

Using Drupal to Connect Educators



Company Summary

- Organization: Empire State College
- Industry: Higher Education
- Type of Drupal Site: Intranet, small independent websites, educational tools
- # of Drupal Sites: 3

Online Innovation at Empire State College

Founded in 1971, Empire State College is uniquely designed to serve adults pursuing associate, bachelor's and master's degrees. The college offers affordable, SUNY degrees onsite at 35 locations in New York state and abroad, as well as entirely online.

Empire State College is focused on mentored learning, with one-to-one programs that provide unique flexibility to adult learners. With learning centers, international locations, and vibrant online learning programs, students at Empire State College can personalize how they engage with education. Empire State College takes pride in its alternative approach to individualized learning.

Silos Within a School

One of Empire State College's strengths is the diversity of locations and programs. With a decentralized organization, the school is well-structured to help students overcome logistical and scheduling challenges, while providing a unique learning experience. As a result of Empire State's dispersion, educators, staff, administrators and various centers and departments often operate independently. An intranet was developed as a way to bring the staff of the college together.

The original iteration of the intranet was consistent with many web 1.0 sites. Manually composed and updated in HTML, the site consisted of a static directory of links, discussion topics, and a shortcut to staff web mail. As the social publishing capabilities of web 2.0 emerged, the absence of many potential services and applications became more conspicuous. Empire State College considered ways to enable their intranet to bring the faculty, staff and administration together more effectively. The answer lay in social publishing.

Intranet Challenges

- Little stickiness; provided diminishing returns
- Did not help connect faculty and staff
- Platform only allowed for the most basic forms of communication

Seeking Solutions

With a parallel project in place to bring the college's internal newsletter online, a rebuilding of the intranet was approved. While the college traditionally had relied on developing homegrown applications or commercial solutions, the new intranet was an ideal opportunity to explore open source alternatives.

Stephen Simon, the development lead for the project, had prior experience managing content managing systems, and took a pragmatic approach. Stephen and a team of three developers reviewed all of the leading open source content management systems, and ultimately selected Drupal, the open-source social publishing platform. "I don't carry an allegiance to proprietary or open source platforms. I'm of the mind that you look at all of the tools available, and then pick the best tool for the job. Given the scope of the project and the budget, this seemed to be a good fit for a reliable open source platform."

While Drupal's capabilities met all of his requirements, the determining factor for Stephen and the project team was the platform developer's community. "I was impressed by the size and quality of developers at Drupal.org. The real difference is how energetic and prolific members are. I could tell that the Drupal community was buzzing with energy, talent, and enthusiasm. With a modestly sized team tasked to building the site, an active and engaged community was important in our final decision."

Rebuilding the Intranet

With a platform selected and a hosting provider in place, the team at Empire State College began to plan out desired functionality and architecture in December of 2008. The expectation starting out was that the intranet would need some basic support, including site maintenance, and regular site, core and security updates.

As the team started to assemble modules and customize functionality, they realized they required additional Drupal expertise – each minor update was mandating additional changes, and pressured the implementation schedule. Applying security updates required testing, and vetting modules became a time-consuming process. The development support provided by their host was insufficient to meet the goals of the new site. The team at Empire State College didn't need traditional consultants, but true Drupal experts who would become partners in the project's success.

The search for subject matter expertise led Empire State College to Acquia, a commercial open source company providing products, services and technical support for Drupal. Acquia initially was chartered to provide a "jump-start" program to help the team get started on the right foot. This jump-start served two purposes: providing a background to Drupal's capabilities to all interested parties, and targeting follow-up training for the intranet team.

In the process of Acquia's introductory sessions, the newsletter team became interested in leveraging Drupal to bring the publication online. The intranet and newsletter projects quickly meshed, and a joint project emerged – the internal newsletter would serve as the home page for Empire State College's intranet.

Acquia quickly proved its value, according to Stephen Simon. "The experience with Acquia was more than traditional support – they worked to understand our goals, and helped illustrate how to best reach those goals using Drupal," he said. "From providing guidance on selecting modules to assisting us with authentication issues, Acquia saved us time and effort by pointing us in the right direction." Stephen pointed out that each member of his team also had competing responsibilities. Given the project team's limited bandwidth, Acquia's help and guidance became an important factor in moving the project from design to production.

A prime example of Acquia expertise came in the form of integrating the college's Lotus Notes authentication. Acquia contributed custom Drupal development, creating an authentication interface, and coaching the internal team through implementation and testing. The result for the college was the integration of Lotus Notes and Drupal into a single sign-on environment that allows users to move seamlessly between the two platforms.

The team began full development in March; in May they began to organize training to help the community members understand how to take advantage of their new Drupal tools. By early July, the site was themed, and the site went live on July 20th. After the initial launch, it was determined that Acquia was more inline with their ongoing needs as a support provider, and Empire State College enrolled in Acquia's Network Subscription plan. Bringing subject matter expertise to rapidly address technical hurdles, Acquia has proven itself as a valued partner in rolling out Drupal solutions at the college.

Bringing the Community Together

The revamped intranet site starts with an online newsletter, and provides an intuitive system for non-technical members to create and share content. Content creators do not require any web coding expertise; the Drupal publishing interface allows them to suggest articles and calendar events easily.

One of the primary goals reached by the intranet team was implementing organic groups. Organic groups can be created and managed by any user, based on a topic of that user's choosing. Organic groups focus on a range of topics, from business oriented groupings such as job function and committee membership, to general interest such as learning environments. The Empire State College intranet team worked to provide tools so that community members can easily find and join existing organic groups of interest.

The new intranet is piloting a single source for campus-wide calendar scheduling. Drupal has transformed the newsletter, allowing faculty members to submit story topics for consideration directly. The new intranet and newsletter have "turned readers

Drupal Benefits

- Self-service content publishing
- Organic groups that bring the community together
- Information sharing that breaks down the silos
- A newsletter that blurs the line between content consumers and creators

Client Impressions

“Our college community may be dispersed, but thanks to Drupal, they don’t have to feel disconnected.”

— Stephen Simon

into members and stakeholders” according to Stephen, by allowing logged users to submit topics, post content, and follow up with content. Drupal’s social publishing capabilities – the ability to create, consume, share and comment on content, go far beyond the scope of the original intranet.

“Drupal enabled us to take our intranet beyond the next level – by providing a social publishing platform that can bring together anybody from our many physical and virtual locations. The newsletter-intranet site is helping to create a centralized exchange of information, by allowing staff to build professional and personal relationships that might not otherwise be possible. Our community may be dispersed, but thanks to Drupal, they don’t have to feel disconnected.”

Looking Forward

In terms of piloting an open-source solution, Drupal has proven itself to be a successful alternative to commercial software. The Drupal team finds new ways continually to bring college members together, and address ongoing training demands, so that users can maximize their intranet benefits. In addition to further intranet projects, Empire State College is evaluating Drupal as a potential solution to supporting public-facing educational tools outside the intranet.

About Acquia

Acquia is a commercial open source software company. We provide a valuable set of software and network services for the popular Drupal open source social publishing system. At Acquia, we maximize the potential of Drupal-powered solutions through our annual subscriptions for software and services. For more information about how Acquia can transform your community driven web investments, contact Acquia Sales at sales@acquia.com, 888-9-ACQUIA or +1-978-296-5250.