Streamlining Maintenance and Access to a University’s Academic Catalog

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Abstract

Developing and maintaining an online version of a University’s Academic Catalog has increasingly become a priority for enrollment management and IT staff. Many schools are now using the online version of their catalog as their primary working copy and are generating their print version periodically as needed. Managing and accessing this content can be cumbersome without a viable content management solution. Using Digital Architecture’s Acalog™ ACMS (Academic Catalog Management System) solution, the process is streamlined for both the end user and the catalog administrators. Built from the ground up by academic professionals exclusively to meet catalog management needs, this product enables various people in the catalog editing and maintenance process to work together to accomplish their goals without a prerequisite of technical expertise. Additionally, prospective students and other web visitors have speedy and intuitive access to catalog data from both current and previous years. Since implementing Acalog™ ACMS at Philadelphia Biblical University, various individuals have been able to directly participate in the editing process to develop a cohesive, intuitive online catalog presence in an affordable manner.

Introduction/Background

Philadelphia Biblical University is an independent private Christian university in southeastern Pennsylvania. The University has a full-time equivalent student body of approximately 1,400 students at the graduate and undergraduate levels. In recent years with the growing trend towards remote/web access and digital format for most pertinent data, it has become necessary to explore options for making our official catalog data available accordingly. We first made our catalog data available by simply posting a digital copy of the print version using Adobe’s .PDF format. With the obvious limitations of .pdf for editing, searching, hyper linking, etc. we desired a more web-friendly format. We then posted an html version of the print catalog, but it was essentially a sloppy html export from print publishing software, resulting in excessive clean-up and formatting work. Our ultimate desire was to make a paradigm shift from working primarily with a print copy (generating an online version as needed) to working primarily with an online version (generating a print version as needed). It was determined that some form of content management software to facilitate the ongoing management of the catalog would be necessary.
Considering the Options

To make the paradigm shift to working exclusively with an online catalog for ongoing maintenance, revisions, etc. and abandon the ages-old way of catalog management, we formulated a wish list of features that would need to be available in any sort of solution. These items included the following:

- A user-friendly interface for the web visitor who needs access to catalog data
- Intuitive and easy to use for administrative staff who publish and maintain catalog data
- Ability to archive previous versions of the catalog
- Ability to easily and cost-effectively generate print versions of the catalog to meet the reduced, but ongoing need for print copies
- Ability to have an ongoing editing process transparent to the end user
- Ability to have multiple levels of access and permissions
- A search function to access catalog data quickly and easily
- Compatibility with other areas of our web site, including the “look and feel”
- Cost-effective in both the short term and long term
- Ability to track changes made to catalog data
- Reduce the need for the print version and its associated costs (postage, printing, etc.)
- Streamline management with reduced dependence on IT for routine editing

Given this list of needs and wants, it was quite clear that a content management solution of some sort was in order. As we contemplated the options, we found that nearly all viable options were either full-fledged CM solutions designed for managing an entire web site or were scaled-down versions of such systems geared for smaller applications. Additionally, all were quite expensive, typically in the $50-$100K range for licensing alone. In the midst of our search we discovered Digital Architecture’s Acalog™ ACMS product (http://www.acalog.com), which was exceptionally well-suited to our goals in virtually every way. Acalog™ ACMS was originally designed from the ground up as an online academic catalog solution. It was developed by academia for academia and had no purpose other than to serve as a turn-key solution for schools looking to publish their catalog(s) online.

We made the decision to purchase Acalog™ ACMS based on its compatibility with our needs and wants, our impression of Digital Architecture as a company, the professionalism of their staff, and their affordability.

Requirements

Acalog™ ACMS runs as a hosted solution, resulting in essentially no in-house technical involvement from an IT perspective with regard to ongoing maintenance. Digital Architecture’s competent staff takes care of all upgrades and maintenance to both the software and hardware.

Using the software

Acalog™ ACMS has two primary components—the Publisher and the Gateway. The Publisher is the management interface (requiring authentication), and it is used to manage, edit, export, update, etc. all components of the catalog(s).
Acalog™ ACMS is currently home to both our Undergraduate and Graduate catalogs. The Publisher interface allows our staff to simultaneously work on existing catalogs as well as future catalogs. Currently existing catalogs can be copied over to serve as the groundwork for future years’ catalogs. Catalogs are not live/accessible to users on the Gateway until they are enabled accordingly in the Publisher interface. Future catalogs can consequently be edited on an ongoing basis and published publicly only when editing is complete.

The catalogs published by Acalog™ ACMS are highly customizable and flexible in order to meet the specific goals and structure of a given college or university. Courses, colleges, schools, departments, programs, etc. can all be added, deleted and arranged accordingly in order to build the precise hierarchy for the institution within their Acalog™ ACMS database.
Within the Publisher interface there are several tools and features to streamline the editing process. These features include:

- Change Notification - Establish lines of approval for making changes to content, communicate with other editors from within the Publisher interface, and approve/reject changes
- Audit Snapshots - Compare changed versions versus previous versions
- Version Tracking - Track all changes to catalog content with detailed audit trails

When the need inevitably arises for a print version of the catalog (accreditation requirements, etc.), the Acalog™ ACMS software has provisions for generating an export file of the entire catalog, suitable for import into a pre-press software application. Additionally, Digital Architecture’s staff offers optional pre-press services for handling the specific formatting and final layout of the print version.

The second major component of the Acalog™ ACMS system is the Gateway, which serves as the public user interface to the catalog data. The Gateway is designed using style sheets and templates to match the general look and feel of other areas of the university’s web site. It consists primarily (80%) of dynamic data that is pulled from a database and managed primarily through the aforementioned Publisher interface.
When viewing the catalog in the Gateway interface, users can select different catalogs from a pull-down menu. Available options will be all catalogs that have been “published” and typically includes current and past versions of all catalogs that the University is currently managing in the Acalog™ ACMS system.

Visitors may also optionally authenticate to the system (with an email address & password) and maintain a “portfolio” of courses and programs of interest for future reference. This can be a benefit in the college decision-making process or during the advising process for enrolled students.
Pros & Cons

Pros

• The system meets all of our needs, satisfying all of the items on our original wish list. Every department involved in the catalog editing process, particularly those most closely involved, has been universally satisfied.
• Performance is fast and intuitive
• The staff at Digital Architecture is very courteous and professional and has always been very attentive to our needs. They didn’t put us in the back seat once we had signed our contract. They honor their quotes and have always been very sincere in every aspect of our interaction with them. Additionally, they were very patient and gracious throughout our long decision-making process.
• Product has been continually developed and improved with customer feedback and needs in mind
• Allows IT to have minimal involvement in the ongoing editing, maintenance and support of the online academic catalog(s).

Cons

• The non-dynamic areas of the catalog, which consist of static HTML pages (message from the provost, policies, calendar, etc.), cannot be edited directly from within the Publisher interface and the process instead entails editing the HTML offline (using an editor) and uploading the static pages using the Publisher interface.
• Modifying the actual design template and/or style sheets cannot be done independently. However, these types of changes are very infrequent and would typically be done only in the case of a site redesign.

Summary

All in all, PBU has been extremely satisfied with the Acalog™ ACMS system and has had no regrets. It has served us well in the short time we have been clients and we highly recommend it to other institutions that are looking for an online catalog management solution.