In presenting itself to students, prospective students, and other members of the interested public, the institution provides information that is complete, accurate, clear and sufficient for intended audiences to make informed decisions about the institution.

Overview

Middlebury College is committed to facilitating access to important information about the institution for both internal and external constituencies. In addition, public expectations regarding the availability of information have increased dramatically in recent years. Since our last self study in 1999, we have conducted two major overhauls of our Web presence; the resulting changes in the presentation of institutional information serve to illustrate our commitment and respond to public expectations. With these and other efforts to improve the way we communicate, we have focused on delivering correct, concise information to those who want and need it. Of necessity, this effort will always be a work in progress.

Description

There are many offices involved with the organization and transmission of information at Middlebury and its various entities. These include Library and Information Services, the Office of Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research, and the two communications offices at Middlebury and at the Monterey Institute. Given the number of offices, individuals, and locations involved in the communication process, ensuring that all offices involved with disseminating information know what the others are doing, and that all information is made available in an organized fashion, is a significant challenge.

The information dissemination function is relatively decentralized, though we have made efforts to centralize some functions where appropriate. The recent overhaul of Middlebury’s website, which took place during the 2009-10 academic year, helped to focus these efforts. This overhaul included a parallel, coordinated, and collaborative redesign and updating of the Monterey Institute’s site, leading to distinctly branded, but complementary, sites for Middlebury and the Monterey Institute. At the same time, Middlebury’s Communications Office assumed greater responsibility for the College’s Web presence, to ensure that information and messages are consistent across Middlebury’s entire public profile and for all of its entities.

There have also been ongoing efforts to ensure that potential and current students have access to information they might want or need. The website is viewed as the most important vehicle for communicating this information, and we have devoted substantial resources to making it as easy as possible for interested viewers of the site to find what they need. For example, the search function on the home page was reconfigured and optimized when the site was updated, and is now much more effective at locating relevant information.

While Middlebury continues to produce some print publications, we have eliminated hard copies of many documents. We continue to publish paper copies of the course catalog, as well as materials used to promote Middlebury in different venues, including the viewbooks for the
Language Schools, C.V. Starr-Middlebury Schools Abroad, and Bread Loaf School of English, and the Middlebury Magazine, but overall, print publications are far scarcer now than in the recent past. The reduction in printed materials was initiated for a variety of reasons, including the need to reduce the costs and staff time required to design and print materials, and a desire to decrease our carbon footprint. Additionally, fewer faculty, staff, and students were consulting print publications as more information became available online as well. Links to the most important information – including admissions, public safety, and sites for all of Middlebury’s entities – may be found at the middlebury.edu home page.

These recent changes have been reflected in a significant reorganization and reorientation of Middlebury’s communications office. Because of the ever-increasing importance of the Web, Communications now spends much more of its time and resources on interactive content, including multimedia projects, videos, and animation. This interactive content feeds the college website, the online version of the college magazine, and supports the efforts of Communications’ primary internal clients—the Admissions Office and College Advancement. There has also been an increased emphasis on greater consistency in our overall message, as well as on making internal communications more effective. Additional changes have taken place in the Monterey Institute’s communications office, which has developed protocols governing the use of all-campus e-mail lists and other key communications tools in an effort to reduce internal communications clutter. To reinforce this, the communications office in Monterey periodically reminds the Institute’s community of the primary communication channels.

At all of Middlebury’s degree-granting entities, key information on degree requirements and courses of study is available on the programs’ websites. At the undergraduate college, the College Handbook is easily available online, individual academic departments and programs have their own web pages, and all were updated last year. As part of those updates, all departments and programs added learning goals to these pages. The Office of Human Resources website is organized so that employees can readily access important information. The Language Schools list all courses offered in each School, including course descriptions, before the application season begins. The Bread Loaf School of English posts course descriptions, course schedules, and reading lists by campus, along with a full program catalog and updated student handbook, on its website before the application and registration season.

The website is also designed to provide prospective students with all relevant information about the College and its entities. Whether students are interested in the undergraduate college, the Language Schools, the Schools Abroad, the Bread Loaf School of English, or the Monterey Institute, they are given clear directions about how to apply, availability of courses and programs, and College policies.

Appraisal
Although information is available describing the entire range of Middlebury programs, different academic units provide different levels of detail. The undergraduate college, because of its extensive resources in many different areas, as well as its wide variety of departments and programs, is the most able to provide large amounts of information. That said, there is significant variability in what individual departments and programs provide to students on the Vermont campus; not all majors are described in equal detail, for example. There is more uniformity in
presentation in Monterey; the recent academic reorganization at the Institute coincided with the website redesign, which made it easier to have consistency across program descriptions.

In terms of academic information, there is one aspect of our study abroad program that sometimes generates frustration from students. When students study abroad – whether at Middlebury Schools Abroad or on non-Middlebury programs – they are often directly enrolling at foreign universities. When making their academic plans, students are often unable to find lists of specific courses that they might take; this sort of academic information is not generally published by foreign universities with enough lead time for students to know what they can take, what might count as courses for their major, etc. One remedy that we have implemented is a course information database, which went live in 2008. This allows students to search by program, university, country of study, and major, to find courses that have previously been approved for major credit by Middlebury department and program chairs. As new courses are approved, they are added to the database.

As described above, Middlebury has shifted to publishing various documents electronically, rather than publishing them in print. While the undergraduate course catalog is still printed, many others have disappeared. The elimination of some, including the Admissions viewbook and the Rohatyn Center for International Affairs annual report, has not caused much consternation, but the elimination of the College directory has been more controversial. There have been repeated calls to print the directory again, and as a consequence, Library and Information Services is working on a directory that would be simpler to compile and could be printed in smaller quantities, as needed. Similar issues have been raised in Monterey regarding the current lack of a printed directory. A reduction in the number of print publications raises questions about the archiving of College publications. Print publications provide an informative snapshot of the institution at a given point in time and can be stored and accessed in the College Archives or Davis Family Library. The College has yet to develop a thorough plan for archiving publications that are only available electronically.

The main vehicle for gathering and disseminating data about Middlebury is the Office of Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research (PAIR). One way PAIR provides data externally is through regular reports to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The NCES makes these data, and data reported from schools across the country, available through its College Navigator site to prospective students. PAIR also provides information about the College on its website; these data include enrollment information, graduation statistics, and financial statements. Looking internally, in the last two years, this office has made it a priority to establish systems that more consistently gather useful information and provide meaningful feedback to relevant constituencies (see Standard 2). For example, in fall 2010, undergraduate department chairs and program directors received reports on the results of a recent senior survey that measured student satisfaction with their majors. The departments and programs were encouraged to use this information in their ongoing conversations about their teaching, curricula, and/or advising.

One recent change in the general area of public disclosure and information dissemination illustrates the challenges associated with managing the large volume of information we have, as well as the potential rewards to thinking through this management carefully. The most recent
website overhaul was a massive undertaking, and involved hundreds of staff and faculty making changes to web pages, rethinking how various aspects of the College ought to be represented, and learning a new process to edit web pages. It is worth noting that there was plenty of grumbling about the changes, and in particular about the number of staff hours that were invested in the change. In addition, since the website does have increased functionality, there is a need for staff, in particular, to spend more time updating pages and making sure that the website is current and accurate. This need for staff time was complicated because the website update took place at the height of the economic downturn when a number of staff were leaving through early retirement and voluntary separation programs.

The overall process, however, was an inclusive one, and there was an emphasis on making the website much easier to navigate when it came to the crucial bits of information that are essential for public disclosure; a frequent complaint about our previous site was that although one could eventually find the information wanted, it was too often an arduous process of digging through many layers. The goal with the new site is to have all of the crucial pieces of information more readily available, both through clicking and through the search function. In order to evaluate how easily one might find crucial pieces of information on the site, we asked a number of students and staff members to locate the information that NEASC has specified for this standard, and they were able to find this key information with little difficulty. In addition, Library and Information Services is considering a portal option for the website, so users can personalize how they utilize the College website. As part of its website development process, the Monterey Institute commissioned an external focus group appraisal and usability study six months after their new site was launched. This study resulted in both positive feedback and a number of specific recommendations for enhancements that have since been implemented. The communications office at Middlebury has also done usability testing of the new website, and some changes have been made as a consequence of this testing.

*Projections*

- The Middlebury communications office, in consultation with all of Middlebury’s entities, will take the lead in creating an integrated communications strategy during the 2011-12 academic year, with the expectation that proposals coming out of this plan will be implemented as soon as is feasible.
- The communications office and Library and Information Services will work together to establish an ongoing process for evaluating which publications should remain in print, and which will reside only in electronic format. President’s Staff will review these recommendations on an ongoing basis.
- In 2011-12, Library and Information Services will establish a working group to develop appropriate protocols for the long-term archiving of electronic publications.
Institutional Effectiveness

There are ongoing efforts to review all of our publications—at this point, mostly electronic—to make sure that information is accurate and up to date. Many offices at all of our entities review their information regularly, usually as part of a process of preparing information for the next incoming group of students. These efforts serve to ensure that the information provided to the institution’s many constituencies about all of Middlebury College’s programs is useful, accurate, and current.