Block Partie people might be interested in sharing some of that energy (or just some of their stories) with the CC site.
- **Community-generated content should be public by default.** There may well be a place for private or password-protected content; of course, anything that interacts with administrative databases must be private, as might internal College administrative documentation. But in general, we envision a CC site where users manage pages, share information, upload photographs, and update their profiles, in the service of a public presence on the site.

It may well be that some parts of the CC site are closed to outsiders. For example, it's been suggested that students may want private calendaring or message boards. And it may be that some features (comments on news items, for example) are supported only for an internal, logged-in audience. But there are already a number of good tools out there that support threaded discussions and closed-system networking— Facebook foremost among them, of course— and when it comes to hosting these kinds of private discussions, we often feel that it's best to rely on outside tools. To advance toward the goal of reconceiving the site as a place that truly expresses the personality of CC people, we'd like to see most of the site's content creators working on the public site itself.

- **We are talking primarily about students here, but of course these tools and functions shouldn't be limited to students.** Faculty and staff should be able to take advantage of these same tools, as a way for the whole community to communicate with itself about events, activities, initiatives, etc. The reason for our emphasis on students here is that we expect that many faculty and staff will expect to have an active role in the site's content management in general, including functions like we're describing here

RECOMMENDATION 9:

REQUIREMENTS FOR A CMS

We know that the choice of a content management system is very much on CC's collective mind right now. That's as it should be; the earlier in the site redesign process a CMS decision is made, the more connected the design and writing processes can be to the CMS integration.

We have been asked about how CC staff will maintain their sites, and our response is generally to tell them that no matter what, it'll be easier than what they have now. How much easier is up to you.

Of course, we hope you adopt our own CMS, LiveWhale— we think its capabilities and flexibility are ideally suited to CC's needs. But whatever CMS your team eventually adopts, we believe there are certain functionalities and features that should be non-negotiable.

The following are what we propose as absolute requirements for any CMS you choose.

- Users must be able to enter and manage content without knowing an overly specialized vocabulary of CMS terms. The concept of a “node” might make sense from the perspective of a CMS developer, but a content manager won't get it. And while training can help, we believe that the real goal of training should be to build communication skills and teach about reusing and sharing content, not learning about “nodes” and “asset libraries.”
- The CMS must be easy to use. Of course, that's obvious— everyone we met with at CC cited ease of use as the most important factor in a new content management solution. What's not always so clear is how a relatively amorphous concept like “ease of use” is to be measured. We offer the following two metrics for potential measurement and evaluation.

First, managing content with the CMS should be *enjoyable* for users who enjoy using computers in general. Someone who's used the system for a while should be asked whether she enjoyed the experience or not; this question might mystify some people who aren't used to enjoying work, but we think that a good CMS will provoke a positive response.

Second, the CMS *should not require training* for doing the most basic content management functions (such as editing the content of a page). Of course training is great, and most content management solutions, LiveWhale included, incorporate training into the product offering. But if training is required before a motivated user can make a change to a Web page, it's a sign that the system isn't as easy to use as it could be.

- The CMS should be able to present a list of items from any RSS feed (and ideally ICAL feeds as well) without excessive tinkering by a content manager. This will ensure that even if a user isn't able to learn the tools, or if the CMS doesn't wind up offering the news and events features that a user needs, she can always go to an external site (a blog, calendar, Twitter feed or bookmarking application) to get her work done, and know that her site will reflect that work.

This is particularly important for professors who maintain active blogs. They must not be required to enter content twice, once on their blog and once on their faculty profile; they simply won't do it (nor should they have to).

- Users should be able to create and manage photo galleries; and if they're not, they must be able to easily integrate a slideshow from an application like Flickr or Picasa into their site without specialized knowledge.
- Workflow should not take the place of accountability. Too often, we feel, complicated workflow setups (Dave enters an item which is modified by Sue, sent back to Dave, then finally approved by Jim) removes a sense of accountability from the content management process. Whose page is it? For every page of the CC site, there should be a clear understanding of who's in charge, and that person ought to consider him/herself personally accountable for its accuracy and effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATION 10:

WEB COMMUNICATIONS AT CC

It has always been a fundamental philosophy at White Whale that Web site designs must be delivered with strategies and processes to help keep them fresh over time. Many higher ed Web sites are lovely, well made, and crisply communicative when first launched, only to diminish over time into poorly organized collections of Web pages that gradually lose a sense of overall coherence.

When this happens, we think it's out of a lack of planning for the site's future care and feeding; after the vendor moves on to new clients, it's easy for internal politics and day-to-day concerns to eclipse a general communications focus. This is how Web sites decline.

It is obviously part of our job to make sure this doesn't happen—in other words, to provide designs and content strategies that are not only effective but *sustainable* over time. Much of this work will happen after designs are presented, revised and approved; in our practice, design and content strategy are closely linked. For every content area we present in a design, we will be ready to discuss how it will be kept fresh over months and years—when you see designs, we'll expect you to ask about their sustainability.

Much of this document has been devoted to aspects of this general goal. But there are some general principles that apply to healthy Web communications processes independent of Web designs and specific strategies, and we'd like to close with a few thoughts about some procedural changes that might be appropriate for CC in conjunction with the launch of a redesigned site.

- **“Communications” should be done by individuals interested in communications. The individuals in charge of making communications decisions must be directly accountable and responsible for those decisions.**

If a Web page needs editing, it can be edited by anyone with sufficient knowhow and administrative privileges to do it. Some institutions work with a small group of content editors, who receive change requests from the community; others enable anyone to make their own page edits. Both models can work well.

Communications is different. If someone is entrusted with the task of making sure a Web page communicates well— that it reinforces CC's message, works well as part of the overall site, and is well organized and argued— that's got to be someone who understands what communication is. That role— of being accountable and responsible for the page— is *completely different* from content management and editorship. The two roles should be considered separately, even if they're filled by the same person.

- **Control of the message is only possible up to a point, and it's a fairly low point.**

In a world where messages are produced and consumed by everyone, it's often suggested—sometimes even by us—that schools need to make a choice as to whether or not they should loosen control of their institutional message. The fact is, there's not really a choice. Whether it's on Wikipedia, Twitter, or RateMyProfessors.com, stories are already being told about CC. And for the most part, those stories reach a wider audience than CC's homepage will.

This means that for the higher ed communications office, the choice isn't so much whether or not to control the message— that's not really possible— but rather what the .edu homepage's role should be in the process.

We suggest that the role of the .edu homepage (and the primary CC marketing pages in general) should be to complement what's out there— to acknowledge that there's a world of communications out there, of which coloradocollege.edu is simply the most reliable source. CC's own Web communications should be aspirational, positive, and on-message; but the more its messaging is perceived as carefully constructed, the more out of touch the site will seem with the rest of the stories told about CC online.

- **Web content should not be managed in “triage mode” except in the case of genuine emergencies.**

The sentence most frequently associated with poorly organized Web sites is “This needs to go up on the Web site right away.” It's typically spoken from someone with power to someone without it— a department chair to an administrator, a Director to an Editor. Typically, the only result required from that statement— the action that results in the appropriate checkbox being checked— is proof that the information's on the site. In its most common form, this means text on the homepage. So department and school homepages fill up with text, and when that text is outdated, it's moved to another static page. Over years, this results in the sort of tangled Web that has to be dissected and reorganized by information architecture consultants like us.

Changing this model doesn't happen overnight. No matter what strategies we put in place, someone will tell someone else to get something up on the Web right away. But what we can do is give you a few strategies for making the process of requesting and executing page edits and additions healthier for everyone involved. We'll discuss these strategies in person, and help you determine how best to communicate them.

- **The ideal role of communicators in a Web communications process is not to *write* but to *curate*.**

There are a lot of potential sources for content about Colorado College. We can request stories from CC students and faculty; we can search the Web for news; we can subscribe to a bunch of Twitter feeds from CC people. In addition to these and many other news sources, CC's got news staff of its own, with capable writers who travel around campus looking for stories.

With all this content out there, the role of communications staff is to sort it all out for the public. What's the top story today? What sorts of information do we want to put in front of people when they come to CC's Web site? The Human Rights Film Festival and the student-run Block Party are both this weekend— which one ought to be featured on the homepage? These are the sorts of questions that can *only* be answered by communicators.

Problems arise when the people in charge of communications are the same people who do day-to-day content management work. What happens, often— it's a very real problem for many of our clients— is that communications-related site management becomes an item on a to-do list along with many more pedestrian tasks like updating the Chemistry site. And the difference is that someone from Chemistry is sending angry emails, which tends to bump that item up on the list.

- **We suggest creating two groups to meet regularly to discuss Web communications and content: one for the homepage, one for the site in general.**

CC should create a Homepage Advisory Group that meets weekly (ideally on Mondays or Fridays). This weekly meeting should include a general plan for the week's communications; which videos and/or photo galleries will be added, removed, or rotated; a review of the events to be displayed; selections for "Today at CC"-type content throughout the week; and any video, photo or news content pending or in development for the following week.

Assuming there is a specific individual who signs off on homepage content decisions, that person's approval of everything discussed should be part of the meeting. Ideally, that way individuals can take actions throughout the week without checking in first (or being overruled later).

In addition, there should be a Web Communications Group that meets once each block, composed of everyone across the CC community involved in Web communications (as distinguished from content editing). This group should gather everyone involved in communicating about CC to the public. Membership should be *opt-in*; not every department will want to think about communications all the time, and this should be an optimistic, forward-thinking group of communicators. Meeting agendas should include a review of everyone's priorities, goals, challenges and successes over the previous month; goals for the following month; discussions of any tools or methods being used by some communicators that could be shared; and sharing of CMS feedback, if appropriate.

Unlike the Homepage Advisory Group— which we should have clearly defined leadership— we'd like to see the Web Communications Group be non-hierarchical, a gathering of equals to share ideas and techniques.