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Academic Public Service Web Sites and the Future of Virtual Academic Public Service

by Ellen Cohn and Bernard Hibbitts

When faculty members turn in their annual reports, they frequently include such public service contributions as fund-raising, staffing a food bank, participating in Habitat for Humanity, and service on nonprofit boards or clinics. They usually do not list Internet-based "virtual public service" (VPS) in their reports, perhaps because this activity is not yet fully defined or formally recognized as public service.

However, many academic computing environments possess the resources to house VPS efforts. Most universities operate a large public Web site, and many universities also offer Web-based course management systems such as [Blackboard](#) or [WebCT](#) as instructional supports. In contrast to other public sites, such systems tend to be restricted to internal audiences and typically exist to support college courses, thereby functioning as siloed, temporary repositories of knowledge (Cohn [2004](#); Cohn and Hibbitts [2004](#)). Universities also host both public and private journal Web sites, center Web sites, and even academic blogs.

Some faculty, however, have flipped the telescope around and have started to use the Internet as a bridge to the public instead of merely to each other. Leveraging their specialist knowledge and their academic authority against perceived public needs, they have created another type of academic Web site on their institutional servers—the academic public service Web site (APSWs). We define the APSWS as an open-access Web-based resource that provides information about an academic discipline and serves the public good. This definition potentially includes the public service that institutions perform when they allow open access to syllabi (including all posted instructional materials) and to professors' manuscripts to meet a perceived public service need. The APSWS model enables scholars to cross institutional and international boundaries seamlessly to benefit diverse and geographically far-flung audiences.

We hope that this article will inspire others to consider the benefits and potential liabilities of APSWSs and to launch their own APSWSs at appropriate junctures in their academic careers. Accordingly, we consider various definitions of academic public service; present two APSWS models; posit conditions for success, markers of excellence, and factors that may inhibit APSWS development; and highlight additional forms of academic virtual public service. Finally, we suggest that creative use of the Internet can spawn new models of academic public service. Such innovations may even necessitate a redefinition of public service within and beyond the walls (both brick and virtual) of academic institutions.

Virtual Academic Public Service? Why Not?

Typically, academic public service activities are not Web-based because most universities are not yet formally prepared to define, and thus acknowledge, virtual public service. [Exhibit 1](#) presents various definitions of university public service; none includes public service with a Web-based component. Many of these definitions appear to have been crafted for institutional budgets and audits (i.e., to categorize faculty workload activities into research, teaching, and service), and all specify that public service must be noninstructional. However, our own institution, the [University of Pittsburgh](#), does not rule out instructional usage:

Public service is broadly defined as the application of University and academic resources for addressing social problems and improving the general welfare of humankind. It is a serious academic activity which intends to provide public or community benefit, is related to a faculty member's academic expertise, is

different from and goes beyond the traditional duties of a faculty member, and is done outside the University. Remuneration is not the primary purpose of the activity. Knowledge arising from this work, ideally, should be disseminated through publications, such as documents, reports, and papers; should be incorporated in the teaching and training of students wherever possible; and have a long-term impact on the University and the community at-large. (Office of the Provost [2003](#), "Definition")

The most problematic application of the above definition is the requirement that public service be "done outside the University." Interestingly, there are no parallel requirements that a faculty member's work on a grant application, lecture, or article be completed *within* the university. The emphasis on external activities is not unique to the University of Pittsburgh, and neither is the traditionally narrow definition of "publications." While academic public service Web sites often constitute mega-publications, universities typically do not factor Web-based enterprises into teaching- and research-driven faculty workloads.

We suggest that it is time to reexamine and update definitions of university-based public service. Must academic public service be noninstructional? Why should public service, by definition, be conducted outside of the academy? Does the ownership and location of a Web site server (within or outside of the university) define whether an APSWS performs a public service, regardless of the site's audience? Should there be a separation between academic activity and service to the public? As internships, Web-based course management software, supported distance education, and blended courses increasingly move instruction outside of institutions' brick walls, it stands to reason that public service might similarly shift and blend locations.

Two APSWS Models

We have chosen to present two academic public service Web sites housed at the University of Pittsburgh for a number of reasons. The sites—[JURIST](#) and [Supercourse](#)—represent two different approaches to APSWSs, either of which readers might wish to replicate or adapt at their own institutions. The sites also provide exemplars upon which to construct a schema to assess the value of an APSWS. Finally, we are extensively familiar with the sites, either through direct involvement or university affiliation.

JURIST, originated by law professor Bernard Hibbitts, is a real-time legal news and research network that provides current legal news and background information for multiple audiences. The site generates original content and supplies real-time [RSS](#) feeds to other Web sites. [Exhibit 2](#) includes a more detailed description of JURIST. Supercourse in Epidemiology, the Internet, and Global Health, developed by epidemiology professor Ronald LaPorte, is a repository of PowerPoint lectures on epidemiology and public health topics from a worldwide network of faculty members. [Exhibit 3](#) details notable features of the Supercourse Web site.

Although these two sites share some common features ([Table 1](#)), they differ in subject matter, presentational media and methods, immediacy of postings, nature of viewer contributions and feedback, and student use. Nevertheless, JURIST and Supercourse have evolved similarly. Each was developed by a tenured professor at the University of Pittsburgh who elicited the voluntary contributions of students and academic colleagues by phone, by e-mail, and at national and international conferences. LaPorte has marketed the Supercourse site in more than 100 [publications](#) and monthly newsletters and has distributed 20,000 CDs filled with Supercourse lectures. Though the two authors do not collaborate on their Web sites, LaPorte and Hibbitts share site updates, and they coauthored a *British Medical Journal* article on electronic publishing ([1996](#)).

As exemplary APSWSs, both JURIST and Supercourse seek to create bridges and meet societal needs by altruistically disseminating high-priority information to the widest possible worldwide audience. JURIST provides current legal news and resources to diverse audiences, including citizens, academicians, and the media. Similarly, Supercourse utilizes a deliberately low-tech format to provide information on disease prevention and health to individuals and organizations in developing countries. Both sites are accessible, are ad-free, and attract high traffic. Their continuous improvement since the late 1990s reflects their originators' disciplined, ongoing commitment to public education on critical issues. Both sites also have delighted their

creators by inspiring offspring Web sites and/or mirrored sites throughout the world, with and without attribution.

Neither JURIST nor Supercourse receives significant institutional support for staffing or IT services. Supercourse is housed on the University of Pittsburgh server, and its major expenses involve the conversion of PowerPoint lectures to a templated HTML format using software already available to faculty members on their desktops. Graduate students provide volunteer labor. JURIST, hosted on a [School of Law](#) server, heavily employs [free blogging software](#) that allows law students to write and work on JURIST from any location without knowing any computer code or HTML. Hibbitts covers incidental technical costs and coordinates JURIST's volunteer student staff in his spare time. Both sites illustrate that the major resources required to create an APSWS include the time, desire, and personal capacities of the innovator to muster volunteer support from students and colleagues. Although these conditions seem daunting, they are not prohibitive.

Conditions for Success

As the success of JURIST and Supercourse illustrate, an exemplary academic public service Web site requires three conditions. The first condition is the existence of a *knowledge gap* that indicates a receptive audience for current knowledge. Both JURIST and Supercourse satiate the public's thirst for knowledge in a general area of interest (the law and public health, respectively). Each of these Web sites also identifies new and current knowledge gaps. For instance, Supercourse added multiple [new lectures](#) in 2005 to address current public health needs, including information on [colorectal cancer](#), [salmonella infection](#), [cholera](#), and current prospects for an [HIV vaccine](#); early this same year, Supercourse presented information on [tsunami](#) in response to the disaster in southeast Asia. JURIST, which is updated 30 to 40 times per day, maintains even higher currency than Supercourse. A compact staff of University of Pittsburgh [editors](#) make real-time, in-depth entries as news events unfold. In 2005, these entries have included ongoing comprehensive coverage of international law and [nuclear nonproliferation](#), high-profile legal [newsmakers](#), and the [Iraqi elections](#).

Additionally, both sites address the knowledge requirements of international audiences. Supercourse features lectures contributed by an international network of more than 1,000 authors. The "[Golden Lecture of Prevention](#)," for example, has been presented in 16 languages and taught in 140 countries. Because of its international appeal, Supercourse had inspired 45 [mirrored sites](#) as of May 2005 and spawned [Cuban Supercourse](#), [Indian Supercourse Network](#), [Islamic Supercourse](#), [Pakistan Supercourse](#), and [Russian/FSU Telepreventative Medicine Supercourse](#). The original Supercourse site sponsors U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [lectures](#) as well as [veterinary virology](#) and [preventive medicine](#) lectures. A [Disasters Supercourse](#) features more than 100 lectures on natural and unnatural disasters affecting various communities throughout the world, including tutorials on terrorism, tsunami, tornadoes, earthquakes, injury, and infectious diseases.

JURIST similarly attracts an international audience by cataloging international law by [country](#). Additionally, JURIST appeals to law school audiences via relevant academic [news items](#); links to American Bar Association (ABA)-accredited [law schools](#); and [Law Reviews](#), a directory of legal journals based at ABA-accredited law schools. JURIST also furnishes links to relevant documents and research, as in the [Cases and Statutes](#) and [Gazette](#) sections. The [Famous Trials](#) module, written by Douglas Linder of the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law, is a guide to celebrated historic trials. A video [webcast](#) section features [government](#), [court](#), [law school](#), and [world](#) channels. JURIST also covers [state law](#).

The second condition for APSWS success is the presence of a dynamic and credible academic "fountainhead"—an innovator who perceives a knowledge gap, sets forth a vision, engages similarly altruistic contributors, provides sustained management, and regards the site as a centerpiece of his or her career. This innovator must possess a keen understanding of how particular audiences prefer to receive information and the agility to respond to changing needs and technologies. Acting as such an innovator, LaPorte chose to

adapt PowerPoint lectures to ensure Supercourse's accessibility to international audiences. While Supercourse has maintained this design, Hibbitts recently responded to audience feedback by presenting JURIST in a news service format while increasing the site's use of blog technology and RSS feeds.

Innovators who function as the driving force of successful APSWSs are likely to be recognized as "super Web communicators" among their peers. Unlike most faculty members who create solitary and restricted course sites, APSWS leaders purposefully create formal and informal academic networks that propel their sites to international prominence. A global network of law school professors, for instance, contributes to the [Commentary](#) section of JURIST.

The third condition for a successful APSWS initiative is a symbiotic and trusting relationship between the Web site developer and his or her academic institution. An institution should provide time support (e.g., the "gift of time" to the site originator in the form of limited course forgiveness and a certain freedom from committee or other administrative responsibilities) and basic technical support in the form of server space and IT troubleshooting as necessary. Institutional administrators should also trust the faculty member to drive the site (LaPorte and Hibbitts are able to make all decisions about their projects themselves in real time, just as a scholar would expect to have creative control over his or her written work and classroom teaching). Finally, it should regard the Web service as an institutional asset. The University of Pittsburgh, for example, features JURIST and Supercourse in news releases and publications.

With these conditions in place, an academic Web site can evolve to demonstrate markers and exemplars of excellence ([Table 2](#)) and to provide a valuable public service by granting open access to information on current developments in specific subject areas.

Potential Challenges

While academic public service Web sites can serve the greater good, there are a number of downsides for potential APSWS originators to consider, at least until they have achieved career maturity. Mostly, these challenges relate to institutional tenure expectations, which encourage academicians to compete for grant monies and/or to produce first-authored peer-reviewed publications. Although Web-tracking data, user testimony, and awards illustrate the success of an APSWS, it is difficult to demonstrate that such Web sites produce measurable changes in the behavior of others. While the very existence of academic public service Web sites represents a paradigm shift of sorts, some might question whether such sites generate paradigm-shifting knowledge.

It is probably no coincidence that the originators of JURIST and Supercourse achieved the rank of full professor prior to devoting major efforts to these projects. Given current expectations, it seems advisable for faculty members employed in the tenure stream to wait for tenure and promotion before launching a public service career, especially one that is Internet-centric.

A further challenge in developing an APSWS is the administration of the site after its originator becomes unwilling or unavailable to continue site development. Ideally, protégés will step forth. If not, the site's amassed knowledge can remain available via archiving.

The Future of Academic Virtual Public Service

As Web-based initiatives, JURIST and Supercourse uniquely fuse instruction, academic scholarship, and public service. Moreover, they operate both within and outside of the host institution and are available anywhere, at any time. Perhaps they portend the future of the academy in a globally connected community of learners.

As academics and their associated library systems become increasingly invested in Web-based activity, the Internet might become an increased locus of lifelong public service. We envision the Internet as a vehicle that

can make superb use of the gifts that academics are best equipped to bestow as they create and disseminate knowledge. These virtual opportunities might range from passive "donated" computing power, such as the [SETI@home project](#) (one of the earliest collective offerings of global Internet-based public service), to the posting of information that serves public interest; interactive activities such as tutoring, mentoring, and collective problem solving; Web-based fund-raising; and interpersonal support to persons experiencing illness or isolation. Such virtualization of public service could enable members of the academic community (current and retired faculty members, staff, students, and alumni) to contribute to the greater community in a manner that matches both their schedules and skills. Such contributions would not only satisfy altruistic desires to provide service to others, but also reflect brightly on both volunteers and their institutions.

Most importantly, virtual public service could empower more members of the relatively underutilized academic community to perform higher-level activities for nonprofit service organizations and foundations. These activities could include the preparation of communication documents, policy analysis, grant-writing, proposal reviews, and service in virtual think tanks. Imagine, for instance, a cadre of trusted volunteers providing service to a U.S. presidential campaign (at any time, and from any place) within the context of a virtual war room that provides an online, secure workspace to cowrite documents, analyze policy, offer expert advice, and even conduct online focus groups. Imagine enhancing the literacy of a person in a distant and underserved rural setting or correctional institution, or advising the owners of a distressed business without leaving one's home or office. Such Web-based public service could be easily documented and highly accessible, flexible, and valuable.

Conclusion

To fully develop the possibilities for virtual public service, the academic community needs to document more fully VPS best practices, train volunteer coordinators to harness the potential of this new environment, and analyze the cost-benefits of VPS initiatives. [ServiceLeader.org](#), a project of the [RGK Center](#) for Philanthropy and Community Service at the University of Texas at Austin, is developing models for "virtual volunteering" service to not-for-profit organizations, government offices, schools, and agencies. This project envisages *technical assistance volunteers* (e.g., volunteers who offer assistance in writing speeches, preparing legislation, conducting research, translating a document into another language, preparing newsletters, designing a logo for an agency, and designing databases) and *direct contact volunteers* (e.g., volunteers who offer online instruction, mentoring, or teletutoring, or who facilitate online support groups). These possibilities suggest that we need to expand both our personal and institutional definitions of public service, and that academic institutions should encourage and recognize public service performed in virtual environments.

APSWs models provide a good start, but we also suggest that it is time to seek even more creative ways to harness the Web to benefit the greater good. One schema we envision would provide frameworks wherein scholars and others could collectively engage in Web-based problem solving to address political, public health and safety, business, environmental, and/or other crises. International communities of multidisciplinary and multicultural experts could creatively tackle these problems round the clock. In a second schema, a Web-based Peace Corps–like system would enable teams of geographically far-flung experts to contribute their expertise to underserved communities. A third Web-based service model could link the efforts of experts and their students in virtual clinics across a multitude of disciplines to help underserved individuals while teaching students the substance and the ethos of service in the process.

The protocols to alert and recruit experts, and then maximize and organize their knowledge building to support large-scale global efforts, are yet to be developed. Meanwhile, the technological infrastructure for such interaction already exists, and the potential scope and benefits of Web-based academic public service are staggering. As the models described here represent important steps toward the full realization of such potential, it is our hope that others will continue to explore the role of APSWSs in their own work as educators and citizens of the world.

[This article was modified from a presentation at the [Teaching Online in Higher Education](#) conference,

November 2004. **Authors' note:** Most statistics about JURIST and Supercourse were current at the time of publication. However, due to the constant growth and evolution of the sites, these statistics are subject to change.]

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