



Benchmarking Department Websites: *Positioning App State for Digital Success*

A Strategic, Comparative Overview by Second Story Media

INTRODUCTION

In higher education, a department's website serves as the first and often most influential point of contact for prospective students. Beyond providing basic information, it shapes perceptions of credibility. As marketing expert Seth Godin reminds us, "...people do not buy goods and services. They buy stories, relationships, and magic." This quote is specifically relevant in higher education, where students are drawn not only to programs, but also to the stories and experiences those programs represent.

BACKGROUND AND REASONING

Recent research on student engagement highlights that digital storytelling creates stronger emotional connections and increases the likelihood that prospective students will see themselves within a program (Niemi, Harju, & Vesisenaho, 2023). In other words, a department website should not solely function as an informational resource; it should also reflect a dynamic, student-centered platform that shows who we are by highlighting the real voices of our students and the successes they carry forward beyond Appalachian State. When comparing Appalachian State's Communication Department website to peer institutions such as UNC Chapel-Hill, Charlotte, and Greensboro, it becomes clear that our site lacks the modern design, student-centered content that its competitors display. This gap represents both a challenge and an opportunity for the department.

STATEMENT OF THESIS

The Appalachian State Communication Department website must evolve from a static information page into a dynamic and student-centered platform that truly reflects the creativity, vigor, and accomplishments of our community. In today's technologically-driven society, prospective students compare departmental websites as a key factor in their enrollment decisions, and while certain UNC schools showcase modern and engaging platforms, our site lags behind, which appears outdated and impersonal. Embracing authentic storytelling, fresh visuals, and streamlined navigation will position the department as both competitive and distinctive, this will then strengthen recruitment, inspiring pride among current students and alumni. Without this transformation, we risk misinterpreting the strength of our program; with it, we set a new standard for how communication education is represented online.

CURRENT STATE OF THE WEBSITE

At present, the Appalachian State Communication Department website feels more functional than engaging. It provides the essential information through a straightforward set of hyperlinks, but the overall design resembles a static document rather than a relevant, immersive platform. Navigation is simple, which isn't always negative, but it lacks a visual hierarchy to guide users or encourage deeper exploration.

The visuals are one of the most immediate shortcomings. Many of the photos observed appear outdated and do not reflect the reality of today's communication students nor the wide range of work happening in

the department. Instead of highlighting student life, the imagery leans heavily on generic snapshots (cameras, filming, or study abroad trips) that don't capture the everyday experiences or achievements that define the program.

Our first impression of the site was that it undersells the department. It communicates the “what” (basic facts, program details, and resources) but not the “who” or “why”. Compared to peer institutions, which immediately draw users in with strong visuals and a sense of identity, App State’s site leaves visitors with the impression of a program that is flat and disconnected from its own community. This gap between the strength of the program and the way it is represented online is the core issue that our strategy seeks to address.

SWOT OVERVIEW

To better understand how the Communication Department’s website currently functions and where it can improve, we conducted a SWOT analysis, evaluating its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, which in this case, we renamed as limitations, in the context of peer institutions and modern expectations for higher education websites.

Strengths

The site is straightforward and easy to navigate. Core information about programs, faculty, and resources are present and accessible, ensuring visitors can find the essentials without much effort. In its simplicity, the website avoids unnecessary clutter and communicates the basics clearly.

Weaknesses

While functional, the site feels outdated and uninspiring. The design resembles a very flat document rather than an engaging digital platform, and many of the photos no longer represent today’s communication students. Heavy reliance on generic images of cameras, filming, or study abroad trips undervalues the department’s true identity. The absence of storytelling and modern visuals makes the site feel monotonous compared to competitor schools that immediately capture attention.

Opportunities

There is significant room to refresh the site’s visuals and layout. Scheduling media days, curating user-generated content, and building a media library would allow the department to showcase authentic student experiences. Restructuring the homepage into modular sections – such as “Why Study Communication,” “Student Spotlights,” “Upcoming Events,” and “Alumni Success” – could transform the site into a more engaging and representative platform. With the precedent of the Art Department successfully petitioning for greater design flexibility, there is also an opportunity to advocate for updates within App State’s broader branding guidelines.

Threats (Limitations)

The primary limitation is App State’s centralized branding, which restricts how far the department can deviate from the university’s standard web templates. As the Art Department’s experience shows, change requires lots of time and persistence, as well as approval across multiple levels of administration. Without buy-in, efforts to update the website risk stalling or being scaled back. Meanwhile, peer

institutions with stronger web presences continue to set higher expectations for prospective students, putting App State at risk of falling further behind.

The SWOT analysis highlights a critical gap: while the site is functioning well, it does not reflect the vibrancy or accomplishments of our department. The weaknesses and limitations underscore the urgency for change, but the opportunities show a clear path forward. If we leverage authentic student media with modern design practices and strategic advocacy within branding constraints, the Communication Department can transform its website into a compelling platform that both represents its community while positioning itself competitively alongside peer institutions.

DRAWING COMPARISONS

We selected UNC-Chapel Hill, UNC Charlotte, and UNC Greensboro's websites as comparison points within our research because they are regional institutions that attract similar student demographics and compete for the same applicant pool. That being said, each school's Communication Department has taken a distinct approach to web design and branding, offering a useful range of models that we thought necessary to compare to ours in hopes of drawing conclusions on what works best for them, and how we can apply that data towards creating solutions that work best for us.

To do this, we will use a point-by-point structure within this comparative analysis to make any contrast between the schools very clear.

Each point of comparison will be analyzed across all four schools:

1. Use of Visual Media
2. Cohesive Branding and Identity of the Institution
3. UI/UX Design and Webpage Functionality
4. Student/Alumni Featured Content
5. Spotlight on Social Groups and Organizations

In drawing our comparisons, we mainly reference the communication department landing pages for each institution, and chose to place our focus on these points specifically, based on the conclusions we drew from our SWOT analysis.

We started with UNC Chapel Hill, a natural competitor in many facets. It didn't take long to notice the drastic differences in how they represent not only their Communications department, but others as well. Their landing pages across all their departments include zero graphics or photos, just text. Each read as a list, organized through tabs at the top of each page that when you go to explore, you'll find similar formatting throughout each page. Even the faculty page simply states the faculty names, no hyperlinks, and no additional information. UNC Chapel Hill's department pages lacked use of visual media, evidence of unique UI/UX design, as well as failed to highlight their students, alumni, or any of their Communications adjacent organizations or clubs on campus. However, their simple UI made the department landing page easy to navigate, as well as helped uphold cohesion across their pages.

It was at this point within our comparative process that we realized that some of the UNC schools don't have a communications department, just an area of study within their specified college. UNC

Charlotte, given their unique location, was the second institution that we decided to include within our comparative analysis. We were drawn to them in how they chose to present their department information at first glance in using a Canva templated presentation deck. There were some other graphics that they had featured that were cute, giving the home page a bit more personality than the other's, but otherwise, the pages were structured similar to ours; bulleted, scrollable, and document style. I can't say that we were very impressed. While I love Canva as a tool, including Canva-style information slides of the landing page for a respected department within such a large institution was off putting. If anything, it helped us to understand the differences between good and bad uses of visual media, and provided an example for us in showing a potential downside in information simplification and integration of visual media.

Otherwise, the rest of UNC Charlotte's communication department pages were cohesive in branding as it pertained to the institution and the website had a simple, yet effective structure and functionality. Our secondary criticism of UNC Charlotte's department pages was their lack of content and information about their student organizations and alumni, an area that we intend on investing in greatly.

The UNC Greensboro Communication Department's website stands out as clear, concise, and modern, offering an updated look that immediately feels engaging. We were immediately impressed by the areas of their department they chose to highlight, as well as the ways in which they curated the stories surrounding them by implementing intentional visual media. The site is also highly navigable, with an intuitive structure that welcomes visitors right away with a meaningful, eye-catching photo and quick, informative tidbits. Its homepage is organized into sections such as "Why Study Communication," "Choose Your Path," "Upcoming Events," "Department News," and "Stay Connected," which together create a strong sense of identity and purpose. We were instantly drawn to their overall UI/UX design and webpage functionality, as well as how good they were at taking the identity of their students, and bringing it to life through their webpage design. To do that instinctively, shows that UNC Greensboro understands the personalities and values of their communications students, and they are interested in investing in them.

THE PROPOSED OUTCOME

We want a visually engaging site that features real, current students, with content from clubs, student organizations, and faculty projects that are updated regularly. Ideally, this site/landing page shouldn't be lengthy, and should have not only a clear identity to the university, but function to attract both prospective students, as well as current students to take pride in their department and the programs and organizations that complete it.

There are several different things we could do, and changes we could make to accomplish this transformation. First, we want to revamp the visual identity of the site by incorporating photography that features current students, faculty, and campus life. Restructuring the homepage to be modular and scrollable is one of our biggest priorities, helping to guide users intentionally through alumni stories, and featured departmental highlights. Integrating dynamic content like blog posts, video testimonials, and student organization updates would help keep the site engaging, while also helping to create a curated perspective on what makes a communications student? These changes, taken together, would not only modernize the site, but also align it with the department's values and strengths; creating an environment

that inspires self-identity, attracts prospective students, and accurately reflects the Appalachian experience.

IN CONCLUSION

Appalachian State Communication Department's current website, while functional, fails to capture the energy, creativity, and human stories that define the department, leaving prospective students with an impression that is misaligned with the program's true strengths. By studying peer institutions and conducting a thorough SWOT analysis, it becomes clear that a modernized, student-centered website is not just a cosmetic upgrade, but a strategic imperative. A redesigned platform that features authentic student voices and thoughtful navigational design will not only enhance recruitment but also foster a deeper sense of pride and belonging among current students and alumni. This transformation will allow the department to reclaim its narrative, showcasing the real people and projects that make communication at Appalachian State exceptional. In a digital age where storytelling drives engagement, our website must evolve into a living reflection of who we are: innovative, driven and ready to lead.