Saint Mary’s College of California  
Web redesign

**ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS:**  
General IA & Content Recommendations

Academic department and program sites are a crucially important source of information for prospective students— and one of Saint Mary’s biggest recruitment opportunities. When prospects come to the SMC site for the first time, they may not be interested in reading information from the Admissions office about why Saint Mary’s is such a great place to go to school— more likely, they’ll want to see the school in action, and get a sense of the kind of things that students do at SMC. This is even more important for your prospective graduate and professional student audience. The department and/or program pages are likely to be among their first destinations; that’s why it’s important that their content be considered just as carefully as the site’s top level landing pages.

Department/program navigation and content should be presented in a way that acknowledges prospects as a primary audience. At the same time, these sites are well-used tools for communication within departments, between faculty and students, and outside departments, among faculty of different institutions, and they must continue to serve their own communities’ unique needs. So departmental sites must balance quick access to helpful information with an effective presentation of the students, faculty and research activities that they’re made of.

For SMC’s academic departments and programs, the IA and content strategies proposed here recommend a presentation of content that appeals to a public audience while maintaining a high level of scholarly professionalism and service to current students. The goal should be to produce friendly, well-written, consistently organized, richly dynamic academic department and program sites that benefit all constituents.

On top of this, the sites should feel clean and uncluttered; all information should be appropriately compartmentalized and presented, easy to quickly digest. Those prospects who want to dig deeper can always do so, but the personality of a department should be easy to read at a glance.
General Recommendations

1. **All academic departments and programs should be encouraged to adopt a single yet flexible design, IA, and content structure.**

   Currently, SMC’s department and program sites fall along a spectrum of content presentation with a few maintaining their own independent websites—Theology & Religious Studies, Chemistry, Physics & Astronomy, etc. Of those in the standard template, there are some with more active sites and those that are little more than copies of the Course Catalog.

   Prospective (and current) students flip between departments and programs when comparing colleges and universities, deciding which courses to take, looking into the resources available in various departments, trying to decide on a major, etc. Because of this, the information found on all of these departmental/program homepages should be succinct, engaging, and similarly constructed. It should be easy to compare and contrast options and to find the same information on each site.

2. **Programs of study not affiliated with a department should be listed and portrayed similarly to departments.**

   This is particularly important for the School of Education. Despite not having official departments, the School of Ed offers many programs that should be given equal weight and prominence on the site.

3. **A clear navigational path to all departments/programs (regardless of the School) should be part of the design template.**

   We envision an expandable/collapsible list of programs that can be integrated into a number of different areas of the SMC site. The SMC homepage and Academics section homepage should have a version that includes both undergraduate and graduate/professional programs. Department/program homepages should incorporate a version of this as well to allow site visitors to easily navigate between departments/programs.

   For undergraduates, the current *Undergraduate Degree Programs* page lists links to all programs yet the site architecture places them as sub-pages under their respective Schools. This means that the “Back to Departments” link leads to the list of departments within a particular school rather than the entire list. While this may make sense institutionally, it can be quite confusing to an outsider unfamiliar with where each department or program exists in the SMC academic structure.
For example, if a prospective student navigates to the History Department through the Undergraduate Degree Programs page and then clicks Back to Departments interested in checking out the Biology Department, at best she’ll wonder why Biology is not in the list and search deeper to find it. At worst, she’ll believe Saint Mary’s doesn’t have a Biology Department.

As noted above, students click between departments seeking information on an area of study, courses, major requirements, and other resources. We don’t want to limit their ability to flip easily between Biology and Philosophy or Economics and Politics and so on. When we work on the Academics section of the site, we will present some IA and design ideas to address this issue.

4. Institute a standard yet flexible IA for academic departments and programs.

Department and program navigations should be similarly worded and ordered, and the sites ought to offer similar information as a basis for comparison. Many SMC departments employ a common set of links that is clearly part of a basic template – so this idea is not new. But the current approach does not limit the number of links in the navigation or, it seems, specify the order.

Departments should be able to have unique links to top-navigation as long as they follow general IA best practices and the standard exceptions, noted below. As we bring all departments and programs into the fold, we will be walking a fine line between keeping consistency among departments and allowing for necessary differentiation.

5. All departments and programs should adopt the same basic homepage content strategy (more details on this below).

Most of the current academic department and program sites are little more than staid descriptions of an area of study. While explaining, for instance, what Women’s Studies or International Area Studies is is important, it’s more important to put that information in context. This means showing the department in action and highlighting what it means to study that particular academic discipline in practice. Providing real examples of department activities, research, events, and so on can ground abstract learning outcomes in reality and give a prospect a concrete idea of what they will be doing while studying in a particular subject at Saint Mary’s.

The biggest challenge here is when a department or program has few resources or is uninterested in their online presence. Our designs and content strategies should help alleviate this problem; in general, we should be sure to provide designs for relatively “content-poor” departments and programs in addition to dynamic and wired ones.
6. **Review and revise internal department pages with a focus on tightening up the content and making it more vibrant, succinct, personal, rich with department-specific examples, and more web-friendly using in-text links.**

Many of the current department inside pages are cluttered and overburdened with text. This text is often an exact copy of the course catalog and lacks the excitement and energy these sites should be conveying. The Web is a different medium from the print Catalog. It presents an opportunity to show the department as an active, alive place with real people and up-to-date information.

Heavy blocks of text are also hard to read. Please refer to our *Best Practices* document for suggestions regarding sub-page headers and other tactics to break up information.

7. **More content is not necessarily better. Engaging content is better.**

While the goal of presenting similar content on each of the department and program sites is important, it is even more important that pages within a department’s site should be thoughtful, relevant, well written, and interesting to your audience. Incorporating a page that has little more than old catalog copy is not going to help engage your audience and won’t compare well with another department that is actively updating its content.

Ideally, departments will embrace their sites as an important means of communicating with prospective and current students as well as with a global community of scholars and develop a web presence that mirrors their real life activities.

8. **Communications staff should monitor and assist with maintaining department and program homepages.**

The interest and capacity of each department and program to create and maintain content varies widely. Given the need for over-arching consistency, we suggest a strategy of ongoing oversight by Communications staff of the homepages, any dated material, and the IA for academic department and program sites.

Beyond these areas, we feel departments and programs should retain independent control of the rest of their content.
Homepage Recommendations

Homepage—general introduction

The homepage serves as the gateway to the department as a whole. It should be energetic, clear, articulate, exciting, and representative of the department. No matter what the subject, it should make a visitor want to learn more about it – to dig into the interior pages, take a class, read a research paper, become a major, and so on.

Departmental homepages should incorporate both static content (a welcoming, introduction to the department as described below) and dynamic content (news and events). Ideally, all of this text helps to illustrate the field of study and SMC’s particular take on it.

The introductory text should be between 50-200 words. Adding to that news and events listings, we should strive for around 200-250 words total in the main content area of the page.

The static content should serve as a secondary guide to the interior pages of the site, incorporating links to the most important information and occasionally to unusual or interesting facts about opportunities or activities within the department. In the end, departments should maintain their personalities and eccentricities while presenting information in a consistent way.

The static homepage content should include an opening paragraph or two in large type that succinctly encapsulates the particular department and conveys the following:

- Basic welcome (a brief sentence: not entirely necessary, use it if it’s already there, can be very simple).
- General description of the field of study using real examples—what is the study of Kinesiology, Liberal & Civic Studies, etc—(1-2 sentences) and / or philosophy of the Department—our take on the study of Biology—(1-3 sentences). If a department offers graduate or professional programs, these should be highlighted and linked to from the homepage text.
- Some reference to the most important internal site content with in-text links to those pages. But don’t over-do it—the effectiveness of links is lost when everything is emphasized.
- Something about the actual work being done in the department, whether that’s majoring, examples of interesting theses, unique experiments students have conducted, internship examples, ground-breaking research being done by a professor and students, etc. This should actually be the most interesting, attention-getting part of the static text (2-3 sentences).
Homepage—News & Events

Department and program homepages should have dedicated real estate for news and events. This is a way to show the department in action in an ongoing way. The design should allow for flexibility, though. Not all departments will have events and there will be downtimes for all departments; as a general rule, most academic units can be expected to generate far more news items than events, and the former tend on the average to be much more interesting.

When departmental news or events are thin, site administrators should be able to populate their homepages with other dynamic content such as Twitter feeds, RSS-driven general SMC news, departmental blog posts, etc. For those departments/programs without an active content manager or very little news or events at a particular time, general academic news and events or School-related news or events should be fed to the homepage automatically with RSS.

Homepage—Media

Departments and programs should have the capacity to present video, audio, and department-specific images on their homepages. Images and video used on departmental homepages should be of high quality, with bright colors and good composition. They should capture students and faculty in action or show images related to the area of study. Photos of the Saint Mary’s campus can always be used, especially when the locations depicted relate to the department’s activities.

The small images used in the current template don’t capture the eye well and, we suspect, do not change often. If the new design includes a lead photo element (as it probably will), care should be taken to make sure fresh photos are frequently rotated in.

The podcasts on many department homepages are great, but there’s very little call to action enticing visitors to listen. As part of the design process, we’ll work on highlighting this type of content. We also encourage you to move toward short videos of the same nature. This is engaging content and visuals would grab people even more.

Homepage—Other Features

Related Links is a common feature throughout the SMC site. This is used with mixed results on the academic departments and programs pages. If we continue to use this navigational pathway, be sure these links are truly related and relevant to the department. For instance, the Biology and Chemistry pages might have links to a number of the Pre-Professional pages—Nursing, Medicine, Dentistry, etc—or Modern Languages might link to Study Abroad. Related Links should expand one’s understanding of opportunities connected to a department.
Writing Style and Tone

The writing on the academic department/program homepages should strike a balance between formal (but not staid) and warm, personal, and welcoming (but not glib); a balance between formal and scholarly and conversational. Most sites currently have static content that is bit dry and not very inviting. If the occasional faculty member writes a sentence that seems overly academic, that’s OK—especially on inside pages of departmental sites, whose audience will likely be more explicitly interested in the department’s field of study—but readability and friendliness should be the primary concern.

The language should reflect the high caliber of scholarly work being done at SMC while being written in a way that is clear and easily understood by someone without knowledge of that area of study. The language should entice the reader to explore further and get them excited to learn about the activities of the department or program.

These pages can incorporate the first person (you, us, our, we), though falling back on “Saint Mary’s students…” rather than “you” is fine too. On occasion we should address the audience directly, as we want prospects and interested current students to be able to envision themselves as part of the department’s community.

The style should also reflect the personality of the department. Saint Mary’s is such a close-knit place where students have incredible opportunities to work hand-in-hand with professors on research and other projects. We want this quality to come through. If a department is known for it’s quirky group of professors, let’s make sure that comes through on their website.
Navigation / Information Architecture

General Guidelines

Academic department site navigation should follow the same IA guidelines as presented in the Best Practices—IA & Content document. In reviewing the current IAs for departments and programs, we’ve found a few of these to be particularly relevant:

- **Keep navigation lists under control.** Sub-page navigation lists should be no more than 8-10 links long. Many sites have more than this.

- **Link only to pages within the section.** With few exceptions, the navigation should link to internal pages only. Links that are part of the primary navigation should never lead to another site or to a PDF or other downloadable file.

- **Do not repeat link titles within the same section navigation.** Some departments have an Admissions link that outlines the requirements for being admitted into the program (not SMC). Though “admissions” does describe this content, we suggest placing that information into the Requirements section (as noted below) – one exception: Graduate Admissions information.

Recommended academic department top-level navigation

The links we propose below represent categories of information found on many of the current sites. We tried to use the most common terminology among the departments to maintain consistency with the current sites. To help students easily find similar information across departments, these links should appear in the same order.

As a number of SMC departments have graduate programs associated with them, we propose 2 different approaches: one for a department/ program with both graduate and undergraduate programs and another for those that only have one or the other. You’ll see, regardless the approach, we recommend keeping as many links the same.

**Department or Program (Undergrad or Grad only)**

[About *Dept or Program name*]
Courses
Requirements
Faculty
[Admission Process] – only for Grad programs
[Beyond the Classroom]
Resources
[Student & Faculty Research or Collaborations]
[Our Alumni]
[News & Events]
Department or Program (with Grad Programs)

[About Dept or Program name]
Courses
Faculty
Undergraduate Programs
Graduate Programs
Resources
[Student & Faculty Research or Collaborations]
[Our Alumni]
[News & Events]

As noted above, the navigation for all department/program sites should have a good deal of similarity, making it easier for students to find the same information when flipping between these sites. There should also be room for some deviation from the set of standard links. It can be hard to find a perfect level of conformity and individuality. A good rule of thumb is that information common to all departments—Courses, Faculty, Requirements, News & Events, etc.—should all be given the same link titles.

Those departments with unique programs/attributes or less content should be allowed to edit the standard IA. For instance, the Performing Arts will need links for Dance, Music, and Theatre, and Physics & Astronomy may want a link for the Geissberger Observatory. The number of links should reflect the amount of content on the site. The [bracketed] links above denote optional pages/sections, so departments with less content may have only 4 or 5 links when the site launches. Any variations should be reviewed by Communications on a case-by-case basis. Individualized department links should be added above News & Events.

Regarding links currently used on department sites not seen above, we recommend:

- moving Contact Us information to the homepage—we’ll work on how to incorporate the form; and
- evaluating the Learning Outcomes content and working those points into examples presented on the department homepage, on the About ______ page, and/or on the Our Alumni page. A focus on outcomes is important and we are glad to see this page already part of most department sites, but an abstract list of skills or theories one will master is not as effective as illustrating actual outcomes.
Notes on departmental architecture and content (Undergrad only)

| Department or Program Name | A link back to the department or program homepage will be included in the new design. The homepage should include:  
|                           | • A brief introduction as described above.  
|                           | • The opportunity to incorporate dynamically generated news, events, blogs, twitter, and other content feeds  
|                           | • Image gallery and/or other multimedia  
|                           | • Department Contact Information  
| [About Dept./Prg Name]     | It is not necessary but a few departments currently provide more detailed information on an About page and others on a Message from the Chair page. In keeping the homepage content as succinct as possible, this page offers a space for more elaboration and details.  
|                           | If departments choose to include this page, the content here should serve to make the case for studying this particular field. It should highlight unique opportunities available in the department and elaborate on any teaser content from the homepage. Ideally, it should strive to be just as engaging as the homepage and not be a repository for heavy blocks of descriptive text.  
|                           | First person messages—like the Message from the Chair—can be good, but also run the risk of being another one-way, “telling” mode of communication. This type of content might be better presented in a short video that accompanies the About page. This adds a more personal touch and can engage the audience better. Also consider having a student or engaged faculty member write this page from their perspective as a way to personalize the content (this writing can be heavily edited/assisted by Communications or others in the dept).  
| Courses                   | Most departments/programs currently have a Courses Descriptions page. This would be the same, we simply suggest a shorter link title.  
|                           | Ideally this page would be dynamically generated and indicate when a course is being offered. But for now, as long as it is kept up-to-date, the list works well.  
|                           | Potential sub-pages here:  
|                           | • Seminars (identified by their dates, ex. Spring Seminars)  
| Requirements              | We recommend combining Major Requirements and Minor Requirements onto one page here. This will help tighten up the department IA and provide one place for all requirements.  
|                           | For departments with an Admissions page listing entry requirements, we suggest listing those at the top of this page.  

| Faculty | This link is currently used on all academic department sites. This would be the same.  

**Potential sub-pages here:**  
- Faculty Publications  
- Faculty Research |
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<td><strong>[Admissions Process]</strong></td>
<td>This link should only be implemented for programs only offering Grad degrees. Though Admissions still goes through the central Admissions office, graduate admissions has a much stronger connection to the department than SMC in general. Thus, we suggest keeping a section open here for that information.</td>
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| **[Beyond the Classroom]** | Most, if not all, departments and programs have opportunities for learning outside of the classroom – internships, research assistantships, general research field trips, study abroad opportunities, student projects that have had an impact on the community, even January Term courses that expand the typical learning environment. This page/section should be devoted to highlighting these opportunities.  

Ideally the page would list opportunities as well as present stories of students participating in them that show this learning in action and the impact it has on students and graduates.  

If there are sub-pages here, they should relate to these opportunities – a page describing in detail an internship or research assistantship opportunity, etc. |
| **Resources** | A description of a department’s unique resources with links to sub-pages containing details (if necessary). This page should be as useful to current students as it is for prospectives.  

Information here should include unique facilities or equipment, thesis information, special collections, connections to a broader network of scholars, “additional links,” course materials, links to external research info, summer job opportunities, grants, scholarships, and links to course sites and blogs, etc.  

We also suggest linking between this page and the Beyond the Classroom page as that information can also be seen as resources for students.  

This is one of those umbrella categories that will most likely have a number of sub-pages that are specific and unique to departments.  

**Potential sub-pages here:**  
- Thesis Information  
- Special Collections  
- Course materials |
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<td>This page should provide a fuller listing of news stories and departmental events. (News and Events feeds should also be listed in brief on the homepage). If a program does not have its own news and relies on general academic news, a separate page for news and events listings is unnecessary. News Archives can be added as a sub-page when necessary. With the new CMS, departments should consider transforming their “newsletters” (often pdfs) into more consistent news stories that feed onto their pages and can be shared with the rest of the College.</td>
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| Potential sub-pages here: | • News Archives  
• [Department Event Series]  
• Newsletter Archives |
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## Undergraduate

This page should list out the undergraduate opportunities. If this is a single program site, the page can be devoted to entirely to the one program. If there are a number of programs and/or the ability to obtain a major or minor in this field, the page should articulate all of the various degree opportunities available. Sub-pages may need to be added to elaborate on these.

**Sub-pages here:**
- Requirements (see description above)
- [Beyond the Classroom (see description above)]

## Graduate

This page should be the central information source for the graduate degree program within a department. This section of the department site should have sub-pages and information that serves the content needs of prospective and current graduate students.

Many departments with both undergrad and grad programs use this approach already.

## Resources

A description of a department’s unique resources with links to sub-pages containing details (if necessary). This page should be as useful to current students as it is for prospectives.

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Much of this information should also be considered News in the department and listed as such (with links). |
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