

REL PACIFIC ASK-A-REL RESPONSE

Developing and Maintaining a Sustainable Web Presence for Research Consortia Part II May 2012

INQUIRY

Request for further information on the experiences of research consortia as they pertain to developing and maintaining a sustainable web presence.

In response to this inquiry, the REL Pacific Reference Desk at McREL, located in Honolulu, HI, contacted eight educational research consortia nationwide to ask the following questions.

1. How does the consortium manage the sharing of responsibilities related to your website?
2. What are the responsibilities and duties you have related to the website? Do you have any protocol around the completion or descriptions of those duties (and, if so, would you be willing to share them)?
3. Does one particular entity take the lead or do you split the management of content, hosting, responding to inquiries, etc?
4. Are there any other commitments for hosting and managing the website? Are there any time parameters (for example, organization A manages for a period of time then organization B takes over)?
5. What is the consortium's plan for website sustainability? What has worked and what hasn't worked in terms of developing and ensuring a sustainable web presence?

CONTACT WITH SEVERAL CONSORTIA

A REL-Pacific researcher contacted the following consortia, via email, to request information pertaining to the aforementioned questions.

- **Consortium for Policy Research in Education**
- Newark Schools Research Collaborative
- **Baltimore Education Research Consortium**
- **Education and Research Consortium of the Western Carolinas**
- Kansas City Area Education Research Consortium
- Michigan Consortium for Educational Research
- **VCU Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium**
- Great Lakes Research Consortium

The four consortia noted in bold font responded.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The four responding consortia differed by focus and size.

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- BERC is a small consortium with a single dedicated Executive Director and researchers from local universities.
- MERC is a somewhat larger consortium, consisting of participants from Virginia Commonwealth University and eight local school districts; all staff members appear to be employees of the University.
- CPRE is a much larger consortium made up of seven research universities. All researchers are associated with the universities but the consortium does have some dedicated staff members, such as a Communications Manager.
- ERC is the most complex of the respondents, operating as a stand-alone non-profit organization with a team of dedicated staff members.

Respondents noted that website maintenance duties include designing the website, gathering content, keeping content current, and responding to requests received through contact forms. Larger consortia keep the design and maintenance in-house while smaller consortia pay a web hosting company to complete the design and maintenance work. The responsibility of keeping information and resources current appears to be the most taxing of the duties (ERC has some specific recommendations for handling this).

Consortia seemed to agree that, once the website was designed and housed on the internet, the maintenance and sustainability were simpler. Financing needs for ongoing hosting and maintenance depend on the size of the website and the intensity of the maintenance needed.

QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

1. How does the consortium manage the sharing of responsibilities related to your website?

BERC: I generally manage the site in communication with our team. We pay a hosting company to do the actual work.

MERC: We have a relatively small consortium - 8 school divisions and the university, and it is run at the university with a staff of two people. Our website is maintained by the associate director, who is housed by the school of education and has responsibility for design, posting new information, and other needs, and isn't really available to the school divisions for them to determine content, structure, etc.

ERC: Our present website was created and is maintained by me and my staff. In fact, I wrote most of the original code for the site myself. The ERC hosts the website, develops/manages the content, and supports all technical aspects of it.

CPRE: CPRE is a consortium of seven universities. The communications arm is housed at CPRE-UPenn and all aspects of our main website and the CCII website are managed by our Communications department. All content ideas and structure changes to the website are authorized by our co-director.

2. What are the responsibilities and duties you have related to the website? Do you have any protocol around the completion or descriptions of those duties (and, if so, would you be willing to share them)?

BERC: The bulk of the work is posting new research papers and briefs.

MERC: [from above] design, posting new information, and other needs.

ERC: As this goes, it would be our advice to assign a staff person to coordinate both the creation and management of the site. This means to determine the back-end framework (e.g. is it a Wordpress site, blog, CMS - a la Drupal, PHP-Nuke, Zikula, or whatever), determine if you host it yourselves or use a hosting service, and determine how the site manages the relationship with each of your consortium members (do you have links to each or a separate "page" for each). In my opinion, each separate group should be responsible for content related to it and that includes delivering the content to be moved to the site to the staff person responsible for it in a timely manner.

CPRE: As the communications manager I am responsible for gathering content, writing Web descriptions, maintaining website functionality, and responding to requests received through our contact forms.

3. Does one particular entity take the lead or do you split the management of content, hosting, responding to inquiries, etc?

BERC: Again me, not that much work actually.

MERC: Financial support for the associate director comes from the school divisions, though she is part time. It's a rather informal arrangement with me as the executive director providing overall oversight and direction.

ERC: The staff person should create regular intervals where content is uploaded/modified with definite timelines. Should data arrive after a deadline, it would be uploaded at the next scheduled interval. The staff person should not be an editor of the content nor the spell-check or grammar police. Each consortium member is responsible for this. The staff person should direct related inquiries to the respective consortium member representative. This implies that each consortium member has an individual responsible for that group's content. You also need very clear direction and responsibilities related to each consortium member group. They must be responsible for providing updated information to the staff member and thus to the website. If data becomes "old" or outdated, then the staff member should have the ability to remove data. This implies that distinct guidelines are created and adhered to regarding who does what, when, and what happens when someone does not follow the "rules."

CPRE: Primarily I am the person in charge of taking the lead for gathering, uploading and maintaining all content appearing on the websites. Hosting is a shared responsibility of our IT Department and our Web development team. Responding to inquiries is my responsibility.

4. Are there any other commitments for hosting and managing the website? Are there any time parameters (for example, organization A manages for a period of time then organization B takes over)?

BERC: We have left [hosting and managing the website] as the part of the ED role.

CPRE: We recently revamped our website which involved several months of planning and execution. It is an ongoing work in progress.

5. What is the consortium's plan for website sustainability? What has worked and what hasn't worked in terms of developing and ensuring a sustainable web presence?

BERC: The biggest investment is design and putting up - maintenance is easier.

MERC: It's been sustained as a "web presence" merely by its existence - we haven't done extensive evaluations of effectiveness, reach, or impact.

CPRE: Keeping fresh, timely content is a challenge for every website. It is important for one or multiple people to solely focus on the website and thinking creatively about how content is transmitted to your audience.

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