

General Guidelines for Web Photography

Prepared by BigBad, Inc

The following are general recommendations created to provide initial guidelines for shooting photography that will be most successful in the web medium. This document is intended as a starting point only, and should not be taken as direction for specific individual shots. The included examples are meant to clarify points certain points, and may not specifically relate to your individual campus.

Photographs are one of the primary elements contributing to a page's file size, and large photos will adversely affect download speed. Photographs should be used judiciously; care should be taken that images add value to the site and specifically enhance or illustrate key concepts and ideas. On content pages of the site, images used should directly represent ideas present in that page's content. In terms of the use of photography on a web site, quality is better than quantity.

In the web medium, certain imagery works better than other types: in general, tight shots (close to the subject) much work better than wider shots (farther away); images with a lot of detail and/or complicated composition are less effective; and all images need to be able to work well at a small size. These points should be considered when selecting or shooting photography for web use. Images that work well in print may not work well on a web site.

General Composition

Images with simple backgrounds work best; in the online environment too many details can easily overwhelm the rest of the subject matter—for example, instead of a shot of a group of students interacting with a faculty member, tighten (or crop) the shot to include just 1 or 2 students and the professor—focusing on a few individuals, rather than the whole group.

Shots that are wide (from a distant perspective) feel too remote to site users; bring them closer to the subject matter by composing tighter (closer) shots. Tightly composed shots can communicate a welcoming, friendly community; wide shots tend to convey a more disconnected, impersonal feel.

People

People should be positioned relatively close together—space (between people) that works fine in print very easily becomes distracting dead space on the Web, where space is at a premium. For example, an image of two people in discussion at a table will be more effective if the individuals are seated at adjacent corners of the table and leaning inward, vs. seated on opposite sides of the table and leaning backward in their chairs. The general idea is to minimize the amount of negative space between the people.

Images must feel genuine—shoot actual ongoing activities and events when possible. When specific shots must be created, take special care to avoid shots of people that feel too stiff or staged. Users, particularly prospective students, will lack confidence in both the site and the messaging presented if they feel that any of the information they are being presented—including imagery—is not genuine.

When shooting people photographs, be sure to include images that illustrate a variety of activities and relationships student-student, student-faculty, student-staff, etc. to provide a sense of campus life and community.

Campus and Facilities

Prospective students and parents will want to see what the campus looks like. External campus shots are one place where wider shots will be beneficial. When shooting campus shots, do this when students are present so that the school is portrayed as an active, dynamic place. Show facilities that have unique or memorable characteristics, or new facilities that have recently been added. Prospective parents will be interested in seeing what a new library looks like; high school athletes will be interested in a renovated field house or new playing fields; alums will want to see growth but also that their old favorites have been carefully maintained.

Include both interior and exterior shots. Show students using classrooms, the library, athletic facilities, research labs, etc. Prospective students will be trying to “picture themselves there,” and the more quality visuals that are included in a site, the more easily this will be accomplished.

Images of architectural details can communicate a great deal about the feel of a campus through color and texture, supporting (not replacing) other imagery in conveying a sense of place for a particular campus. For example, brick, ivy, and white columns easily convey an idea of "Harvard." At the same time, care must be taken to choose details that are both interesting and unique to your campus, as well as to shoot these elements from an interesting angle or perspective. Images that are too predictable will seem trite and not stand out from those on other sites. Lots of schools have clock or bell towers—the key is to show how that particular clock or bell tower is unique. For example, if, on a particular campus, this tower can be shot with a recognizable cityscape in the background, the resulting image conveys to the viewer information not only about what the campus buildings look like, but also places the school as a whole in a context of a specific geographic location.