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Many Traditions One Alaska

Date: April 24, 2018

To: Paul Layer
            VPASA, University of Alaska

From: Lisa Hoferkamp
            Chair, University of Alaska Faculty Alliance

Subject: Proposed UA Portal

Dear VPASA Layer,

The Faculty Alliance (FA) supports the goal of simplifying students' electronic access to and registration for classes across the UA system. The current tools available, including UAOnline, have proven awkward and confusing for both students and faculty alike.

It is not clear to the FA that the proposed UA Portal will be an improvement over the existing system. The FA is especially reticent to engage another independent vendor's product. We feel this would only worsen the situation which already includes a bewildering variety of incompatible and poorly integrated methods that include:

- https://catalog.uaa.alaska.edu/coursedescriptions/
  http://catalog.uaf.edu/courses/   http://catalog.uas.alaska.edu/course-descriptions/
    - Public, no login. This lets catalog pages be linked from outside pages, and discovered by search engines, which is critical for reaching new potential students
    - Separate unrelated links for each university, with no easy way to see the equivalent departments at other universities
    - Does not show which courses are currently offered
    - Does not allow students to register for the courses they find

- http://www.alaska.edu/coursefinder/framework/
    - Public, no login
    - Searches each campus separately (must select campus first)
        - A UAF-specific version exists at www.uaf.edu/coursefinder
    - Does not allow students to register for the courses they find

- https://uaonline.alaska.edu/ Student -> Registration -> Class Search
  - Similar functionality to CourseFinder but a different interface
  - Does not allow students to register for the courses they find

- DegreeWorks (no URL, only accessible via UAOnline Student -> DegreeWorks)
  - Shows students which degree requirements they have already met
  - Finds courses that meet specific degree requirements
    - Courses meeting a degree requirement are listed as clickable links
  - Separate UAA, UAF, and UAS links to DegreeWorks
    - Is this a branding issue?
  - Does not allow students to register for the courses they find

- Schedule Planner (no URL, only accessible via UAOnline Student -> Schedule Planner)
  - Searches among many options for a compatible course schedule
    - E.g., find a combination of physics lab and english courses that leaves MWF afternoons open so a student can work the afternoon shift at their job
  - Does not show degree requirements
  - Does not import or export to DegreeWorks
  - Does not allow students to actually register for courses they find

The strategic pathways Student Access Gateway plan appears to recommend adding a sixth method (modeled after www.TNReconnect.gov) that does not integrate with these existing methods. Students and advisors DO NOT want or need another fragmented, poorly-integrated way to search for courses or degrees. The FA joins them in encouraging the administration to reconsider further pursuit of this apparent course of action. Instead, the FA recommends adding well-labeled, intuitive links that connect our existing tools and allow the user to benefit from the existing functionality with a minimal number of clicks.

The actual registration process could be initiated in the catalog, Degreeworks, Schedule Planner, and other relevant online tools by adding a simple one-click **"Sign up for this course" button** that will initiate the registration process (including admissions, prerequisite checking, financial aid, etc). On clicking the "Sign up for this course" button, UAOnline should route students to the appropriate subsystem:
- Current degree-seeking students would then be forwarded to the existing UAOnline process (Student -> Registration -> Register/Add/Drop)
- Current non-degree-seeking students could also be shown a degree-seeking "upsell" page that provides customized recommendations on degrees tailored to fit a student's existing courses. (e.g. "We estimate you could earn a Bachelor's of Emergency Management from UAF in as few as 3 semesters")
- New students would be forwarded to the ground-up admissions process. If constructed properly, many uses of the "Sign up for this course" button will be from merely curious potential students, in which case their contact information should be retained and a process built in to ensure follow-up by a proactive admissions advisor.

More ambitiously, the FA suggests the use of degree requirements currently encoded in DegreeWorks to **automatically recommend** a list of classes a given student should take in an upcoming semester:

- Start with the list of degree requirements, recursively expanded with prerequisites. This is constant for each degree
- Remove courses where the student does not have the prerequisites
- Remove courses that the student has already taken
- Intersect this list with the courses offered in the upcoming semester
- Prioritize the list, for example by prerequisite-critical-path-length, offering frequency, or manual course priorities
  - Generally, major requirements take priority over GERs (which are offered more frequently and have more options)
  - Departments should be able to assign the priorities of courses for their own majors: e.g., CS majors that *can* take MATH 251 *should* take it as soon as as possible, but they can wait for CS 331
- Export the first 6 courses on the list to the Schedule Planner 'cart'

Generally, the keys to a **successful implementation** of the proposed integration efforts include:

- Adding links to smoothly connect existing tools rather than bring in new isolated tools
- Removing redundant tools and integrating their beneficial features into existing tools
- Utilizing faculty and staff expertise
  - The university's last portal effort, SunGard's MyUA, failed because its features were driven top-down rather than bottom-up from the ultimate users: advisors, faculty, and students

Thank you for considering these recommendations,

Lisa Hoferkamp

Lisa Hoferkamp
Chair, Faculty Alliance

Appendix: "Sign up for this course" link format

The FA recommends setting up the "Sign up for this course" buttons so they use a **durable** hyperlink. Because course numbers are durable, this would let the sign up buttons be included in long-lived department advising web pages, QR codes in brochures and printed advertising, in social media posts about the course, and elsewhere in our web presence.

Ideally the link from the "Sign up for this course" button would use a short simple URL format such as one based on a short human-readable course description, for example:

https://www.alaska.edu/signup?course=MATH+251

When there are several sections of a course, this version would let students pick the campus, section, and timing that they prefer.

A more ephemeral CRN based version of the link could be used when more precision is needed, for example:

https://www.alaska.edu/signup?CRN_list=12345,67890

This version could be used to link to a specific course section offered in a given semester, or as output from Schedule Planner or a department-specific advising tool, to allow students to bulk register for a batch of specific sections. Because CRNs are unpredictable, this would not be as long lived as the durable version above.