

Administrative Toolkit Website

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Abstract

Virginia Commonwealth University is a public research university enrolling more than 26,000 undergraduate, graduate, and first professional students. The University employs approximately 4,380 full-time faculty and staff.

The Finance and Administration Division includes University controller, budget operations, treasury services, procurement, facilities and real estate management, police and security, environmental health and safety, human resources, information technology and communication services, bookstores, mailing and printing services, parking, food services, employee health services, and EEO/affirmative action services.

Navigating the VCU Web for the 36 or more websites associated with these areas was often limited by a user's familiarity with the University's organizational structure. In many cases, faculty and staff would need to know the exact name of the department or of the item being searched. Once reaching a departmental website, depending on size, several more minutes were spent looking for the form or informational link.

The Administrative Toolkit website, <http://www.vcu.edu/toolkit/>, was developed as a web portal that would provide links and information to all administrative and financial policies, activities, training, and on-line forms. The Toolkit links are presented in a topical format, eliminating the need for faculty and staff to be familiar with organizational hierarchy. The Toolkit hosts over 550 links, ranging from the academic technology help desk to room reservations in University facilities. The Administrative Toolkit has proven to particularly helpful to new University employees.

Introduction of the Organization

Virginia Commonwealth University is a Carnegie Doctoral/Research University - Extensive. The University operates two campuses in Richmond, Virginia: the Medical College of Virginia Campus and the Academic Campus. A third campus is located in Doha, Qatar for the VCU-Qatar School of Design Arts. The University occupies approximately 165 buildings.

VCU offers 162 baccalaureate, master's, doctoral, and certificate degree programs. Forty-four of these programs are unique in Virginia. Twenty of our graduate and professional programs are ranked by U.S. News & World Report as among the very best of their kind. VCU's Medical College of Virginia Campus (MCV) is home to the VCU Health System, one of the most comprehensive academic health systems in the nation, complementing our nationally ranked School of the Arts, School of Social Work, and other schools and programs.

With a large and growing urban university, the VCU website offers a comprehensive site with more than 220 links to departmental homepages. As more administrative functions, requests, and forms become web-based, the primary problem for most faculty and staff is locating information in the various individual sites.

Statement of the Problem/Initiative

VCU faculty and staff were experiencing difficulties locating financial, operational, and administrative topics on the VCU web. Navigation of this information was often limited by a user's familiarity with the University's organization structure.

VCU identified the need for a site that would serve as a central repository for financial, operational, and administrative information. The goal was to create a searchable site with a streamlined, topical format so users could easily access the information they needed without searching through various web sites. VCU envisioned the site would also reduce or eliminate paper notifications and provide easy access to commonly used forms.

Design

The Administrative Toolkit (www.vcu.edu/toolkit/) was developed as part of the VCU Board of Visitors-approved Financial, Operational, and Administrative Practices Framework, a collaborative effort between the Finance and Administration Division and Audit and Management Services. The purpose of the initiative is to strengthen financial, operational, and administrative practices and put into place a proactive University compliance program. The Framework is a multi-year initiative during which many of the University's financial, operational, and administrative areas will be reviewed.

A work group was formed in Spring 2000, to develop the overall Administrative Toolkit design. Members of the workgroup included the Associate Vice President for Finance and Administration, the Deputy Director for Audit and Management Services, the University Controller, the Director of Special Projects in the Controller's Office, and the

Coordinator for Administrative Services in the Office of the Senior Vice President, with overall project coordination and technical support provided by the Controller's Office.

As a starting point, the work group reviewed established websites to determine if a similar site was in operation. Numerous university websites were evaluated for presentation of administrative information and ease of navigation, however, no comprehensive site was found. In addition, finance and administrative staff were asked to provide input on Toolkit content.

The work group identified eight major components for the main page of the site:

Policies, Procedures & Guidelines - an alphabetical list of links to information pertaining to financial, operational, and administrative policies, procedures, and guidelines.

Topical Index - an alphabetical list of links on "how to do" or "where to find help" with financial, operational, or administrative topics. In addition to providing the appropriate link, this page also includes the name and phone number of the responsible department.

Training - an alphabetical list of links for training opportunities available to faculty and staff in financial, operational, or administrative functions. In many cases, on-line registration is available.

Forms - an alphabetical list of links to financial, operational, or administrative forms available on-line, which are in HTML, Word, or Adobe Acrobat format.

Search - a search engine that allows users to search four sites: Toolkit, VCU Web, VCU directory, or the Internet.

When All Else Fails - a query feature for users who are unable to locate the needed information. Users complete an on-line form with their name and e-mail or phone number, which is electronically sent to the Toolkit mailbox. The Toolkit webmaster will either respond to the question or forward it to a departmental representative familiar with the topic for response. This feature is particularly helpful to new employees.

Customer Feedback - this feature allows Toolkit users to provide anonymous comments and suggestions. This feature has been particularly helpful in keeping the Toolkit useful, complete, and relevant.

What's New - an announcement page to report new information, policies, how to's and other issues.

The homepage of the Administrative Toolkit was designed with economy of space so that users would not have to scroll down the page to find the links to these categories. The entire page can be viewed with most computer monitors despite the pixel settings.

The design of the Administrative Toolkit was influenced by four considerations:

Technology Limitations or Skill Level of Users

VCU is a large, public university with varying levels of computer equipment (desktops and laptops) and operating systems (Microsoft Windows and MAC operating systems). In addition, some faculty and staff access the web through modems. For these reasons, the design did not include the use of flash, video and audio streaming, and other advanced features. The site was designed to be viewed and used by any member of the University community, regardless of equipment or skills.

Diverse User Group

Toolkit development considered the large diversity of educational/comprehension levels within the University, with the audience defined as all employees and not just university administrators. In fact, the name of the Toolkit was changed from Administrator's Toolkit to Administrative Toolkit in recognition of this broader audience. Consideration was also given to individuals who speak English as a second language. Special attention was given to reduce the complexity of the language in the information and links presented. Subjects are often listed more than once, so that more than one common name for the topic can be searched.

Limited Resources for Development and Maintenance of the Site

The site was developed and is maintained with the common web page software programs, Dreamweaver and FrontPage. The University Webmaster provided CGI scripts for the

search engine and form handlers. The University Controller's Office used existing staff to build and later maintain the site. Currently the site requires about 8 hours per month to answer questions from the Toolkit mailbox and check existing or add new links.

Implementation

Discussions leading to a final design concept took approximately one year. With an approved design, actual construction of the site began in July of 2001 and was ready for approval by mid-September. At the same time, departments reviewed the site for links associated with their areas. The site went live in November 2001. The Senior Vice President for Finance and Administration sent a University-wide e-mail announcement to faculty and staff announcing the new site. The response was overwhelmingly positive with many notes of thanks sent through the site's feedback feature.

Benefits

The Administrative Toolkit dramatically improved the quality and accessibility of financial, operational, and administrative information available on the VCU Web. Links are provided at various pages on the VCU web. Faculty and staff, especially new employees, are able to find financial, operational, and administrative links without spending unnecessary time. The Toolkit's feedback and "when all else fails" features help the Toolkit webmaster keep information current and relevant. New links are added as faculty and staff request them.

Retrospect

The only drawback to a website this large is tracking continuous changes in web address linkage. Maintaining the links requires cooperation and communication between the Toolkit webmaster and each individual department's webmaster. Hosting too many broken links will only dissuade faculty and staff from using the site. After a few months into the Toolkit's operation, participating webmasters from the Finance and Administration Division came to an agreement about notification of link changes and when it is or is not necessary to change the linked information's web address.