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Missing Links: A Survey of Library
Systems Department Web Pages

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With the rapid growth and popularity of the Internet and the World Wide Web, it has become common for many libraries to have Web pages. The widespread adoption of information technology in libraries has also led to many libraries instituting systems departments. Yet despite the growing number of library Web pages and systems departments, casual observation suggests the departments do not appear to have much of a presence on library Web pages.

It is the purpose of this study to investigate to what extent systems departments have established themselves on library Web pages. In addition to reporting the results of a survey of 258 academic library Web pages located at the Yahoo Web site,¹ this article will discuss some possible reasons for the results. It will also explore some of the key issues associated with systems department Web pages. These include why a systems department should have a Web page, the elements of a good systems department page, and what systems departments can do to improve their Web pages.

Before undertaking such a discussion, it may be helpful to look at some reasons why there may be a dearth of systems department Web pages. After all, it seems particularly ironic that the library department that knows the most about the Web should be one of the least visible on it. One possible explanation is that systems departments in libraries have traditionally been associated more with technical services than with public services. Because technical services departments are usually “behind the scenes” operations that library users seldom see,² this association may help account for the lack of a Web presence on the part of systems departments.

Another reason for the lack of a systems department Web presence may be due to organizational politics within the library. In some libraries, the content and design of the

library's Web page is controlled by a Webmaster, Web page committee, or Web team. Such an individual or group may or may not see mounting a systems department page as useful or appropriate. Some functions that a systems department page might serve, such as explaining access procedures or offering answers to commonly posed automation questions, may be usurped by other departments such as reference or user instruction. The rationale that is sometimes used for these decisions is that systems librarians are not capable of communicating directly with the public. Their technical orientation makes them so prone to abstraction and jargon, the reasoning goes, that their explanations and answers have to be translated into clear, simple language in order to be intelligible by an average student or faculty member. This "translation" responsibility is often assumed by the public services department, which may insist that they "mediate" between "techies" and the library's users.

A third reason that systems department Web pages seem to be in scarce supply is that some libraries appear to have substituted those of other academic units in their place. Many universities have campus-wide academic computing services or centers that house computer labs that students and faculty may use for everything from word processing to computer-based instruction. In some institutions, these computer centers are housed in the library, but not always. Yet on many library Web pages, there is a link to the campus-wide computer center, but no link to the library's systems department. This seems particularly odd in cases in which the campus-wide computer center is a fully autonomous unit of the university with no physical connection to the library.³ It is as if the library is saying to its users, if you have computing questions or problems do not contact us, contact them, even though the library's system may be independent of the

computer center. This must seem somewhat bewildering and perhaps frustrating to the library user who may have a problem with an OPAC or with database access. The user calls the campus-wide computing facility and explains the problems, then is told by their staff that he or she must contact the library for help with the library's system. Yet the library Web page has no systems department Web page that the user can turn to for specific help with the library's system.

One additional reason why there seems to be relatively few systems department Web pages is that few librarians may have realized a need for them. Why should a systems department have a Web page? The following section addresses some of the reasons why a systems department Web page can be important to library users and staff.

Some Advantages of a Systems Department Web Page

It could be argued that there is no pressing reason to have a systems department Web page when the library may have several good systems librarians that are perfectly capable of answering any questions themselves. Yet there may be times such as late evenings and weekends when these people are not available either to the public or to colleagues. In such instances, it would be extremely helpful to have a Web page that users could refer to that provides answers to their questions, or at least provides information about specific concerns and ways of coping with them. Some systems department Web pages provide the names of people to contact and include email links that the person can click on and send a message.

There are a growing number of remote access students and distance education is becoming increasingly important. A systems department Web page may be especially

valuable to this segment of the user population.⁴ A student who is many miles from campus cannot walk over to the library and ask for help, and even calling the library may be expensive or inconvenient. This can be especially frustrating for distance students who attempt to telephone the public service desk at a busy time when there are many in-house patrons clamoring for the attention of harried librarians. A bad phone connection or a garbled explanation can lead to tension on the part of both users and librarians. At such times, a systems department Web page may prove to be a useful alternative to trying to reach a “real person.”

Indeed, some library users may actually prefer using a systems department Web page to a live contact. They may hesitate to speak to a real librarian because they are shy, or are embarrassed to admit they do not know, are afraid they will appear ignorant, or are perhaps intimidated by a librarian’s personality or demeanor. The systems department Web page can provide a comforting anonymity that may be much more appealing to these students. Other students may have difficulty articulating exactly what their problem is, or may be reluctant to interrupt a busy librarian.

A well-designed systems department Web page that is easy to locate and user friendly may also take pressure off library staff. It can do this in several ways. A thoughtful systems page can address many of the obvious questions that reference librarians are repeatedly asked at the desk.⁵ By reducing the overall volume of questions, the systems page performs a valuable service for colleagues. More importantly, a good systems page can be indispensable to public services librarians who can refer to it for help when confronted by highly difficult technical questions from patrons. This is especially true at times when public services librarians may be working but systems

librarians are not. An effective systems department page can also relieve systems support staff from answering routine questions asked by library staff internally.

Another reason why a systems department should have a Web page is because of expertise. Because systems librarians are intimately acquainted with the library's system, they should be able to do a better job of explaining its capabilities and shortcomings to users than other staff. Reference librarians who are asked challenging technical questions by users often contact the systems department for an explanation, and end up repeating the same information, not always accurately, to users. Why should not systems librarians get the credit for answering these questions on their Web page? This assumes that systems librarians are every bit as articulate and capable of explaining technical concepts as public services librarians. Systems librarians are also more familiar with the library's system than staff at a campus computer center, even though the campus wide computing facility may be featured prominently on the library's Web page.

Finally, a good systems department Web page may be an excellent public relations vehicle for the department. It can go a long way toward raising the department's profile, both within the library and in the larger campus community. An effective systems page can dispel any stereotypical notions of the systems librarian as an antisocial or uncommunicative "techie." It can counter the image of the systems department as a strictly "behind the scenes" operation with little or no connection to the library's users or to other departments and staff. If done very well, the systems department page can even become a focal point of the library's services, and help to position the library as being at the forefront of technological innovation and expertise on campus.

Thus it can be seen that there are many advantages to having a well-designed systems department Web page. This raises the question, what is it that makes a “good” Web page? A number of articles have appeared on this topic in the library literature, and it may help to briefly review them before reporting the results of this survey. For the purpose of analysis, it may be useful to divide the elements of a good Web page into two categories--content elements and design elements, even though in actual practice, these categories may overlap.

Content Elements

The content of a Web page is its most critical element, because no matter how well-designed a page is, if its content is weak, the page will be of limited utility. The most important consideration with regard to content is how well it addresses the user's information needs and helps solve their problems.⁶ The content of the page must be chosen with the user firmly in mind, and the ability of the Web page author to empathize with the user is crucial.

Other content elements that are important are that the page has a clear title, a stated purpose, and some indication of who the intended audience is. As obvious as they may seem, many Web pages fail to include at least one of them. Yet they are important to users trying to get a quick grasp of whether the page is relevant to their needs.⁷

An outline of the organization of the site can be an extremely useful element. This is particularly true if the site is large and has many links.⁸ The user who needs to quickly survey the contents of a site will be greatly aided by having it summarized in outline form.

A Web page that has a didactic purpose should include not only some degree of explanation, but also include examples. It will be helpful if the page provides links to other useful resources.⁹ It would be even more useful to searchers if the links included brief annotations, so that they have some idea of what they are clicking on before they select them.¹⁰

Users need to have some sense of how current the information on the page is. This is especially the case with information technology because it is undergoing such rapid change. It is not enough that the page be continuously revised. A good Web page also needs to display the date when it was created and last updated.¹¹

The use of graphical elements such as photos or illustrations should be limited to situations in which they are really necessary. Large, lavish images, while attractive, can slow down the speed at which a site loads. It is not helpful to users to have to wait for images that may not have any real educational content. Good Web pages use graphics judiciously, which usually means sparingly.¹²

Both Web pages that have many images and those that have few should at least give users the option of selecting a non-graphical version of the page. Not everyone has the computing power to successfully load highly graphical pages.¹³ There may also be times when even the most popular browsers like Netscape and Internet Explorer may be down. Having a non-graphics option is an important attribute of a good Web page.

In addition to images, the text must be carefully chosen. Content that discusses various aspects of information technology should be chosen with particular care to avoid the use of jargon as much as possible.¹⁴ Technical terms that must be used, should be carefully and succinctly defined. If a high percentage of technical language must be

included, it may help to include a glossary, so that the text is intelligible to novices. The page must be comprehensible to a wide variety of constituents.¹⁵

A quality Web page should also be interactive. The user should be provided with some means of communicating with the author of the page, or the staff at the library where the page originates.¹⁶ The inclusion of an email address, or a link that the user can click on to open up a response form may be helpful. To make the author or staff members seem less anonymous and more human, it may also help to include their titles and perhaps some brief biographical information.¹⁷

The author(s) of a good Web page will also likely include some sort of feedback mechanism, so that feedback from users can be incorporated to help improve the page. They may include a link that asks for the user's reaction to the page.¹⁸ Visits to the site can be monitored by use of a counter.¹⁹

An elaborate Web page that includes extensive resources needs to offer some additional features. Any particularly large files should indicate the file size in kilobytes, so that the user has an idea of what they are accessing before they click on it. A large Web page will also benefit from having its own search engine, in case the user is looking for something specific.²⁰

These are just some of the elements a good Web page might include. In terms of content, there are many other elements that could be included, depending on how ambitious and creative the authors wish to be. For example, the creators of one Web page chose to include descriptions of services, information about the policies of the institution and its practices, a page of current events, an electronic newsletter, and subject-related pages as well.²¹

Design Considerations

Perhaps the most important design consideration for a Web page is that it be prominent enough to be easily located, that it be accessible. If users cannot find the page, it does not matter how valuable it is. This is especially true if the page is itself contained within a larger site, such as a departmental page being contained within the Web site of a larger institution.²²

As mentioned earlier, the page should be designed to require minimal download time, and only necessary images and text should be included. Web designers who fail to take a “no frills” approach to their pages run the risk of having the user select another site because they do not wish to wait for the initial site to appear.²³ Sticking to the essentials helps avoid this problem.

Once the content of the page has been decided, it needs to be organized. The contents need to be prioritized and arranged in a manner that is both logical and intuitive to the user. Ideally, the page should be designed in terms of user needs, such as the steps of the search process.²⁴ The better the content is organized, the less time the user will need to spend searching the site for specific material.

A well-designed Web page will also offer the user a choice of access points. The same information can be reached in a variety of ways. Access links may be arranged by topic, by audience, or by whatever arrangement seems likely to be useful to the user.²⁵

Good color contrast between text and background is important if the site is to be readable and so that it will reproduce well when it is printed.²⁶ The type used can also make a big difference in readability. Stylistic elements like bold, italic or flashing type

need to be used with restraint.²⁷ In general, simple uncluttered type and background are more effective than a needlessly busy and complex overall look.

The homepage of the site should be as brief and as simple as possible in design. There should be a minimum of categories on the initial page, which may help to put the user at ease.²⁸ This will also enable the user to get an overview of the site at a glance. The homepage can always contain links to lengthier pages with more extensive collections of links if this is necessary to keep the homepage of the site simple.²⁹

Another useful feature of a well-designed Web page is the inclusion of a set of internal links. These can help the user navigate around the site easier. Standard elements include links from internal pages back to the home page, and links at the bottom of a page to return to the top. It can be especially useful when some of the links allow the user to go backward or forward several levels in one click.³⁰

Having briefly examined some of the design and content elements that constitute a good Web page, we can now turn to the study itself. This includes a description of the methodology, the results, and a detailed look at some of the best systems pages.

Methodology

In order to research systems department Web pages, Yahoo!'s "Reference: Libraries: Academic Libraries" classified index was surveyed. The index listed 418 libraries, but many of these were foreign or Canadian institutions. These were excluded from the study to make the sample more manageable. Over a four-week period, a total of 258 library Web pages in the United States were surveyed.

The libraries in the sample included a broad range of sizes and types of institutions, from large university libraries to small college libraries. Both public and private institutions were well represented in the survey. Seven Web pages were unavailable, so the actual number visited was 251. The author visited each library Web page in an effort to locate the library's systems department page. If, after ten minutes of searching, the author was unable to locate a systems department page, that department was categorized as not having a page.

Results

Of the 251 library Web pages surveyed, the author was able to locate only twenty-four systems department Web pages. In other words, less than one in ten libraries had a systems department page. The majority of libraries that did have a systems page tended to be medium- to large-sized university libraries having a student population of 10,000 or more students. Only one college library had a systems page.

Many of these systems pages are not readily accessible from the library's home page. Most are hidden behind at least one page, and in many cases, several pages. A user in need of help would likely experience some delay and frustration and perhaps an inability to successfully locate the systems department page. Given the potential usefulness of a good systems page, this is unfortunate.

A closer examination of the twenty-four systems pages revealed that nine of them offered only minimal information to users. This information typically consisted of only the most basic elements: a title, a brief description of the department's responsibilities, and names and contact information for some department members. A user with a

problem or a question might find these pages to be of little assistance, other than to provide a name and phone number (or in some cases an email form) of someone to contact. Depending on how quickly a user is able to get a response from one of these contacts, they may or may not be satisfied. Few of these pages even invite users to contact systems staff for help. The overall tone is “don’t call us, we’ll call you.”

The fifteen systems department pages that do contain more substantive information demonstrate a much more thoughtful approach to the possibilities and potential of a systems Web page. This is particularly true with regard to content, more so than design. What follows are brief descriptions of some of the highlights of these pages in order to help convey a better sense of what a good systems department Web page *could* be.

Auburn University Libraries <<http://www.lib.auburn.edu/automation/>>

Although the Auburn University Library systems department Web page is not especially prominent on the library’s Web page, it does have some interesting features. It uses a humorous title “Library System...master of none,” that immediately sets the user at ease. A trailer runs along the bottom of the page, reading, “If you need help with a library computer, contact HELP@LIB.AUBURN.EDU.” In addition to contact information, the responsibilities of each contact person are clearly stated so the user knows exactly who to contact to address their particular problem. A link called “Policies, Procedures and Help Requests,” connects to a page that itself contains several useful annotated links. The very first is entitled “Problem Determination and Resolution,” and its annotation reads “Check here if you are trying to figure out who to call on an evening

or weekend and there are systems problems.” Other links on this page include “Who to Call,” and “Unix Startup Help for Departmental Webmasters,” for staff interested in creating department Web pages. There is also a link for reporting equipment problems and another for monthly statistics on library Web page use.

Another link off the main systems department page called “Software Reference Documentation” offers an extensive set of links to software documentation topics such as “FTP,” “Graphics,” “HTML,” and “Windows 95.” There is a link that lists current department projects. Other links connect to trial products and to staff CD-ROM databases. Although the audience for this page is intended to be library staff, it is likely that many Auburn students and faculty might find it useful as well.

Brigham Young University <<http://www.lib.byu.edu/dept/lis/>>

The Library Information Systems department page at BYU features a table that has links to the pages of the department’s three working groups: Desktop Support, Network Support, and Unix Systems. Although the Desktop Support page is currently under construction, it lists links to a number of new features being implemented by the group. The Network Support page includes a “Newest Additions” section, containing helpful advice such as publishing HTML files using WS-FTP. There is also a list of the group’s “Current Projects,” including links to information about converting to OS/2, moving to a new office server, and future plans and projects. The page also contains documentation for the platforms the department supports and information about the library’s networked CD-ROM towers. The Unix Systems group page was also under construction at the time this author accessed it. The systems department Web page

features a list of tasks to be done and reports on their progress. There is a list of new equipment recommendations, and miscellaneous links detailing support responsibilities, departmental organization, employee schedules, and systems logon procedures.

Although not as friendly or comprehensive as Auburn, the BYU systems page contains a lot of useful information for library staff.

Dartmouth College Library <<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~library/infosys/>>

The systems department at Dartmouth College library has created a brief but helpful resource that includes links describing the campus-wide information system and its interfaces. There is a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) for library staff, and a link explaining how the catalog filter works. There are links that provide instructions for troubleshooting problems on the library's systems, and another link that enables users to search archives of the Innopac listserv. The overall feel of the page is brief, factual, no-nonsense. It is clearly intended for library staff, although the more general information about the college's system and interfaces might be useful to faculty and students as well.

Kansas State University Library <<http://www.lib.ksu.edu/depts/lms/>>

The KSU Library systems page is easily distinguished by its unusual graphic "LNS" (Library Network Services) and its witty photograph of a staff member holding his head in angst. The humorous tone is continued throughout the site and is very effective in making the systems department seem human and approachable. A list of the department staff members and interns with contact information is prominently displayed, and there is a semester-length schedule of hours posted for the department's interns. A

link called “Network Support Resources” connects to a page listing manufacturers’ Web sites and helpline numbers for hardware and software used in the library. A collection of links to search tools like Alta Vista, WebCrawler, and HotBot can also be found on this page. Another link called “Setup Procedures and other Troubleshooting Links” leads to a page of links containing instructions for windows setup, drivers and paths. The KSU systems page also includes a page of annotated links to LAN Server Documentation, including network standards, security, networked applications, and rebooting procedures. There is a link called “How to Do Cool Web Stuff.” It offers links that describe how to include current weather conditions and to create forms, images maps, and access counters, among other things. Other links at the KSU systems page provide monthly use statistics for the library’s catalog and databases, Web use statistics, and documentation for Microsoft Access 97. The KSU systems department staff manages to achieve an admirable balance on its page—playing the role of systems experts yet not taking themselves too seriously in the process.

Kent State University Libraries <<http://www.library.kent.edu/systems/>>

The systems department home page at Kent State contains many useful links to systems-related resources. Like most systems pages, it appears to be created for use by library staff rather than the campus as a whole. The page begins with information about how to contact staff and about the department’s responsibilities. There is another section entitled “Links to Resources” that features links to hardware, software, operating systems, and networking resources. Many of these resources are actual manufacturer’s pages, such as Microsoft, Macintosh, etc. The systems home page includes a section

called “Downloadable Software,” that includes telnet and FTP applications. There is also a request form for opening a new user account that is a PDF file that can be read on Adobe Acrobat. The site provides extensive documentation for the library’s circulation, cataloging, and serials systems, as well as Web proxy server instructions and remote access FAQ. A separate section of the systems homepage covers current projects of the department, among them a networked printing management system, a page of resource links on authentication, and a Hotbot search engine trial for searching the library’s Web page. The Kent State systems page does not feature a lot of unusually creative options, but it is a good solid collection of resources that is well-designed and easy to use.

Louisiana State University Libraries <<http://www.lib.lsu.edu/aands/>>

The LSU Libraries systems page utilizes a well-designed graphic in the form of a table that is divided into three columns: “About the Department,” “Services,” and “Local Documentation.” Under “About the Department” may be found pages listing staff contacts and responsibilities, a calendar listing what systems staff are available on each day of the current month, and the systems department annual report. An additional link called “News,” is actually a monthly report on projects completed and problems solved by the department. The “Services” column features links to separate pages describing local area network, PC, and Unix resources. The “PC Resources” page is whimsically titled “Two Guys Computer Repair” and features an informal, chatty discussion of how to keep a PC running well. It contains many helpful links for reporting PC and printer problems, how to handle error messages and viruses, and how to use DEFRAG. A “Unix Resources” page describes the two Unix Web servers at LSU Libraries, and includes

information about the directory structure, how to change a password on the server, dialup instructions, programming documents, and a Unix tutorial. There is also a link to LOUIS, the homepage of the Louisiana Library Network. The LSU systems page provides a handy collection of links called "Local Documentation" that supplies information about PCs, Unix, and NOTIS. There is also a link to the Graduate Assistant Handbook for students working in the department. The LSU systems page assembles a lot of valuable information and presents it in an unusually clear and simple tabular format.

Northwestern University Library <<http://www.library.nwu.edu/it/>>

The systems page at Northwestern is actually shared by two departments within its Information Technology Division—Library Management Systems, and Network and User Support Services. Clicking on the link "Library Management Systems" brings up a page of links to responsibilities within the department, information about how to request services, staff and contact information, how to access the catalog from outside the library, and a page of miscellaneous links related to library automation and technology. The other department, Network and User Support Systems, also has its own homepage that is linked to the Information Technology Division Page. Here can be found information about after-hours technical support, a form for reporting problems, an online survey to assess the training needs of library staff for various products, information about library staff accounts, and a separate page of links to resources for Windows NT. There is also a helpful subject index to levels of support offered for various types of software, management software, and Web development. A separate training page includes links to

information about computing workshops, and training videos. Software handbooks and manuals are available in PDF format as well. Yet another page describes training facilities, including a small computer lab, laptops, projectors, and a desktop publishing workstation that can be reserved by staff. The Northwestern Information Technology page has much to offer not only in terms of resources but also the tasteful way they are organized and presented.

[Penn State University Libraries](http://www.libraries.psu.edu/crsWeb/itech/itech.html) <<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/crsWeb/itech/itech.html>>

The Penn State Department for Information Technology page is not that easy to locate, because it first requires clicking on a link titled “CBRST (ITECH)” in order to find it. Once you get there, however, you’ll find some interesting links. One link, called “Our Mission,” includes not only I-Tech’s goals, but also a brief history of the department. Another link entitled “Helpdesk” connects to a page that can be used for staff to report problems. Clicking on a link called “Technology News” takes you to a page of links assembled “to help make daily automation a little easier.” These links include “Things we think you should know about,” which has an intriguing title but is still under construction, and “I-Tech Help FAQ,” which answers numerous questions about Eudora. There is also a link that connects to a page describing the availability and policies regarding lending of laptops to staff. A page entitled “Remote Access to Email Accounts” is still under construction. On the PSU Systems homepage there is a link “Instruction,” which brings up a page describing the department’s software instruction classes. A click on “Tools of the Trade” reveals a page of freeware and shareware that staff can make use of. Finally, “I-Tech Staff” links to a page describing the department’s

personnel and their responsibilities. The Penn State systems page is a very brief, no-frills page that is not flashy, but it does offer solid content.

Texas Tech University Libraries <<http://www.lib.ttu.edu/itsd/index.htm>>

The Texas Tech Information Technology Services Department page is similar to Penn State's in that it offers some basic information in a clean, unadorned package. It starts with information describing the location and hours of the department and includes a simple "Help" link with a pop-up email form that can be used by the public for describing questions or problems. This is followed by a list of staff and their titles. There is a brief mission statement, and then a link to "ITSD News." This contains information about current projects the department is involved in, and information about distance and dial in access, online catalog availability, and access to the library's databases. Another link called "Recent Projects" details a list of undertakings recently completed. There is also a link to the department's annual report. The Texas Tech systems page is unusual because it contains more information useful to the general campus population than most systems pages, and has a more "public" feel that other systems department pages might benefit from emulating.

University Libraries of Notre Dame <<http://www.nd.edu/~syshelp/public/>>

The Systems Department at Notre Dame Libraries is hidden behind four or five pages that one needs to click past to reach it. It features a tasteful design that utilizes gothic type and graphics to give it a medieval flavor. The page begins with the acknowledgement that, although the department is not a public service unit, it will try to

provide the user with technical support necessary to use LibNET, the University Libraries' Web site. It is thus clearly designed for use by the general campus population. There is a link on the systems page called the "Electronic Resources" page which was being updated and was unavailable. Under the heading "LibNET Access" is an extensive series of alphabetized and annotated links describing various databases that the library subscribes to, and how to access them. Like the Texas Tech page, the Notre Dame Libraries system page is very basic and very much oriented to campus use. Both pages might be helped by including some resources geared toward the library staff, although it is possible such information may be available on the intranets of those libraries.

University of Oklahoma Libraries <<http://www-lib.ou.edu/depts/systems/index.htm>>

The OU Libraries systems page utilizes a very simple design in the form of a table with the heading "Contents." Arranged in the boxes beneath are the logos of—and links to—an eclectic array of resources. For example, there is a links to the National Center for Supercomputing Applications' Beginner's Guide to HTML and IBM's Advanced HTML Guide. Another link connects to the Team OS/2 Online Web site, and several other links are provided to other OS/2 resources on the Web. Many of the links on this page appear to be IBM-related. There is a link to the IBM VSE/ESA home page, and to the World Wide Web Consortium. For users looking for tools for understanding the Web better, there is a link to the home page of The Web Developer's Virtual Library. Other links connect to the OS/2 Device Driver Pack, the IBM New Rack, and the home page for Inferno Software. The OU site also includes a link called "Reference Shelf" that is linked to a page of links that contains some computer dictionaries mixed in with general

reference sources like almanacs and zip code directories. The OU systems site features some worthwhile resources arranged in an interesting format that make it appealing to both novices and professionals.

The University of Utah <<http://www.aclis.utah.edu/>>

The staff at the Academic Computing and Library Information Systems (ACLIS) department at Marriott Library have assembled a worthwhile collection of links. The page opens with a link to the University of Utah computing policy, and another link to FAQ about the policy. A “Support Information” link provides access to a page of links that detail the department’s work on the library’s databases. These include a list of projects underway for the week, a list of products waiting to be installed, a list of databases with problems, hard drive mappings, and a vendor rating list that contains information about installation and update experiences that the systems department has had with various database vendors. Back on the systems home page, there are also links that allow users to apply for email and Internet access, provide resources for scanning and optical mark reading for test scoring and course evaluations, and ftp software. A set of links called “Help and Training” includes a link to the library help desk, a faculty assistance center, seminars and short courses, and online training materials. Another cluster of links provides information about computer labs on campus, and still another, about ACLIS itself. This last set of links includes information about the department’s mission and goals, a description of services, information about the membership and meeting minutes of the ACLIS Advisory committee, staff and contact information for the department, and maps of ACLIS computing areas in the library and on campus. This is a

well-conceived and designed systems page that contains a huge amount of information, which reflects the recent merger of the library's systems department with the University Computer Center and the library's microcomputer center.

The University of West Florida <<http://lanadmin.lib.uwf.edu/>>

The systems department at the UWF's John C. Pace library has created a modest but attractive Web page for its small department. The page begins with two links: one to a separate page with staff and contact information, another to a map that shows the location of the systems department in the library. This is followed by a detailed exploration of the functions and responsibilities of the department. The page then lists some of the links to institutions that the department works closely with. There are links to OCLC, The Florida Center for Library Automation (FCLC), and SOLINET (The Southwestern Library Network). A list of frequently asked questions is also available, along with a link to the reference department's staff and contact page and a note explaining that questions about search strategies or the content of databases should be directed to the reference staff. This systems page is among the best designed for a small systems department.

Yale University Library <<http://www.library.yale.edu/~lso/>>

The Yale Systems Office has an unusually colorful page that uses frames to create a column of links running along the left side of the page. The right side of the page contains only the campus and mailing addresses of the department. This seems like an unusual use of space, but the page can hardly be accused of looking cluttered. Clicking

on the first link “About the Systems Office” yields the same page with the two departmental addresses. Another link called “Staff Directory” connects to a listing of staff and contact information. A click called “Action Plan (pdf)” brought up a notice indicating that access to the file is restricted. The same result occurred with two other links “Library Technology Support Group” and “Systems Steering Committee.” Yale appears to be very restrictive with regard to who can access its resources. Clicking on “NOTIS Release 6.4.1.1” brought up a page with numerous links describing new features of the latest release, a detailed plan for implementing the project, who in the library is testing it, how a training plan will be implemented, and online documentation. A final link, called “Workstation Support” is a wonderful resource, with an unusual design that resembles one of Mondrian’s geometric creations. It is a multicolored patchwork of interlocking frames, each of which contains many links that provide help and resources for every aspect of computing. There are pages updating the status of networks and machines within the library, a link checker, a schedule of workshops and tutorials, and much more. Of all the systems pages surveyed, the page created by Yale’s Workstation Support Group stands out for its comprehensive content and creative design.

Conclusion

From the preceding survey, it is obvious that a well-designed systems department Web page can be useful to a library’s users, to library staff, and to systems staff as well. Yet despite their value, this survey suggests that relatively few systems departments have Web pages. Even fewer departments seem to have pages that offer much to users in the

way of substantial content. Only a handful such as Auburn, Northwestern, and Yale offer outstanding Web pages.

What makes for a good systems department Web page? It is not enough to have anticipated the needs of the user, though the best pages seem to have an uncanny ability to anticipate the user's needs, questions, and problems. Nor is it sufficient to have the content organized so well that it is both logical and intuitive. It is a combination of these, and more. The best systems department pages seem to convey a personality or style that makes them unique. Auburn's warmth and wit is as engaging as Yale's cool, cerebral style is intriguing.

Of course, some systems Web page is probably better than no systems Web page. After all, the central irony mentioned at the outset of this study remains. Systems librarians are the people in the library profession who know the most about the Web but have relatively little presence on it. In order for this situation to change, systems librarians will have to take the initiative themselves. Hopefully, reading an article such as this and getting a sense of the possibilities of what other systems departments are doing may serve as an impetus for more systems librarians to create departmental pages, maybe even some great ones.

Notes

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