A Better Resource For Faculty And Students: Transformation Of A Law Library Website

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A Better Resource For Faculty And Students: 
Transformation Of A Law Library Website

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Introduction
As a new law librarian, freshly out of library school, I came into my current position with an interest in technology, mostly focused on social media use for the library. Almost immediately, and with little to no experience in updating web pages, I was given the task of editing and maintaining the library’s website, which was in desperate need of a makeover.

My limited knowledge of website construction, design, and maintenance comes from two completely different experiences: a quick lesson on Microsoft FrontPage from a college class (I was an accounting major so I simply don’t recall how this lesson was relevant to that line of education), and some on-the-job experience with Drupal from my work with the Legal Information Institute.

My experience with the Legal Information Institute proved to be invaluable when it came time to update the Rutgers-Camden Law Library website because of a similar Drupal interface. I made sure to contact our IT department to find out the full extent of my access and editing permissions. Permissions control what I can do on the website, and permissions are managed by the Law IT department.

Next, I had to come up with a game plan. Fully recognizing that updating all the law library pages would take months, my plan had to be flexible (and so did I). My initial objective was to first redo the pages that I believed were, or should have been, the most-used pages on the website (e.g. information about the library, collection, resources, and reference librarians). For this, the other librarians were my focus group. Three of us were new to this library and the library website at the time, and since we were using the website to help us get familiar with some of the available reference resources, I spoke with them on a near daily basis both before and after any significant changes. Their feedback proved invaluable.

I also acknowledged that what I wanted to do would involve using more HTML (HyperText Markup Language) tag options than the Drupal rich-display offered, so I went and got myself a starter guide for HTML. From there, most of the work I did was in that code.

Drupal 7
In the first version of this article, I talked about Drupal 7 at the end because the upgraded web page editing software had only just been introduced to the school. Upon revisiting this article, I decided to incorporate the pre-Drupal 7 changes and the post-Drupal 7 changes within each section below, rather than save all the Drupal 7 changes until the end.
What do I mean by pre- and post-Drupal 7? The Law Library’s Drupal software used to be hosted on a library-run server that utilized a template built from scratch by a librarian and the Assistant Director of IT. Because this system was built in-house, they only added CSS (Cascading Styling Sheets) coding for things that were necessary at the time.

A couple of years before I got to Rutgers, this system was migrated over to the main web server for the law school. All of the librarians had access to add, modify, and delete Law Library content, restricted only by the capabilities of the man-made system that was coded by the librarian and IT. The upside to this arrangement was that it gave me complete freedom to create new pages and update existing content; the downside was that the Law Library’s pages looked entirely different from that of the law school’s, creating a visual disconnect, despite the Law Library being a menu option from the Law School website.

The Law Library’s Drupal 7 software is still hosted on the main web server for the law school, now utilizing a template designed by a third-party company that has more coding capabilities. The initial changes that I made to the library web pages were done in the older version of Drupal, and before I knew of the system’s coding restrictions. As mentioned above, most of this work was done in the code, rather than in the rich-display format.

When our IT department offered to upgrade our web pages from the old Drupal to Drupal 7, I was warned that this upgrade would come with costs: specifically, the inability to add new pages, and to manage the order of the pages from the menu options. The trade-off was that our web page designs would be consistent with that of the Law School’s web pages, which had been my ultimate goal when I began this project. As I have a friendly relationship with the IT department, and my experience thus far had confirmed that they responded to requests rather quickly, I was willing to accept these restrictions.

Each section will discuss the initial changes that I made (which became the pre-Drupal 7 changes) before the upgrade, and then any changes that were necessary after the upgrade (the post-Drupal 7 changes, and current version).

**Homepage**

This undertaking really gave me a chance to think critically about the way words appeared on any given web page, by themselves, in relation to the other words on the page, and in furtherance of the library’s mission. While I was thinking about what was visually appealing both to me and to my colleagues, ultimately, I had to make changes that would be both accepted and appealing to those I believed to be our main groups of website users: the law school community, the campus community, and the public.

The first change was logically to the Library homepage. This was the first page that our patrons saw of the library website. The old homepage (Image 1)
had three notes: the first addressing content, the second requesting donations, and the third highlighting a faculty member in the news. Beneath these paragraphs were links to the catalogs of both the Law Library and the main university library, in an outlined table. Having little experience with my library at the time, I did note that many calls that came into the reference and circulation desks were inquiries about library hours. A quick glance at the former homepage shows that there was no bright, blinking neon sign indicating on which page the hours could be located. So, the first change that I made in August 2012 was simply to display the regular semester hours on the homepage;

(Image 2)

this change was minor, yet significant.6

Main menu items across the top of the page are called “Primary Navigation”7 while the menu items along the side of the page are called “Secondary Navigation”8. When visitors arrived at the Law Library homepage, the Primary Navigation links were static across every law library web page. The menu on the left of the page displayed the four secondary links of the Law Library option from the main menu. Clicking on any other Primary Navigation link should have displayed the secondary links of that main menu option. For some strange reason, the Secondary Navigation menu only ever displayed the Law Library’s secondary links despite having clicked on the other main menu links. While I had the permissions to designate a new or existing page as Primary or Secondary, the control over what displayed as Secondary Navigation was beyond my permissions. So, I had to request that our IT department fix the Secondary Navigation to allow the correct menu display for any given main menu selection.

The next change in November 2012 addressed the visual appeal of the information9. We added a link to the Newark Law Library catalog, and in doing so, we decided to draw users’ eyes to the library catalogs by turning the hyperlinks into Drupal’s pre-formatted headings10 (“<h2>” tags), enlarging the text and making the links more prominent. I had originally wanted to do away with the lines of the table, but the result did not do much to enhance the clarity of the information, so I left the visible lines. While I was keen on learning HTML to control the look and feel of the website,11 the task of learning and then incorporating CSS to add more distinction12 to certain information seemed daunting in the face of all of the other changes that had to be made, so I had to make do with just HTML for the time being. I did add some “website flair13” with buttons that linked to the library’s social media accounts (Image 3, top of next page).
The upgrade to Drupal 7 affected the visual display of the information on our homepage. The new layout moved our main menu to the right side of the page, displaying our offerings much more prominently. Unfortunately, this made the homepage picture the main focal point on that page, forcing down the information that website visitors might be more interested in. This presented a challenge to me in how I wanted to present the information for the best visual appeal for our website users. I decided to keep the table, doing away with visible lines. I got creative with the bold ("<strong>14") formatting option and headings tags to make the hours and catalogs pop out for users. The navigation notes and information about other website changes, followed by an “In the News” section are farther down the page. If you visit the website now, you will also notice that I had to do away with the social media buttons, so I created simple hyperlinks within the designated footer ("<footer>" tag) area. Since the Law Library is a department of the law school, the banner across the top of the page, including menu items, and the banner across the bottom of the page, including contact information, are static law school web designs. In the bottom banner, the law school has incorporated their own social media buttons, so in an effort to avoid confusion, I opted for clean hyperlinks as opposed to seemingly duplicative social media buttons.

Consistency In Appearance — Details Do Matter

After modifying the homepage, my next goal was to establish a consistent format across all of our pages. The library’s primary function is to support the mission and curriculum of the law school and the scholarship interests of the law school community, respectively, so I wanted our pre-Drupal 7 pages to look somewhat similar to those of the law school, with proper sections for information and resources clearly designated and separated and with appropriate headers for each section. I wanted the library website to be functional for the law school community so that...
they would have easy access to the resources that we were making available. The former layout was inconvenient for the librarians, not to mention the faculty and students!

One immediately noticeable thing was that the titles of menu items and the titles of pages they linked to sometimes differed. In some places, users would find abbreviations and symbols for words that were written out in other locations (e.g. “Int’l” and “International”). Oftentimes, the abbreviations were inconsistent within a single page. So, I decided to standardize the menu items as either “and” or “&,” but not both, and if periods are used in abbreviations (e.g. “N.J.” vs. “NJ”), then there had to be consistency in that as well. I did away with the abbreviations within menu item titles because they were visually unappealing otherwise. Where menu items used to simply display the types of resources (e.g. formerly: “foreign & int’l law” or “gov. docs”), I decided to tack on the word “Resources” to these menu item titles to remove any confusion for the average user. A reason for this was one of our ongoing digitization projects—converting government documents to a digital format, which are accessible from our catalog. While we want to publicize the existence of these digital government documents, I wanted to reduce user confusion from similar documents found on the Government Documents webpages (.gov sites), offering resources, tools, and guides for finding Government Documents, separate from our digital offerings.

Many of our old pages had been set up as tables with visible lines and, in some places, bullet points, and even worse yet, a bulleted list within a table with visible lines. This format was able to accommodate all of the information being offered to the website visitors, but it was a poorly thought out design coupled with intermittent maintenance that made the information difficult to find and therefore use. Due to the lackadaisical input format offered by Drupal’s rich-display, many web pages were several pages long (Image 5) with inconsistent spacing between lines; while others had inconsistently indented and spaced out bullet points—in some places several line returns (i.e. new paragraphs <p>) and indented bullet points that should have been more prominent. This display resulted in a lot of good information going unnoticed and unused. Furthermore, because of the intermittent maintenance coupled with the inconsistent layout on any given page, many links went unchecked for years (based on the “Last Updated On” information in Drupal’s content management system), leaving hyperlinked texts that led to many 404 errors (i.e. “Page Not Found”).

My first step to creating a consistent feel across all pages was to make sure that each page had a proper heading. I attempted to employ the Title (“<title>”) tag, but I was not happy with the spatial layout that resulted, so I used the Heading 3 (“<h3>”) tag for the page title, the Heading 4 (“<h4>”) tag to note either a disclaimer or a description, all followed by a Horizontal Rule (“<hr />”) to physically create a break between the header and the page content. Moreover, where
sections on each page were separated by the Horizontal Rule breaks, I used the pre-formatted Section Header (<span class="section_header">23") offered from the rich-display to change the color of the text of the section titles to red, allowing different information sources to stand out to users. (Image 6)

My next step was to figure out what to do with the information within the tables with visible borders. (Image 5)

This pre-formatted option was my only option for changing the text color display. As previously mentioned, the way that the library's old Drupal system had been set up did not allow the incorporation of different style elements within the markup language. Even in the full HTML display, those changes would not have been reflected visually—the system would simply ignore those commands because it was not programmed to recognize them.

While I wanted to completely do away with tables, the old system didn't offer the rich-display modules that I would have needed to properly space out and line up information (such as left- or center-justifying text). I kept some tables, for spatial consistency, but I learned how to cleverly code the table formatting to display information in a way that was visually appealing. The information about the collection and the list of reference librarians were converted into similar tables. However, what made these tables different, and therefore more aesthetically pleasing was that I employed some of the table formatting options to make sure that the table borders were not visible, and to make sure that the top cell(s) of the table were configured as a table Heading to properly give a title to the list of information (Image 6, top of next page). The information that people seek is in bold followed by a description that is not bold. This bold/normal formatting is consistent with other lists of resources on any given Library web page.
The lists of information from the above example allowed for the use of specifically formatted tables due to the nature of the information (i.e. short lists (Image 6)).

For the longer lists of information, I decided to convert some of the paragraphs (“<p>” tags) and bulleted lists (which used “<ul>” and “<li>” tags24), to detailed lists (using “<dl>,” “<dt>,” and “<dd>” tags25): while I did not have the modules necessary to indent, center- or right justify information within an area of the page, the detailed lists offered a way to do just that. Each link was automatically left-justified and bold so that it stood out from the description (“<dd>”) that rested immediately underneath and was automatically indented.

Also, Drupal 7 displays hyperlinks as a different color than text, setting off the link title from the description of that resource below, which was a look that I had originally wanted, but could not make happen with the programming restrictions of the old system. So I ended up changing all of the detailed lists back to paragraphs with line breaks (“<br/>” tag). This made all the information left-justified, with no indenting, creating a clean look to our lists of resources.

**Reorganization Of Information**

After several discussions about some of the web pages with a colleague, I decided that I should proceed with updating pages based on the assumption that users don’t scroll27; so the most important information had to be “above the fold” (i.e. near the top of the page).

One example of this was the page containing the Library Policies, which were at the bottom of the very long Student Services page (Image 6) and not clearly labeled on a menu title. It did not make sense to keep most of the library policies at the bottom of a page without any directive that that was where that information could be found, especially on a page titled “Law Library Guide to Student Services”; after all, library policies apply to more than just students. Also, there were some other library policies on another page. I consolidated all policies onto a new page entitled “Library and Lending Policies,” so there should be no confusion as to where those are located, and to whom they apply.

As I mentioned earlier, there was useful, substantive content on some of the pages, which saved me the trouble of having to create content from scratch. The problem was that the pages were so long and monotone that it was hard to distinguish any one detail from any other—
everything looked the same so any piece of information was easily lost to the untrained eye. For example, the New Jersey Resources page (Image 7 and 8)

shows how the Detailed List formatting created a cleaner look for a single web page. A more appealing display of the information increases most users’ ability to find what they are looking for simply because it is easier to read.

I believe that the detailed lists were extremely helpful for the pages-long lists of resources (hyperlinks followed by a short description of that resource), and seemed more helpful for organizing the information within individual cells on the tables as you can see on the (now) Judicial Branch Resources page, available from our Government Documents Resources.

**Next Steps: Content Management**

The most important content change I made was at the start of this project. I knew that we could not fix all the content issues right away, so I decided to start with the most used resources on the website: the list of databases for research. As I said at the beginning of this article, the law library’s mission is to support the law school community, and one of the ways that we can do that is by having easily accessible resources presented in a manner that makes those resources easy to find, with the least amount of effort, frustration and confusion. So, having the list of databases used for research behind a link titled “Restricted Access Databases” did not seem logical. To me, the link name was a deterrence to website visitors; in fact, I had spoken with a 3L journal editor who had never once clicked on the link to see what the restricted access databases were. Now, all of our databases for research are behind a link titled “Research Databases” in an effort to promote access and user interaction.

Furthermore, some information was duplicative on several website pages, so I wanted to get rid of obvious overlaps that confused visitors (and me). The duplications dealt mainly with our digital resource offerings: U.S. government documents and opinions, and New Jersey courts opinions. I was often confused by these duplications because, in the process of
finding resources available to help my research, I often thought that there were several different databases from which to check simply because the link to that resource was in several locations, usually under different link titles. For instance, there used to be links to the New Jersey Courts database available from both the New Jersey Resources page as well as the Digital Collections page. The confusion stemmed from the fact that the hyperlinks employed different page titles for those hyperlinks, giving me and possibly other users the impression that the same databases available from various places on our website contained different information, when they were, in fact, one in the same (e.g. the New Jersey Resources page used “NJ Courts” within a list of links for other NJ resources and specific courts’ opinions, while the Digital Collections page used “New Jersey Courts” followed by separate links for “US District Court for the District of New Jersey” and “New Jersey Court opinions”). I had to make a decision: were those databases New Jersey resources or Digital Collections? I ultimately decided that they were Digital Collections. So, as part of an ongoing library project, I created a link to the Digital Collections page from the New Jersey Resources page, rather than duplicating the hyperlink to the New Jersey Courts database. Moreover, many of the links went unchecked for years. Any given broken link could only be fixed by finding the entirely new URL for the hyperlinked item.  

The new layout of the information is much cleaner and makes the presentation of available resources much easier to scan through; at the same time, it highlights areas where we need to update or create more content (e.g. our new “Study & Practice” page was born of information from the research page that might not necessarily be classified as “research resources” as well as using ideas from our librarians for content to be created). This will be an ongoing group effort.

Conclusion, Of Sorts
What was once a series of web pages haphazardly fitted together with virtual scotch-tape has become a cohesive, optimized interface that operates smoothly. It was my ultimate goal that by improving the functionality of the website and the presentation of the information, resources would be easier to find, not just for librarians, but also for faculty, students, and the public. We have been answering fewer questions regarding library hours. And now that the librarians all know where to find certain resources, we’ve created a whole host of potential teachable moments for reference desk inquiries.

This upgrade, like most, came with its pros and cons. Since the overhaul, I’m happy to say that I do not spend much time updating the website. The librarians work as a team to ensure that our hyperlinks remain live, and will notify me accordingly if something needs to be added, deleted, or simply fixed. The upside is that all of our webpages match those of the law school, and they are more logically organized. The only downside to the new Drupal is that I’ve lost some of my editing permissions; specifically, the ability to add a new page and then publish it for all users to see.

Rather than have me preach to you about why law librarians should know HTML, read this blog post on the Learning LibTech blog: http://cynng.wordpress.com/2013/03/17/why-you-should-learn-html/.

Notes
1 “Permissions” defined at https://drupal.org/getting-started/6/admin/user/permissions, last accessed on October 3, 2013. Because Law IT manages all of the various law departments’ web pages, user permissions are generally restricted to access for necessary pages, only (i.e. librarians only have access to edit law library web pages).
2 More commonly known as WYSIWYG (“What you see is what you get”) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WYSIWYG, last accessed on October 1, 2013. This display looks like familiar word-processing software where the available HTML tag’s editing options look like buttons that easily enable the user
to insert mark-up language into the editor without knowing the different HTML tag options.

3 Boumphrey, F. (2012). *HTML for dummies elearning kit*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. (This is not an endorsement; I’ve just had success with this series in the past.)

4 Boumphrey (2012) p. 10. These formatting options can control the style of the text (i.e., font size, type of font, etc.) so that the text stands out from the surround text in a noticeable way. I don’t get into CSS all that much in this paper because I didn’t use many CSS formatting options, with the exception of the “section header” option that changed the font color of select text (post, at 5).

5 I was not using analytics at the time, so this was a subjective conclusion based on observation and the shared references experiences of my colleagues.

6 Again, no formal analytics were collected, but the number of calls to the reference and circulations desk regarding hours were significantly reduced.

7 Also called “Main Menu,” defined at https://drupal.org/documentation/modules/menu. Last accessed on October 1, 2013.

8 Also called “Secondary Menu” defined at https://drupal.org/documentation/modules/menu. Last accessed on October 1, 2013.

9 See, generally, Conroy, Karin, “Website Design Best Practices” (2012). The Lawyerist (Blog), available from http://lawyerist.com/website-design-best-practices/, last accessed on October 1, 2013. Again, without using CSS features, it was tricky to make certain words, like Section Headers, stand out on a page that was designed to make all text display in a consistent, monotonous format.

10 For dummies, p. 31. I used headings because I would not have been able to change the size of the font otherwise, even with CSS.

11 Initially, since the library web page design was different from that of the law school web page design, CSS would have been used to create a more consistent display between the law school pages and the law library pages (e.g., larger, bold section headings followed by smaller text, and a different text color for hyperlinks).

12 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cascading_Style_Sheets. The “styling” that could have been added, had the system been programmed to accept such displays, included: font sizes, font colors, etc.


14 Defined, with examples at http://www.w3schools.com/tags/tag_strong.asp, last accessed on October 1, 2013.

15 Defined, with an example at http://www.w3schools.com/tags/tag_footer.asp, last accessed on October 1, 2013.

16 Tables require several tags, depending on the number of rows and columns utilized. Table is defined with additional styling attributes at http://www.w3schools.com/tags/tag__

17 See footnote 3. In Drupal, there are not as many formatting button options as we’re used to seeing in our documents editors, whatever they may be. In a documents editor, you can control the line spacing, and the degree of indentation for a bullet list, usually fairly easily with the ruler at the top of the document; in the Drupal rich-text editor, line spacing and paragraph indentation were sometimes hard to control because, despite the notion that “what you see is what you get,” line spacing and indenting text often looked different in the editor than it did on the published page. These specific formatting problems were easier to control in the code. See, generally, https://drupal.org/node/669114, last accessed on October 1, 2013.

18 Defined, with an example at http://www.w3schools.com/tags/tag_p.asp, last accessed on October 1, 2013.

19 Defined, with an example at http://www.w3schools.com/tags/tag_title.asp, last accessed on October 1, 2013.

20 Defined, with an example at http://www.w3schools.com/tags/tag_hn.asp, last accessed on October 1, 2013.

21 Defined, with an example at http://www.w3schools.com/tags/tag_hn.asp, last accessed on October 1, 2013.

22 Defined, with an example at http://www.w3schools.com/tags/tag_hn.asp, last accessed on October 1, 2013.

23 Defined, with an example at http://www.w3schools.com/tags/tag_p.asp, last accessed on October 1, 2013.

24 Defined, with an example at http://www.w3schools.com/tags/tag_li.asp, last accessed on October 2, 2013.


26 Defined at http://www.w3schools.com/tags/tag_br.asp, last accessed on October 2, 2013.

27 Soussan Djamasi, Marisa Siegel, Tom Tullis, *Generation Y, web design, and eye tracking*, International Journal of Human-Computer Studies, Volume 68, Issue 5, May 2010, Pages 307-323, ISSN 1071-5819, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2009.12.006. (http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1071581909001918) “... the top part of the page received high levels of fixation while the area below the fold received no fixation within the first five seconds of viewing, and very little fixation over the entire viewing time (319)... Through eye tracking, it was found that Generation Y did not scroll, suggesting that important information should be placed above the fold of a web page... (320).

28 Thank you to Melanie Gordon, a unit computing specialist at Rutgers-Camden, who migrated all the library pages into Drupal 7, checking for and fixing broken links along the way.