

AU Policy: Responsible Use of University Websites & Content Management Systems

Subject: Requirements and standards for use of University web resources

Responsible Office: University Communications and Marketing (UCM)

Review Cycle: Annual

Procedures: Web Steering Committee Procedures for Quality Assurance: Meeting Security and Performance

Related University Policies: [Information Technology Security Policies](#), [Computer Use and Copyright](#), [Intellectual Property](#), [Data Classification](#), and [Trademark](#).

I. SCOPE

This policy governs public-facing websites that are part of American University's digital ecosystem, which includes web-based platforms used to deliver information to the general public: Content delivered on the domain *american.edu*, or subdomains thereof, and other AU-branded content on platforms controlled by the university; video hosted on university accounts on platforms like YouTube or Vimeo; and files shared via links from the public website. Social media is covered by AU's [Social Media Guidelines](#).

The university provides an integrated user experience across a widely-distributed publishing ecosystem, while offering publishers the flexibility for customized content. This model creates shared responsibility for quality assurance, usability, portability, performance, accessibility, and security. The actions of one individual or department can affect the entire system. Therefore, expectations are set to ensure quality, manage risk, and present the university's web content to users in the most effective ways.

II. POLICY STATEMENT

The purpose of this policy is to establish basic requirements for use of university web resources by university faculty, staff, student employees, or contractors in a manner that maintains quality and appropriately reduces risk to the confidentiality, integrity, accessibility, and availability of university data, as well as the system. The requirements of this policy deal with university standards for web content, including visual identity, design and editorial quality, accessibility, management applications and databases, security, and advertising.

III. DEFINITIONS

Content Management Systems (CMS)

Software application used to store, edit, and publish web pages, including html, text, photos, video, and other media via a series of managed templates. American University has adopted PaperThin's CommonSpot as its web CMS solution for the main *www.american.edu* site and WordPress as its solution for blogs. Washington College of Law uses Mira, and AU Eagles contracts with Presto Sports.

Content Publisher

A university representative with authorized access to the content management system who enters content (text, photos, video) into approved modules or templates, so that the information is displayed on the university website.

Content Publishing Committee (CPC)

All content publishing leads, the core web team from UCM and the Office of Information Technology (OIT), and select data custodians who meet monthly to provide user input to the Web Steering Committee.

Content Publishing Lead (CPL)

Content publishers with admin access to one or more subsites in the content management system. For larger sections of the website CPLs may coordinate several subsite managers within their section. CPLs serve as the communications conduit from leadership to the publishers in their group.

Content Owner

The person within the academic or administrative unit with primary responsibility for the content represented on the website. Content owners may not have CMS access in which case they work with a CPL or publisher to create online content.

Data Custodian

Supervisors authorize addition of users to the content management system, as well as CPL designations.

Domain

A domain name locates an organization or an entity on the Internet. In case of American University, our domain name is *american.edu*. The domain name represents the labeling used to identify multiple server addresses under single umbrella, allowing nearly unlimited sub-domains. Websites that use a name that includes "american.edu" are considered part of the domain.

Externally-Hosted Web Content

University web content hosted by external service providers, managed through university owned contracts. University web content that is externally hosted is also governed by this policy.

Publishing Standards

Standards for content, design, and publishing are developed and maintained by the Web Steering Committee for the purposes of providing an integrated user experience, reasonable publishing flexibility, and consistent messaging, branding, and experience across university assets, as well as ensuring the accuracy, timeliness, security, and accessibility of content.

University Websites

All pages and information served from the university's domain and university-branded, externally-hosted web content that represent administrative and academic units of the university are considered part of the university website, are university assets, and should follow university policies and procedures.

University Web Content

Any information created by university students, faculty, staff, or representative and published on university websites to represent the work of the university, school, department, or unit. With the exception of intellectual property of the faculty, which is licensed for use by the university, such content is owned by the university.

University Data

(Refer to Data Classification Policy)

Web Steering Committee (WSC)

An advisory group reporting to the President that provides overall governance for the university's web presence, including but not limited to www.american.edu, and its subdomains, and related media channels such as social media, blogs, and video. The WSC is responsible for creating, recommending, and implementing policies and procedures to guide:

- Architecture
- Strategies for distribution of and access to web content
- Web-based marketing and positioning
- Use of the content management systems
- Content migration
- Editorial, design, branding, and sub-branding considerations
- Security and risk management
- Training and leadership of content publishers
- Quality assurance
- Performance and measurement
- Tracking and evaluation

The WSC is led by the Vice President, University Communications, and includes representatives from UCM, OIT, Academic Affairs, Campus Life, Office of the President, and Washington College of Law. The

group meets monthly to manage ongoing operations and maintains contact intermittently as needed to resolve urgent issues.

IV. POLICY

Section 1. All content publishers will abide by standards designed to assure quality, performance, usability, accessibility, and security. Content publishers will be provided training and on-going support to effectively use designated tools and standards. Content publishers and owners will be notified if standards are not being met to allow the timely remediation of issues.

Section 2. Content must pass review for quality assurance, including load times, presentation, and security risks, as part of the WSC's Quality Assurance Process prior to publishing. On-going security and performance review, as well as periodic content and design review, will monitor live content and problems. Issues of concern will be raised with the content publisher and owner so they may be promptly addressed.

Section 3. All university digital assets should comply with all applicable laws and policies regarding Intellectual Property, Copyright, and Trademarks. Links to original sources should be provided where possible.

Section 4. Special web applications and databases presented on the site will adhere to university standards referenced in this policy. Applications that rely on university data, including confidential, official-use-only, and unrestricted data (see Data Classification Policy) will follow appropriate requirements. WSC is the determining authority on what content can be hosted on university assets. Applications deemed by WSC to pose security risks, hinder performance, or confuse users will not be hosted. All approved integrations with third-party vendors should have a Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT) on file with the contract and with a copy to WSC. Accessibility requirements language per Section 8 must be included in applicable contracts.

Section 5. External hosted university web content should be explicitly reviewed and approved by the WSC, following review of unique requirements that would warrant such hosting. All approved third-party vendors should have a Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT) on file with the contract and with a copy to WSC. Accessibility requirements language per Section 8 must be included in applicable contracts.

Section 6. Content that is linked from the university's website to another entity or organization's site should clearly identify a departure from university pages. Non-university web content should not use or replicate the University's templates in a manner that confuses content ownership.

Section 7. The university is a non-profit organization and is strictly limited in terms of accepting advertising revenue that would compromise its non-profit status for tax purposes. As such, advertising is not appropriate for any part of the university site. (See Advertising Policy.) In addition, messages that imply university endorsement should be avoided. Links to partners and affiliates should be provided as

resources, and should avoid advertisement or official endorsement. It's suggested that multiple references be available where possible to reduce the implication of endorsement.

Section 8. The university is committed to ensuring equal access to information, programs, and activities through its websites for its students, faculty, staff, and participants in AU's programs. To that end, all university content published on its website or subdomains, including content externally hosted on behalf of the university, will strive to maintain accessibility standards as defined by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) 2.0, Conformance Level AA](#) or website content and functionality be made available to users in an equally effective accessible alternative manner. WSC will provide resources and specific guidelines to help content owners and publishers create accessible content and will be the final authority on the university's application of accessibility standards.

V. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Web Steering Committee

WSC establishes governance mechanisms for use of university web resources, including policies, procedures, and standards for web content and publishing; leads working groups managing development of new features; and monitors migration of content to site.

Division of University Communications and Marketing (UCM)

UCM provides standards for design, editorial, visual identity, digital media, and advertising, as well as leadership for the university's website and digital strategy. UCM is the service owner of the CommonSpot CMS and associated performance (See Service Level Agreement for CommonSpot). UCM leads the Content Publishing Committee and quality assurance review process.

Office of Information Technology (OIT)

OIT provides management and development of the application environment and related infrastructure used to run the university's website and publish university web content. OIT is also responsible for ensuring performance, availability, and the on-going monitoring and assessment of issues related to security and accessibility of the university website (refer to Service Level Agreement for CommonSpot).

VI. STANDARDS

Design

University web pages maintain an integrated user experience and cohesive branding across websites through standards available to content publishers through the UCM [Resources and Guides](#), as well as on the [Content Publisher Tools](#) resources for Content Publishers within the CMS.

Editorial

Content presented on university websites should maintain the designated style and voice to accurately portray the personality and brand of the university. Guidance is available to content publishers in the [Editorial Tool Kit](#) and [Best Practices](#) provided by UCM.

Digital Media

Performance and quality of digital media, including photos, graphics, and video, ensure functionality and optimal user experience on university websites. Guidance is available to content publishers through the UCM [Resources and Guides](#).

Quality Assurance: Content

Content owners and content publishers are responsible for maintaining content that is relevant, accurate, and timely. Publishers should ensure proper maintenance and follow all published university standards of form and content. An annual review cycle is required for proper content upkeep. Content publishers and owners will review content each year to determine if updates are needed or if content should be archived or deleted. WSC may notify content publishers and owners of content that has not been reviewed in a year or more to request its immediate evaluation.

All content must also be accessible per Section 8. Quarterly accessibility scans will be used to determine potential areas of risk in terms of accessibility and shared with CPLs for immediate remediation.

Quality Assurance: Security and Performance

University web servers are regularly monitored for security vulnerabilities and performance. Web pages that are identified as vulnerable or causing server performance issues may be deactivated until the areas of concern are addressed. Software upgrades, new application features, and major site releases will be tested in the quality assurance server environment to prevent the introduction of poor performing or vulnerable web resources.

VII. EFFECTIVE DATE

Policy effective August 31, 2010.

Policy last reviewed August 2015, no updates.

Policy reviewed and updated December 2017.