

HigherEdBlogCon

Brendon Connelly
George Fox University
bconnell@georgefox.edu

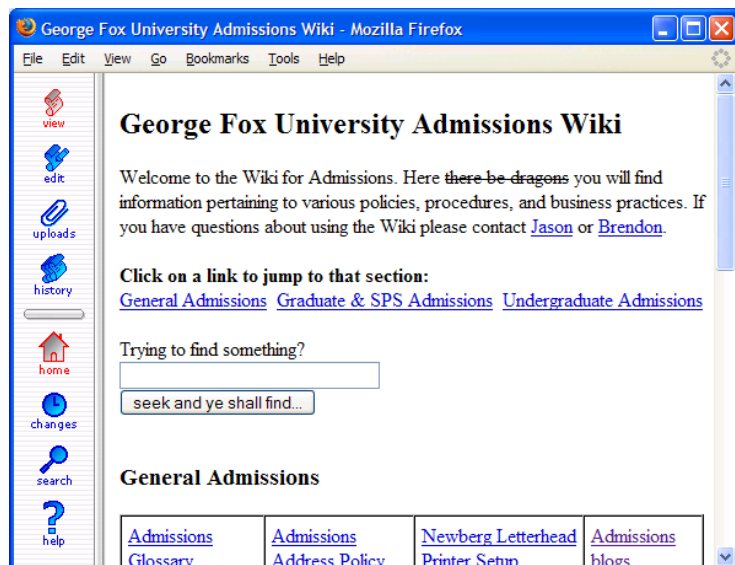
Sean McKay
George Fox University
smckay@georgefox.edu

Introduction to the Swiki wiki

A wiki is a collaborative web-based content management system in which all users can edit the web pages that are part of the site. Wikis provide a flexible and adaptive web-based environment for admissions (and other higher-ed) departments to develop knowledge bases and repositories of group experiences and wisdom that empower admissions personnel to be more effective in recruiting students. It lends itself to building a community and facilitating an environment that is based on collaboration and teamwork rather than control. Because of its nature, a wiki web site evolves over time and adapts to work with the content that its users contribute.

Wiki as an administrative tool

We've had the opportunity to implement and champion the use of wikis as a knowledge management tool in both Financial Aid and Admissions offices as well as an Institutional Technology department. In all cases, the specific "flavor" of wiki was Swiki. What follows are some notes on the common challenges facing the rollout of a wiki among administrative staff with varying degrees of technological comfort.



Resistance and the learning curve

Despite their relative simplicity, there's no doubt that there is a learning curve for wikis. But the learning curve is only a portion of the challenge facing the person championing the wiki rollout. In addition to the raw learning curve, there will also be raw resistance to change, an unwillingness to learn additional technology and a limited capacity to envision the benefits inherent in a fast and flexible web-based editable documentation environment. In our experience, widespread adaptation begins to take hold after at least a year of regular exposure and use.

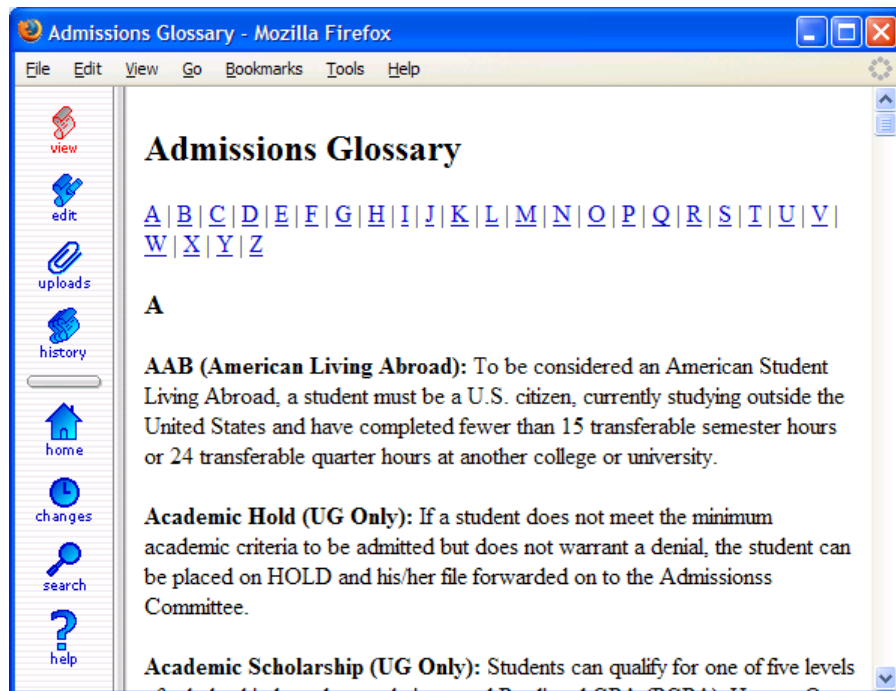
Use in an administrative environment

In both Financial Aid and Admissions offices, the wiki is ideal for holding two types of information. The first type is relatively static and unchanging documentation: account numbers, specific policy and procedures, job instructions, etc. The second type is informal and often ad hoc information to be shared between individuals. A good example of this is a list of telephone calls, where the names to be called are removed or struck out as the day progresses. Also, the wiki is helpful for sharing information between groups spread across large physical distances. A good example of this is using the wiki to host pictures and descriptions of career fair and tradeshow gear available to be shared.

Tips for success

- Be a constant champion
Someone has to continually promote the wiki within the department. If not you, who?
- Find an easy convert and turn them into a co-champion
Survey the department for the ideal convert: someone who is influential within the department and has a moderate degree of technical savvy. Get them hooked and set them loose.
- Drive routine communications through the wiki in order to accelerate comfort and use
Any time you amend a policy, create a list, build a reference page, etc, don't send the info via email. Rather, send a link to the relevant wiki page.
- Begin to answer questions with, "Have you checked the wiki?"
Make "check the wiki" part of the office culture by asking so often that people get sick of you

- Allow at least a year for full adaptation
Be patient.
- Don't allow the world to edit your wiki
In our experience, it is important to have a mechanism in place for providing access controls to the ability to edit your wiki. Providing unfettered access to your wiki is a near-guarantee that you will get wiki-spammed.
- Find a partner in your IT department
It helps to have an advocate and support in the IT department who you can work with to address security and backups as your wiki matures. It also helps establish your wiki as an authorized service and not a rogue application out in the wild.



The Friendly Wiki

One great element of the Swiki that is difficult to objectively describe is that it feels "friendlier" than some of the other wikis we have used. They either have too many or too few features. The Swiki strikes a great balance of just the right features to get the job done in an interface that is easy to use and learn. Our staff have commented on their personal preference for the Swiki over other wikis we have experimented with.

Low Threshold

Sean's introduction to wikis occurred after stumbling upon the Swiki wiki system. The Swiki is a project maintained by Jochen Rick and is part of the Collaborative Software Laboratory at Georgia Tech University. The Swiki wiki runs inside of the Squeak SmallTalk virtual machine (Squeak + wiki = Swiki) on nearly any platform. The Swiki wiki provides a near effortless deployment process, regardless of platform that you decide to use (we've run it on Windows, Macintosh, Solaris, Linux, and NetBSD). Just download the virtual machine, unzip it, and run the program. For instance, we started with a Swiki running on an extra Macintosh computer with Mac OS 9 and after three years moved the Swiki to a Linux-based server (for maximum stability the developers recommend a UNIX server, however we ran it very successfully for those first years on a PowerMac G3 266MHz with 128MB of RAM). Due to the portable and self-contained nature of the Swiki wiki, it can be deployed by just about anyone and therefore rises to the top of the wiki offerings in that it provides a low-threshold entrance into the realm of wikis.

Our first stab

The first wiki created was an online KnowledgeBase for our Institutional Technology department. It served as a testing ground for breaking a control model of information and documentation dissemination. All employees, including student workstudy, were allowed to have an account and contribute to the KnowledgeBase. Of particular benefit to our users was the Help button at



the top of every Swiki page—I frequently reminded people that they could learn everything they needed to know about using the wiki by clicking on that button. Additionally, the Swiki wiki does not require the use of CamelCase to create new pages. Rather, the user place asterixes "*" around a set of words (CamelCase or otherwise) to create a new page. In contrast with other wikis, renaming the page is as easy as changing the page title (provided in a field at the top of the page when editing the page).

Getting started with the Swiki

You can download a copy of the Swiki from <http://minnow.cc.gatech.edu/swiki/15>. There are versions provided for Windows, Macintosh, Linux, and Solaris. There is also a listserv available where you can discuss the Swiki and ask for help from the lead developer and other Swiki users. To subscribe, visit <https://mailman.cc.gatech.edu/mailman/listinfo/pws>.

Portions Copyright by AACE and revised from the SITE 2005 Conference Proceedings with permission of AACE (<http://www.aace.org>).