



2024

Website Best Practices

UNIVERSITY MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS

STEVEN SAULS, WEBMASTER

VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

Valdosta State University is committed to ensuring that critical information is readily available to students. One of the ways the university accomplishes this is through the website. Employees who maintain the website have a responsibility to ensure that information is complete and up-to-date, webpages are clean and consistent with our brand guidelines, and that department sites are easily navigable.

Valdosta State University houses a massive web presence, with over 10,000 pages on our main website alone. These pages are managed by faculty and staff through Cascade. Cascade is a Content Management System (CMS) created and managed by Hannon-Hill.

This document will cover:

- [Folder Management](#)
- [File Management](#)
- [Using Metadata](#)
- [Content Strategy](#)
- [Using Blocks/Modules](#)
- [Accessibility](#)

QUICK RESOURCES FOR CASCADE USERS

- [Valdosta State University Web Services](#)
- [Valdosta State University Cascade Guide \(IT\)](#)
- [Hannon-Hill Cascade Knowledge Base](#)
- [Cascade Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- [Northwestern University Cascade Tutorials](#)
- [Valdosta State University Cascade Portal](#)

FOLDER MANAGEMENT

Organizing your files in Cascade is an important part of maintaining the website properly. Before we can make content accessible to others, it must be accessible by us first.

As a website manager, you will often create new content. However, most of your time on the website will be spent maintaining existing content. Existing content that is well organized within department folders is simpler to work with and helps us to better visualize how we can best use that content on the website.

Cascade makes folder management very easy since moving and renaming files will not immediately break your webpages (and when it does, it's easy to repair).

CASE STUDY: ORGANIZING A FOLDER

I have several changes to make to the University Marketing & Communications Department webpages. However, the folder I am working in is messy and unorganized, preventing me from working quickly and efficiently. I wrote down the following instructions and used them to organize the UMC folder.

1. Verify that the main department folder contains a *_resources* folder. If not, create one.
2. Copy the *_department-modules* and *_common-links* folders and paste them inside the *_resources* folder for easy access to commonly used module block templates and links.
3. Move all department module blocks to the *_resources* folder.
4. Create an *images* folder and move any images to that folder.
5. Create a *documents* folder and move any documents to that folder.
6. Create a *forms* folder and move any web forms to that folder.

After taking these steps, I was left with a much cleaner folder structure. If somebody else were to begin managing the UMC folder, they would have no trouble finding the information they need. The entire process took less than 5 minutes and did not break any department pages.

FILE MANAGEMENT

File management is equally as important as folder management. Making sure files are named properly is vital to ensure that information can be easily found when needed. Cleaning out old files is even more important, as we do not want our folders to be cluttered with files that are out of date and unnecessary for our website.

Action Items: Ensure your pages/files are up to date and have names anyone can understand.

When creating a file, it is easy to name it something that makes sense in that moment. However, you are a content manager. Good content management is being proactive about how your content will be used in the present and in the future.

I want to upload my headshot portrait to the website to use in the directory. Examine the filenames below and see if you can determine which filename will be most useful to the user.

- SSHS.jpeg
- New-Hire-Headshot-photo-1080x720-thumbnail-for-Steven-Sauls.jpeg
- Headshot-StevenSauls.jpeg

The first filename gave us almost no information and the second filename gave us more information than we need. The third filename is most useful because it follows a simple and informative format called **What-Which**. This format is perfect for naming things like images, documents, and other media.

1. **What** are we uploading? *A headshot.*
 2. **Which** headshot are we uploading? *Steven Sauls'.*
 3. **What-Which** Filename: *Headshot-StevenSauls.jpeg*
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CASE STUDY: ORGANIZING FILES

I spent a few minutes applying this style to the UMC folder and got great results. These names will be far more informative to anybody browsing these folders in the future.

- LI-In-Bug.png → LinkedIn-Logo.png
- IG-Glyph-Circle-Logo.png → Instagram-CircleLogo.png
- f_logo_RGB_Blue_58.png → Facebook-BlueLogo.png

CASE STUDY: CLEANING OUT FILES – UPDATING DEPARTMENT PAGES

I went through the UMC folder and browsed for anything that could be deleted. It is as simple as moving through the folders of the department you are responsible for maintaining and removing anything that is out of date. There are currently 13 pages in the UMC folder alongside 7 folders. Below was my process for updating these and how long it took for me to evaluate each page. You can do the same on your pages, forms, and documents, and all other files.

- **All You Campaign** – This page is a more recent addition to our UMC site and displays visual content about our latest campaign entitled “All You.” It is managed by our Marketing Manager and only took a moment to look over for updates (there were none).
- **Awards** – This page lists some awards our Marketing and Communications team have received. It is also managed by our Marketing Manager and only took a moment to ensure it did not need updating.
- **Calendar** – This was a dummy page made by me a while back when I was testing some different calendar solutions. I forgot to delete it after finishing those tests. I took a second and deleted the page.
- **Community Activities** – This is the Christmas-themed page I will use in the next section to demonstrate metadata. Even though it is not published right now, we will keep it in the folder to use as a template for this year’s holiday season.
- **Creative Services** – This is not a page itself but instead a link to the Creative Services page. We don’t need to make any changes to that.
- **Marketing** – This page is wordy but can easily be separated into sections... it is a perfect candidate for a Tab or Accordion module (explained in a future section). I copied a Tabs module from Cascade’s *_department-modules* folder and pasted the information on this into it. This took about 10 minutes.
- **Our Team** – Our department recently underwent a reorganization, so there were a few updates that needed to be made to our staff. This took about 5 minutes to update.
- **Parent Portal** – This page about The VSU Parent & Family is wordy, unorganized, and may be outdated. I will check with the owner of this page to see if the content is still relevant. If it is, I will work on making sure the content is easier to digest and that the action (logging into the portal) is easy to take.
- **Resources** – This was a page someone had started to build but obviously did not finish. It contained just 2 URLs that could easily be found on other pages in the folder. Since it’s not necessary, I deleted this page.
- **Scope of Work** – The scope of work that is handled by our Marketing team. This is a heavy content page, but the content is clear and requires no edits. Reviewing it took just a moment.
- **Social Media** – Another heavy content page that requires no editing. However, certain links at the top are displayed incorrectly, taking up much of the page’s height unnecessarily. It took about a minute to correct them.
- **Social Takeover Guidelines** – This page is unpublished, and the content may be irrelevant. I will check with the owner of the content to determine whether the page should be deleted.
- **Welcome** – This page is mostly up to date but requires some phone numbers and other information to be updated.

HOW TO USE METADATA

Metadata is information a file may store about itself. It can include data such as the file's name, author, size, and the date the file was created. Search engines like Google use metadata to decide which websites to display at the top of their search results. Websites with good metadata will always be prioritized whereas websites with poor metadata will be deprioritized.

Action Items: Ensure every page in your department folder has appropriate metadata!

CASE STUDY: APPLYING METADATA TO A NEW PAGE

I need to create a new page in the University Marketing & Communications (UMC) folder. It is a landing page that will house a VSU-themed crossword puzzle, Christmas cookie recipe, and some coloring pages for the community to enjoy over our December break. As I create this page, we will walk through the metadata and go over each section.

1. Display name.

The display name appears in the banner at the top of the page. It should reflect the overall information presented. We'll call this page *Community Activities*.

2. Title.

This title will become our page's *meta title*. Meta titles are the names used by search engines when displaying search results. *Community Activities* is a proper title for this page.

3. Keywords.

Keywords describe the fundamental topics of a page and are relied upon heavily by search engines. The best keywords are unique to that page and are included in the page's content and title. We'll add *community, activities, Christmas, Valdosta, VSU*.

4. Description.

Search engines use a page's description to learn more about the page. They will often feature the description in a page's search result beneath the title. I added two or three sentences describing the page and made sure to include my keywords for good SEO.

5. Start date.

If you need a page to automatically publish at a future date, use this field. Otherwise, you can place yesterday's date here.

6. End date.

Setting an end date is required if your content will expire in the future. This page is for the community to use during our holiday break, so we will set the expiration date for January 2nd, the day we are scheduled to return to campus. **We do not want this page to remain on the site unnecessarily.**

CONTENT STRATEGY

The University Marketing & Communications Department has included 10 guidelines for content in our branding strategy. Following these goals is crucial to aligning your content with our brand and setting your department up for success as students view the website.

1. Be clear and concise.

The most effective messages are uncomplicated. Rather than getting hung up on academic language or marketing jargon, write clearly and in a straight-forward tone.

2. Know your audience.

Before you start writing, know who it is you're aiming to connect with, and make sure you're speaking to them.

3. Make it all about “You.”

Use the second person “you” or “your” to engage and motivate the reader. While everything you write will feel like it's about us, it's about them.

4. Be human.

Our students, faculty, and alumni are the best examples of the work we're doing. Highlight their stories, their wins, and the challenges they face as part of the fabric of the Valdosta State University story.

5. Be relatable.

The level of humor in our messaging will vary depending on the message, but where appropriate, don't be afraid to have fun, and be relatable. After all, some experiences (like exam stress, or mixed emotions at graduation) are universal.

6. Provide a benefit.

What's in it for the reader? If you can't answer this question, it's time to pause and reconsider the piece.

7. Back it up.

Our storytelling should feature relevant points of pride, statistics, testimonials, and emotion—but use them to support our messaging, not as a substitute for it.

8. Focus on impact.

We do lots of things differently, and better, than other institutions—but what's most important is the impact this has on our students and our greater community. Demonstrate VSU's relevance by communicating the results of our hard work.

9. Give the reader something to do.

Always provide a single, clear call to action.

10. Say one thing well.

Every Instagram post, pamphlet, headline, or blurb should have one distinct message. Get to the point and refrain from sending mixed messages, so that your audience knows how to act on the information you're giving them.

USING BLOCKS

Just as the VSU website is made up of pages, each page is made up of blocks. You will mainly use the default content block as it comes pre-added to your department's pages. However, you are encouraged to add additional blocks as appropriate for your page.

You can copy blocks from the “**_department-modules**” Cascade folder into your department's folder. Then, simply edit them and add them to your page. We currently have 8 blocks available for department pages.

1. **Accordion**

If your page is long and wordy, use an accordion block to break up the information into manageable sections. This is helpful for readability and extremely useful for mobile users.

2. **Cards**

Cards are a great visual way to attract a user's eye to things you want them to click. Use Cards when you have 3-5 links that you need to display in a visually attractive way.

3. **Fast Facts**

Fast Facts are just what they sound like! Use these to display several quick bits of information.

4. **Link Buttons**

Link Buttons are animated buttons for displaying links. If you need to display 3-6 links but don't want something as flashy as Cards (or need to save room on the page!) use Link Buttons.

5. **Link Directory**

A Link Directory is a collection of cards, each of them containing a list of links. If you have a large collection of links that need to be sorted by category, use a Link Directory!

6. **List Grid**

A List Grid is the same as a Link Directory. The only difference is that a List Grid allows you to display an image inside each link card. Use a List Grid when your Link Directory needs some razzle dazzle.

7. **Tabs**

Tabs are a great alternative to the Accordion module when you need an interactive way to break up lengthy swaths of information on your page into manageable sections.

8. **Text Editor**

The Text Editor module is a copy of the “Department Content” tool. Place a text editor when you need formatted text or images on a page and the “Default (Uses Body Content)” option is unavailable.

Using these modules will allow you to present your content in a more exciting way and to break up large amounts of information. They make your page more enticing and increase engagement where it counts!

ACCESSIBILITY

Making Valdosta State University's website accessible is crucial for reaching more people and creating an inclusive online environment. When our website is accessible, students and community members with disabilities—such as those with vision, hearing, or mobility challenges—can access and navigate our information easily. Prioritizing accessibility helps attract a wider range of students and shows that VSU values everyone's ability to engage with our online resources.

Our website was built with accessibility in mind, meaning that most of the work is already done. The modules, the content editor for body content, and the website theme itself already lend themselves to following the standards expected from university websites.

However, this doesn't mean that there is no room for improvement. You still need to follow the best practices for accessibility when building your pages. Below is a list of recommendations for easy reference.

1. Add Alt Text for Images:

Provide a brief description for each image to help visually impaired users understand the content.

2. Use Proper Headings:

Use different headings to structure the page properly. This helps users with screen readers navigate more easily.

3. Write Clear Link Text:

Use descriptive link text, such as "Learn more about admissions," rather than "Click here," to make link destinations clearer.

4. Check Color and Contrast:

Ensure text contrasts well with its background and avoid using color alone to convey important information (like simply making important text red).

5. Add Captions to Videos:

Include captions in videos, when possible, to make them accessible to users with impairments.

6. Run Accessibility Checks:

Use an accessibility checker to identify and fix issues on your pages. Contact VSU Web Services to be given access to Monsido if you are interested in monitoring your page(s) more intensively.

By following these steps, the VSU faculty and staff can help make our website more welcoming, accessible, and legally compliant.