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The School Counselor Web Page

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It is no surprise to hear that Internet use continues to grow. According to a recent Pew Research Study, Internet use among teenagers, 12-17, is now at 93%. Sixty-two percent are going online for current events, 48% for shopping, and 31% to find information on health related issues. Of the latter category, 17% are seeking information on sensitive topics such as drugs and sex (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010).

Like all other professions, counseling has recognized the role technology can play in providing information and services. While 26 states' Departments of Education now have state school counseling web sites (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2010), some school districts have included counseling on their web sites and school counselors are beginning to create pages or a site for their individual schools.

In school systems that have Web sites, some school counselors are using their Web pages to provide current information about their programs while others have pages that once developed are not regularly updated. School counselor Web pages usually provide such information as the school master calendar, testing information, and supportive links to other Web pages. Some provide email contact information, but an insignificant number contained information about current issues in the school (Reynolds & Kitchens, 2007).

According to Van Horn and Myrick (2001), school counselors most often use computer technology for retrieving information, recordkeeping, and helping students select colleges and universities. Since the use of technology, including Web pages, is limited, many have called for training counselors in technology (Carey & Carey, 2004;

Gerler, Jr., 1995; Sabella & Booker, 2003; Van Horn & Myrick, 2001). Van Horn and Myrick (2001) suggested that a Web page could be used as a means for communicating with parents and students, for providing information in the three domains of school counseling (career, academic, and personal/social development), and in crisis situations. The American School Counseling Association has also suggested the use of technology in gathering data to analyze systematic change, helping students with career and college selection, consultation with stakeholders, and planning, implementing, and evaluating school counselor programs (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2003).

A questionnaire sent to school counselors via the SchoolCounselor.com newsletter to ascertain what technologies school counselors were using and for what purposes found that few counselors mentioned using Web pages for their programs (Sabella, 2005). However, counselors did report using Web sites to gather information. It was interesting to note that when counseling programs had a Web page one counselor in the school was usually designated to manage it.

In a random sampling of counselor Web pages, Reynolds and Kitchens (2007) found that some were designed for parents while others were directed toward students. Most counselors who had Web pages were using them to assist individuals planning for academic and career choices by providing information and links to resources. Most pages provided information about counseling services, and a few included activities that supplemented classroom guidance. Many Web pages contained only general information, and some appeared to have been developed and never revisited.

With consideration for the ethical use of technology, the need to reach diverse populations, greater demands on time, and the need for accountability, school counselors need to use all means available to them to streamline their workload. School counselors who understand Web page development may find it a time-saving tool that makes the counseling program more accessible to students, parents, and all school stakeholders. The purpose of this article is to provide school counselors with information for setting up a simple, easy-to-manage counselor Web site or page that can potentially increase positive public perception of the counselor's role and increase efficient performance of counseling-related duties.

Planning the Content

The first step to developing a site or a page is to determine the target audience: parents, students, or others. The Web page could serve all these populations by having separate sections or pages devoted to each group. Next, decide what information would be most beneficial to each population. The parent section should address concerns of two groups of parents; parents with children currently enrolled in the school and parents considering enrolling children in the school. Some information common to the two groups are: counseling services offered, schedules, parent and community consultation, topics of group counseling, how to contact the counselor, the school or testing program, and work and college preparation information. Time spent in updating the Web pages could be minimized by avoiding posting dates in documents. Only the annual calendar and testing dates would be updated each school year. Attention would be necessary for the calendar and testing dates. Additional information could include developmental stages of students, parenting assistance for special issues, and local resources available to

parents. When school crises occur, the counselor Web page can be a valuable means for providing information to parents on how to help their children cope.

The section for students could contain developmental information, follow-up activities for classroom guidance, how to access the counselor, and available services. It might also include age appropriate games for learning about feelings and other developmental issues, interactive resources related to careers, academic success, and self-esteem, and other information deemed important for the student population. As with the section for parents, some information could remain unchanged for long periods of time while other information would need frequent updating. An out-of-date Web page may create more negative impressions of the counseling program than no Web page at all.

If the desired content seems to be overwhelming for the beginner, plan to start the Web page with basic information that does not need to be updated frequently. Plan space for adding to the page and include new features as needed.

Ethical Considerations

When developing a Web site or page, the counselor must comply with The Ethical Standards of the American Counseling Association (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2006) guidelines and Section A.10 of the Ethical Standards for School Counselors (ASCA, 2004). Section A.10 of the ASCA standards states that counselors should promote computer applications that are appropriate for students, that students know how to use the applications, and that they meet students' needs. It also states that counselors should follow the National Board of Certified Counselors [NBCC] Standards for Web-Counseling. The NBCC (2007) standards state that Web counseling should supplement face-to-face counseling based on the necessity and convenience of providing counseling from a distance. For example, homebound students could receive the same guidance lessons as in-school students. Parents who cannot attend school functions could receive current information about the school and ask questions online.

Web Page Design

The Web page should be very easy to update and maintain. It should be simple, easy to navigate, appealing, and uncluttered. As a counselor becomes more familiar with developing Web pages, more dynamic Web designs can be added. Developing a Web page that people want to use requires a basic understanding of design principles.

Avoid the common mistake of having a cute but very busy background. Keep the background simple and uncluttered to avoid conflict with the text. Create contrast by using lighter backgrounds for large spaces and dark backgrounds for small spaces. Two color schemes that work well to make information stand out are the middle spectrum and warm/cool colors. The middle spectrum consists of yellow, green, white, and blue. As text, these colors generally stand out against a darker background. Warm colors (reds, oranges, and yellows) tend to stand out on most pages, while cool colors (blues, greens, and violets) recede.

Internet users tend to scan Web pages for information rather than reading them in depth (Morkes & Nielsen, 1997). Organize the text into short blocks or chunks to increase legibility. Limit the text to 10 -12 words per line. Studies of online reading and

legibility have indicated that short to medium lines of text are preferred (Bernard, Fernandez, & Hull, 2002). The average printed book follows this rule. Multiple lines of centered text are difficult to read, so center only titles, headings, or sub-headings. Use caps for very short phrases or titles. Writing a sentence or paragraph in all caps increases reading difficulty. Choose a font that is intended for computer use (e.g., Helvetica, Trebucher, Univers, or Verdana).

Limit the number of graphics since too much visual stimulation can make the page difficult to read and navigate, especially for novice Internet users. Graphics should always support the content, increasing clarity and communication. Avoid animated graphics, as these are distracting to most people. Navigation links within the page and external links should be prominent. Limit the amount of print on the home page to essential information and add additional pages for supplemental materials. For ease of use, utilize the same basic layout for all the pages within the site, especially navigation links.

Developing a storyboard of the home page (a blue print or drawing of the desired layout) is an excellent way to organize the content. It also allows one to clearly visualize the page so that potential problems can be spotted before the page is created. For examples of good and bad Web design visit Williams' (n.d.) "Web Design Features" at <http://www.ratz.com/features.html>.

Selecting the Content

While students and parents can visit any part of the Web page, design the home page to direct parents and students to sections of the Web page that contain information of interest to them. Other sections accessible from the home page could be information about the counselors, information about the school and school activities, school calendar, and special workshops. Discussion boards, blogs, email, links, and announcements might also be accessed from the home page. These later items would need to be monitored regularly.

As the page is constructed, test it frequently using different Internet browsers (i.e., the programs that allow you to view and navigate Web pages). Currently, the most commonly used browsers are Window's Internet Explorer, FireFox, and Safari. Different browsers and different versions of a browser may display the page differently. Check the layout and all links to make certain they are all working.

Accessing the Internet

For the Web page to be accessible for the intended audience, it must be uploaded to a hosting site's server or computer. Almost all school systems now have allotted space on their servers for school, faculty, and student Web pages. Many provide technical support and training for faculty. If this service is available, contact the school systems' Web Master or technology department for assistance. If the school does not provide server space, a commercial hosting site must be found. Many hosting sites provide a combination of services, such as Web authoring, which is a means for designing Web pages, and file transfer protocol (FTP), a method for transferring files from one computer to another over the Internet, as well as hosting capabilities.

Numerous Web hosting sites are available on the Internet. One source to take into consideration would be the counselor's current Internet Service Provider (ISP). An ISP is a commercial means for accessing the Internet from a home computer such as America Online (AOL) or Charter Communications. Most ISPs and Web hosting sites provide free hosting services for their customers. However, these are often limited in size, so the allowable file size and the intended Web site growth need to be taken into consideration. Free sites frequently have non-removable commercial advertising banners that appear on all pages. By using advertising to pay for their operational costs, the hosting site can afford to offer individuals free Web hosting. If the advertising banners are not a major distraction, will not cause conflicts of interest, or the advertising is not of an offensive nature, these sites are a good option. Fees for sites that charge for their services will depend on server space and features offered (see Appendix A).

Tools for Developing Web Pages

Web authoring and file transfer protocol (FTP) tools are required in Web page development. There are numerous software programs for both Mac and PC that are designed to build and publish Web pages, as well as programs designed to upload your materials to the Internet (FTP software). Web authoring tools allow a user to create a page in a desktop publishing format while the program generates the Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) or page code behind the scenes. The user can work in either the code or the page layout view. A second tool is a WYSIWYG ("What You See Is What You Get," pronounced 'wiz-zee-wig') editor. In this type of application what is seen on the screen is what will appear if the page is printed.

Applications for Web site or home page development are available as freeware, open source, shareware, and proprietary software. Freeware is software developed by someone who allows anyone to use his or her programs free of charge. Open source is software developed by a person or persons who give users permission to make programming changes to the software that will alter its functionality according to the user's needs. Shareware is very similar. It is software developed by a person or persons who allows others to use the software, but charges a nominal fee for their product. Frequently, one can use shareware free for a trial period; however, a fee is charged for continued use. Proprietary software is purchased from a retailer. The most economical to use is freeware (see Appendix B). In addition to considering the types of software, you should consider the levels of user expertise built into the software, which ranges from novice to expert. A second consideration should be the amount of technical support provided.

After planning the Web site or home page, the next step is publishing it on the Internet. If the school system is providing server space follow their directions for uploading the Web page files. If school resources are not available, the use of an FTP program and a hosting site is required. The FTP software and the hosting site will provide specific directions and information for uploading files. The Glossary at the end of this article will provide reference to terms to facilitate creating the Web page.

Conclusion

A Web site can increase the benefits of the counseling program for students and parents and increase communication with faculty and administrators. Some schools are using Web pages to promote the counseling program, document counseling services, and provide information in crisis situations. It can also be used to provide services for students from a distance, cost effective communication of current events, enhancement of classroom guidance, and preventive counseling on developmental issues. Because the counselor can only address a limited number of issues in the classroom, additional lessons and information can be posted on the Web page, thereby increasing the services provided to all the students and their families.

A counselor Web site or home page can be an exceptional tool for communicating with parents, students, and other school stakeholders. It may require learning about some technology resources, but well designed Web pages can be well worth the effort.

Glossary

Browser or Web browser - A software program that allows one to view and navigate Web pages.

Dynamic - Web content that changes each time it is viewed or reacts to user input without sending requests to the Web server.

FTP - Abbreviation for File Transfer Protocol. It is the format used for exchanging files over the Internet such as downloading music, video, and other files and for uploading Web page files to a hosting site's server.

Hardware - Objects that you can touch, like a disc, monitor, keyboard, or printer.

Home Page - The first or main page on a Web site that usually serves as an index or table of contents for other documents stored on the site.

HTML - Abbreviation for Hypertext Markup Language. The code or language used to write Web pages.

Internet - A global network connecting millions of computers.

ISP - Abbreviation for Internet Service Provider. A company that provides access to the Internet for a fee.

Navigate - To move from one location to another within a Web page or from page to page within a Web site.

Network - A group of two or more computers linked together.

Server - A computer on a network that manages network resources and information.

Software Program - An application that does real work for users. Examples would be word processors (Microsoft Word), spreadsheets (Excel), and databases.

URL - Abbreviation for Uniform Resource Locator. It is the unique global address of documents and resources on the World Wide Web.

Web Authoring - Enables the user to develop a Web site.

Web Design - The arrangement and creation of web pages.

Web Host - A free or commercial site that stores, houses, and maintains Web pages or Web site files.

Web Page - A document on the World Wide Web that is identified by a unique Uniform Resource Locator (URL).

Web Site - A group of Web pages.

WWW - Abbreviation for World Wide Web. Provides the user with the ability to access information on the Internet through the use of various language protocols.

WYSIWYG Editor - Is pronounced 'wiz-zee-wig,' What You See Is What You Get.

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Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm

Appendix A

Web Hosting Sites

Free Web Hosting Sites

- (a) CoffeeCup, <http://www.coffeecup.com/k12/> is free to educators. It provides hosting, design, and FTP capabilities.
- (b) BlueDomino, <http://www.bluedomino.com/bluecomino/index.bml>
- (c) Scholastic Class Homepage Builders, <http://teacher.scholastic.com/homepagebuilder/index.htm>
Scholastic uses a 3-step process for linking pages to the school's Web site. It also provides space for student Web pages that are free of advertising.
- (d) Google Sites, <http://google.com> Choose the More menu, then Sites.
- (e) Namu6, <http://namu6.com/>
- (f) Webs, <http://www.webs.com/pages/features/>

Commercial Web Hosting Sites

- (a) GoDaddy, <http://www.godaddy.com/gdshop/default.asp> GoDaddy starts at \$4.29 a month.
- (b) TigerTech, <http://www.tigertech.net/> TigerTech is \$6.25 a month if paid for a year's hosting in advance.

Appendix B

Web Development Software

Freeware and Open Source Software

SeaMonkey – for Mac, Linux, and PC. It requires a novice level of expertise.
<http://www.mozilla.org/projects/seamoney/>

Shareware

Use Tucows for all kinds of shareware. This resource page also provides information about Web page materials and other resources for Windows and Mac at <http://www.tucows.net>

Proprietary

These are some of the software titles that can be purchased at a local store.

(a) FrontPage – It is for PCs, running Windows XP and earlier systems and is easy to use.

(b) Dreamweaver – It may be used with a PC or Mac computer. Previous experience in working with Web pages is recommended. It contains a great deal of functionality, but has a steeper learning curve than other products.

(c) SharePoint Designer 2007 – This software took the place of FrontPage and it is for PCs. It is for a novice or intermediate user. The address is:

<http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/sharepointdesigner/FX100487631033.aspx>

(d) RAGE Software is for a Mac machine. It is relatively inexpensive and easy to intermediate in use. The address is: <http://www.ragesw.com/products/webdesign.html>

(f) iWeb is part of the iLife Suite for Mac OS X is for the novice user. The address is: <http://www.apple.com/ilife/>