Proposal for a USFSP Online Student Support Portal

by

Casey Frechette, Assistant Professor, Journalism and Media Studies
Berrie Watson, Head, Library Systems and Digital Technology
Sharon Austin, Library Web Applications Specialist

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Proposal for a USFSP
Online Student Support Portal

This document outlines a plan for an online student support portal at USF St. Petersburg. Students involved in online learning at USFSP presently find support through various channels. No one source, however, provides comprehensive help and information.

The portal website proposed here will serve as a clearinghouse of information useful to students involved in online learning. It will address all aspects of the online learning experience, from orientation and registration to taking classes and exams.

We propose a two-phase approach to the development of the portal. In phase one, the portal will offer comprehensive, consistently-presented information about online learning at USFSP. Personalized, customized content would be introduced in phase two. Such content might include information tailored to students’ majors or current course loads.

Part 1: Overview, Background & Anticipated Audiences

USFSP offers various resources to support students throughout the online learning process. We do not presently, however, provide a central hub of help and information.

Based on brainstorming meetings, background research and related efforts undertaken by Sharon Austin, Berrie Watson and Casey Frechette, this proposal outlines a plan to build a comprehensive, accessible, personalized, centralized resource for students involved in online learning at USFSP -- virtually every student on campus.

We have identified three primary audiences:

1. **Prospective students** interested in understanding Online Learning prior to admission or enrollment; also admitted students prior to commencing study

2. **Students taking one or more online courses**, both undergraduate and graduate

3. **Students enrolled in a fully-online degree**, a mixture of hybrid courses or even a single online course.
Although not a direct audience, **support personnel** (advisors, professors and librarians) will also benefit from the tool.

*Please note: Faculty & staff are not an intended audience for this portal; training tools and professional development should be addressed elsewhere.*

To ease student frustration arising from inconsistent data sources across disparate systems, the proposed project aims to build a **cross between an informational website and a customized portal** by providing:

1. **A content-rich area for potential students** to browse information gathered from multiple USFSP units.
2. **A unified information portal** with mobile-friendly views of some content tailored to the degree program of the student.
3. **Optimized & centralized data** gathered from multiple systems that gives a comprehensive view of student progress and status in a visual format, including a “Dashboard” showing, possibly, GPA, classification, currently enrolled courses. Other visual presentations of data, such as progress bars, charts and graphs will be prioritized.

**Part 2: Assumptions & Functional Requirements**

The site should:

1. **Account for integral aspects of the online learning experience**, in conjunction with campus units.
2. **Be accessible 24/7**, while aggregating USFSP assets in support of SACS requirements where possible by addressing eight critical areas: About Online Learning at USFSP, Orientation, Registration, Advising, Financial Aid, Research & Study, Technology Support, Taking Classes and Exams.
3. **Not merely link to nor entirely recreate the functionality of current systems**, but **offer an intuitive portal that combines the best aspects of both approaches**. The proposed website serves as both portal and endpoint, initially as a guide and path to existing resources and ultimately becoming a robust, comprehensive web presence that addresses all aspects of students’ online experiences.
4. **Reflect consideration of existing resources and evaluation of their effectiveness for online students**. Given a firm spring deadline, we will set a scope commensurate to the timetable. The platform will be functional from the onset, but permit new technology for localized functions over time, based
on coordination with stakeholders, process owners and responsible organizations.

We have identified certain technical requirements:

1. **Host the site on a library-provisioned server**, with WordPress as the platform.
2. **Program custom PHP and JavaScript** to scrape information, integrate with third party systems through APIs and enhance the portal’s user interface, as applicable.
3. **Emphasize the visual representation of data**, examine social media integrations.
4. **Tailor content through student-selected options** to identify major or other affiliations.
5. **Install appropriate security tools such as SSL certificates** to ensure protected access.
6. **House the site on a usfsp.edu subdomain**, possibly online.usfsp.edu.

**Part 3: Initial Design Decisions**

Although many specific aspects of the portal have not yet been defined -- and must be informed by a range of stakeholders -- we have determined several features as a result of our planning and brainstorming. These are outlined below.

**Content Sources**

1. **General information** about being a student at USFSP: from USFSP website, USFSP stakeholders
2. **Data that we scrape from public third-party sources**, for example, OASIS.
3. **Student-specific data** gathered via scripts from content sources such as Canvas and DegreeWorks, being careful not to store sensitive student information.
4. **Student-provided data**, including degree programs, majors and preferences. These data will be inputted through drop down lists, checkboxes and predetermined options to avoid student privacy concerns.

**Access Levels**

Different content sources will require different access levels.
1. **Open access** to general information, with no tailored information and no login required.
2. **A Portal ID (login)** allows personalization, before a student is admitted or enrolled. This may be coordinated with an existing recruitment system. The user begins training on the tools of the system, how to navigate, read visual progress bars with the goal of admission and obtaining a NetID. If possible, we will use the VIP Login provided as part of the orientation process as the PID.
3. **NetID access** allowing tailored information as described earlier, with possible progress bars or other visual indicators. At this level, we can access personalized data from sources such as Canvas.

*Please note: A more detailed explanation of these levels can be found in the appendix.*

**Personalized Content Possibilities**

Based on these sources and access levels, specific content possibilities include:

1. A list of classes the student is enrolled in, with links to each respective class
2. A calendar that combines specific course and general academic deadlines
3. Program-level policies and informations based on the student’s major

**Part 4: Required Resources, Tentative Timeline & Ongoing Support Needs**

Completing this project will require significant content, design and technical efforts. The second-phase integration tasks, in particular, will take concerted development resources.

Major tasks are listed below. Completed tasks are designated by bold.

1. **Planning**
   a. **Initial Research**
   b. **Proposal Development**
   c. **Interviews / In-depth Background Research**
2. **Content**
   a. **Identification / Creation**
3. **Development**
   a. **Initial site configuration**
   b. **Site customization**
   c. **Portal ID-level customized content**
   d. **OASIS integration**
e. Canvas integration  
f. DegreeWorks integration  

4. Graphic Design / User Interface Work  
   a. Desktop  
   b. Mobile  

5. Overall Coordination / Project Management  

The team involved in the creation of this proposal has a good grip on the overall goals and challenges of the project and could play an important role in the planning, content and overall coordination areas.

However, the University should consider the best way to implement the plan, particularly with regard to graphic design and programming needs.

Possibilities include hiring freelance designers and developers, recruiting a web design/development company to take on the project, or hiring additional FTE help.

Given there is a team in place that could play a coordinate role in this project, we recommend either hiring freelancers or establishing a new FTE position, with the former being an option that would seem to offer the most flexibility.

Rates can vary widely, but skilled designers may ask $50 - $75 an hour, with programmer rates averaging between $75 - $100 an hour.

**Tentative Timeline**

Many factors will influence the timeline for this project. These include when approval for the plan is achieved and how resources are provisioned for the project. With this in mind, we believe the following chart provides a reasonable timetable for completing major project deliverables.

**Phase 1:**

**End of Fall 2014**

- Project Planning  
- Initial Site Configuration  
- Initial Content Development  
- Initial Design  

**End of Spring 2015**

- Full Content Development
• Complete Design

Phase 2:

End of Summer 2015

• Portal ID-level Integrations

End of Fall 2015

• Third-Party Integrations

Ongoing Support Needs

The portal platform can be designed so that minimal support is needed, but that may mean curtailing certain features. Support requirements include technical, content, administrative, logistical, and security/access. The portal needs to be monitored and, when necessary, the code to gather information from others systems needs updating to reflect any substantive changes to external systems.

Part 5: Reviewed Literature

In preparing this proposal, we enlisted the help of a reference librarian and conducted research into academic and industry publications about the design, implementation and evaluation of online student support portals. Our investigation did not turn up any literature discussing the kind of platform we propose building.

We did, however, discover a variety of publications discussing specific aspects of such a platform. Much of this literature addresses user interface and user experience considerations when developing support portals of various kinds. We believe the recommendations contained within these studies and analyses can play a helpful role in informing our work.

We also discovered an Educause survey from 2013 inquiring into the technologies universities use to power their overall web portals. Although these platforms are different from the one we propose to build, qualitative responses on the survey do provide some insight into the roadblocks that can arise when integrating multiple systems and providing centralized tools and content.
Given the lack of literature specifically addressing the creation and implementation of online student support portals, we believe USFSP will be well-positioned to contribute new knowledge to the field as we progress with our work on this project.

Part 6: What We Need To Know and How We Plan to Find Out

We have a broad sense of the kinds of support that will be most helpful to online students at USFSP, but we need to understand the specific tools and content that should receive priority. We need to know what the pain points are for students as they progress through their academic programs so we can introduce remedies when possible.

We anticipate three kinds of data collection:

1. **Interviews with support staff and other key stakeholders.** We plan to talk with the groups identified in the next part of this proposal about representing their departments on the portal. We would also like to determine what each division sees as most important to ensuring online student success. Identifying specific information and systems that we might incorporate should be one outcome of these conversations.

2. **Surveys and, in some cases, interviews with students.** We will ask students involved in online learning to complete a brief survey. This questionnaire will gauge their experiences throughout the process of learning online at USFSP. We’ll assemble a list of processes (which may cut across various departments) that students undertake (registration, for example). Then, we’ll present that list as part of a survey to online students and ask them to rate how much friction they presently experience completing the task. (We will also include open-ended text box for additional comments.) We will coordinate with the Online Learning and Instructional Technology Services group to design these surveys.

3. **Analysis of existing data.** Lastly, we will examine existing data for clues about how to improve the online learning experience. This will include a review of previously-conducted surveys and an audit of existing technical systems, especially third-party systems like OASIS and Canvas. Again, we will work with Online Learning and Instructional Technology Services to complete this task.

Part 7: Relevant Organizational Units
This platform depends on integration with various USFSP offices. We intend to work with these groups while designing and building the portal:

1. **Academic Affairs** (Han Reichgelt)
2. **Enrollment Management Services / Admissions / Orientation** (Holly Kicklitter, 727-873-4455)
3. **Records & Registration** (Linda Crossman)
4. **Academic Advising** (Joan Eldridge)
5. **Cashier’s Office** (727-873-4107)
6. **The Nelson Poynter Memorial Library** (Carol Hixson)
7. **Online Learning & Instructional Technology Support** (David Brodosi)
8. **Arts & Sciences** (Frank Biafora/Susan Toler)
9. **Business** (Gary A. Patterson, Alison Watkins)
10. **Education** (Bill Heller, Olivia Hodge)
11. **Office of Graduate Studies** (Donna Knudsen)
12. **Campus Computing Help Desk** (Gavin Peacock)
13. **Financial Aid, Scholarships & Veterans Services** (Erin Dunn, 727-873-4128)
14. **Academic Success Center** (CeCe Edwards)
15. **Student Disability Services** (Barry McDowell)

**Part 8: Appendices**

I. Technical Details on Login Levels
II. Overview of Research into Other Universities’ Efforts
III. University Models for Consideration (Spreadsheet)
IV. External Systems (Spreadsheet)
V. OASIS Script Example
Appendix I: Technical Details on Login Levels

To support students at different phases of their studies, our system will provide for three different levels of access.

At the first level, anyone can browse the portal and easily gain information about online learning at USFSP. No login would be required. This is meant to serve as a platform by which a prospective student may explore freely. Parents, friends, and potential classmates would be free to explore the same information, and discuss this information with the prospective student, thus enabling a support system of family and friends.

At the second level, a Portal ID (PID) is generated for the student in order to personalize information important to the student’s path through his or her chosen academic program. Anyone can access the system at this level, regardless of whether they have a NetID. This personalized information will enable the platform to guide the student in a targeted manner to complete the USFSP orientation and registration process. This Portal ID may be tied to or gained from existing recruitment systems.

At the third level, the student must have a NetID, and the student will receive a new progress bar, leading them to graduation. The look and feel of the experience will be similar to that of the second level, but much more comprehensive and personal. We anticipate that a student, having gone through the second level platform, will understand the signposts displayed on the progress bar, and will also understand its importance as he/she progresses through the academic program. In other words, we have essentially “trained” the student how to navigate the academic system in second level, and is ready to focus on academics learning after moving to the third level.

To summarize, each phase builds on the previous one while providing more comprehensive layers of personalization. A tiered system has the advantage of “training” the student to use the “progress bar” system in level two, without penalty to the student’s academic progress. By the time the student has successfully attained a NetID and has entered phase three, the student will be familiar with the tools that enable him/her to track academic requirements necessary for graduation.

Here is another, slightly more technical way of understanding these levels:

1. **Students come to the portal without a NetID or Portal ID.** They can browse the portal and access basic information, or they can create a Portal ID. This Portal ID (PID) will be advertised as a way to target information that is
relevant to the degree. It will allow us to filter and prioritize content based on the individual needs of the student. We will do this in two ways:
   a. By tracking how students use the portal after logging in with a PID
   b. By reacting to the responses students provide to a sign-up survey that must be completed when a PID is requested

2. **Students come to the portal without a portal ID but with a NetID.**
   a. We allow students with Net IDs to login to the portal. There is no need to assign a portal ID. We require Net ID students to complete the same sign up form so we can capture that information and tie it to their portal account.

3. **Students who previously created a Portal ID now have a NetID and want to tie the two together.**
   a. We allow students to merge the two together. If students have created and logged in with PIDs but have not yet connected their NetIDs, we show a prominent prompt somewhere on the site (upper-right corner, for example). This prompt says that the NetID has not been supplied, provides background on what the NetID is, and allows students to enter their NetID username/password to link the NetID account.
   b. We can periodically redirect users to a page when they come to the site that asks them whether they have a NetID that they want to link.

4. **Students come to the portal with a NetID or a PID that was later linked to a NetID.**
   a. In this scenario, students can log in directly with their NetIDs. They can also log in with their original PID.
   b. The login form consists of a single username/password combination. We prompt students to enter a NetID or PID. We provide help text explaining what each is. We provide a link to create a PID for students who don’t have either login credential.

In this manner, the login states include:

1. Not Logged In (Level 1). Limited personalization, no progress bar.
2. Logged In – Unlinked NetID (Level 2). Some personalization, restricted progress bar.
3. Logged In – Linked NetID (Level 3). Full personalization, unrestricted progress bar.
Appendix II: Overview of Research into Other Universities’ Efforts

In an effort to understand how other universities have solved the same problems we seek to remedy with our portal, we reviewed websites from schools across Florida. We also considered a range of other support portals from universities and colleges across the country. This section summarizes our findings.

Overall, we discovered a wide variety of approaches. There was little consistency in the scope, structure or sophistication of the support portals that we encountered. Many of the portals we reviewed were mostly or entirely public. A few were only accessible to registered (and logged in) users.

One recurring theme was tailoring different portals or websites for different audiences. Common audience groups were undergraduate, graduate, freshmen, transfer students, veterans, and international students.

We were surprised at how many third party applications were involved. Utilizing these existing systems may have been deemed the most cost-effective way to introduce sophisticated functionality while safeguarding students’ sensitive, personal information. However, third-party platforms do not necessarily integrate well with one another, and important questions remain about whether students are receiving the best help possible.

A few universities employed ombudsmen, which we thought was a great idea. It was apparent by visiting some sites that internal communication between units was poor, because the “owners” of the different processes were unaware of the impact that each had on the others’ processes and, therefore, on the student experience. An ombudsman kept processes united, simplifying the process for the student.

Several universities used a form of chat technology to provide on-the-spot assistance to those who were “lost.” We found there was some merit to the idea of using a chat system. In a sense, a “chat” system is a technology that allowed some of the advantages of an ombudsman (a student could be routed to the proper location of information within a site) without necessarily incorporating the expense of a dedicated, high-profile position. Several organizational representatives, already hired by the university, could monitor the chat and respond appropriately if they saw a question arise that dealt with their area of responsibility.

However, we also took note of the disadvantages, including the cost of the technology, and the added workload of chat duties to those already tasked with other responsibilities. Most importantly, however, we felt that as the platform is
meant to provide information on a 24/7 basis, the chat experience, active only when properly-trained or paid personnel were available to man the chat, would not be a consistent experience for the platform. We see significant resource implications if live help were to be integrated into the system. In the end, though, we also see the possibility of real-time help as an important question to bring to students in the survey phase of this project.
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<tr>
<td>USFSP Virtual Computer Lab</td>
<td><a href="http://www.usfsp.edu/computing/students/virtual-computer-lab/">http://www.usfsp.edu/computing/students/virtual-computer-lab/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>USF Application Gateway</td>
<td><a href="http://apps.usf.edu/">http://apps.usf.edu/</a></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign-in for USF Application Gateway</td>
<td><a href="https://apps.usf.edu/web/">https://apps.usf.edu/web/</a></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple sub-sites: eg 8085 Simulator</td>
<td><a href="https://apps.usf.edu/web/site/default.aspx?CTX_CurrentFolder=%5c8085%20Simulator">https://apps.usf.edu/web/site/default.aspx?CTX_CurrentFolder=%5c8085%20Simulator</a></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subfolder of MyUSF requires login</td>
<td><a href="https://mysites.usf.edu/_catalogs/masterpage/#">https://mysites.usf.edu/_catalogs/masterpage/#</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAST Search for SharePoint End User</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reporting Services Help and Whats New</td>
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<tr>
<td>PerformancePoint Dashboard Designer..</td>
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<td>SharePoint Server 2010</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>OASIS - myUSF</td>
<td><a href="http://usfweb2.usf.edu/oasis/mainoasis_stu.htm">http://usfweb2.usf.edu/oasis/mainoasis_stu.htm</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-Z Index - Search</td>
<td><a href="http://search.usf.edu/search?q=&amp;btng=Go&amp;client=default_frontend&amp;proxystylesheet=default_front">http://search.usf.edu/search?q=&amp;btng=Go&amp;client=default_frontend&amp;proxystylesheet=default_front</a></td>
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<td>Service Now/IT Desk with NetID</td>
<td><a href="https://webauth.usf.edu/AuthTransferService/casToken?url=https://webauth.usf.edu/SocialAuthService/serviceNow/transfer">https://webauth.usf.edu/AuthTransferService/casToken?url=https://webauth.usf.edu/SocialAuthService/serviceNow/transfer</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Service Now/IT Desk without NetID</td>
<td><a href="https://webauth.usf.edu/SocialAuthService/serviceNow/transfer">https://webauth.usf.edu/SocialAuthService/serviceNow/transfer</a></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Costs...net price calculator</td>
<td><a href="http://usfweb2.usf.edu/finaidnpc/npcalc.htm">http://usfweb2.usf.edu/finaidnpc/npcalc.htm</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial Aid Calculators</td>
<td><a href="http://www.finaid.org/calculators/">http://www.finaid.org/calculators/</a></td>
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<td>FAFSA</td>
<td><a href="https://fafsa.ed.gov/">https://fafsa.ed.gov/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>VIP Login</td>
<td><a href="https://stptusf.askadmissions.net/VIP/Default.aspx">https://stptusf.askadmissions.net/VIP/Default.aspx</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Short Description (Function)</td>
<td>Connections</td>
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<td>authorization to specific USF assets</td>
<td>USF</td>
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<td>Network Identification</td>
<td>USF Google</td>
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<td>Google Account for USF students</td>
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<td>Outlook account for staff</td>
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<td>USF portal to online admissions</td>
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<td>LMS Blackboard</td>
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<td>LMS Canvas</td>
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<td>Personnel Information</td>
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<td>Personnel Information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ticket System for Help Desk</td>
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<td>Restricted to Students for Evaluation of Instructors</td>
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<td>Applications available to USF staff</td>
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<td>Sign in to portal for applications available to staff</td>
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<td>Shell</td>
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<td>subfolder in portal to applications</td>
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<td>Portals for Sharepoint?</td>
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<td>Portal for Product Help</td>
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<td>Portal for Designer End User</td>
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<td>Portal</td>
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<td>Portal for Microsoft Help</td>
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<td>USF community multi-user</td>
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<td>Search Function</td>
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<tr>
<td>Service Ticket</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Service Ticket</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Options selected in a dialog box</td>
<td><a href="http://usfweb2.usf.edu/finaid/npc/npcalc.htm">http://usfweb2.usf.edu/finaid/npc/npcalc.htm</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collection of links for more calculators</td>
<td><a href="http://www.finaid.org/calculators/">http://www.finaid.org/calculators/</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Student Aide</td>
<td>Pin Site <a href="http://www.pin.ed.gov/PINWebApp/pinindex.jsp">http://www.pin.ed.gov/PINWebApp/pinindex.jsp</a></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Aid.gov <a href="http://studentaid.ed.gov/">http://studentaid.ed.gov/</a></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Web Services (OAuth)  

https://usflearn.instructure.com/profile/settings#  

Amazon S3 is storage for the Internet. OpenID  
When in guides, "home: takes you out of your login  

Organized by subject matter?
Appendix V: OASIS Script Example

This appendix demonstrates how we can completely customize the appearance of information available in OASIS, a publically-accessible directory of USFSP course information.

The OASIS search form includes many options:
In the example above, the **term**, **college** and **department** have been specified. These settings will result in the following output:

OASIS provides a wealth of content with many search and filter options, but its output can be unwieldy, doesn’t work well on mobile devices and sometimes provides much more information than a student might be looking for.

We have developed a script to submit the OASIS form on the user’s behalf and customize how results are displayed. The final page of this appendix shows a very basic version of how output might be generated using this script. It displays only some of the information depicted in the standard output and arranges it in a list instead of a table.

Importantly, the exact structure and design of the output is fully customizable, can be personalized and can be made fully mobile-friendly.

This script represents some of the ways we can integrate third-party content into our support portal without the need for logins or APIs.
COM 2130 Comm Skills for Health Prof  PREVIEW ONLINE
JOU 4188 Neighborhood News Bureau  LOCATION: NNB
JOU 4188 Neighborhood News Bureau  LOCATION: NNB
JOU 6006 Digital Democracy  ONLINE
JOU 6114 Multimedia Reporting  ONLINE
JOU 6360 Digital Media Technology  ONLINE
JOU 6361 Digital Video Production  ONLINE
JOU 6362 Digital Audio Production  ONLINE
JOU 6606 Photojournalism  ONLINE
JOU 6708 Digital Ethics  ONLINE
MMC 3602 Mass Comm and Society  ONLINE COURSE
MMC 4203 Communication Ethics  ONLINE COURSE  MONDAY PM  ONLINE discussions  MANDATORY
MMC 4420 Research Meth in Mass Comm  ONLINE
MMC 4936 ST: Food Writing  ONLINE Pre-req: JOU 2100
MMC 6421 Research Meth in Mass Comm Online Course
MMC 6936 ST: Professional Colloquium  ONLINE
MMC 6936 ST: Neighborhood News  LOCATION: NNB
MMC 6936 ST: Food Writing  ONLINE
MMC 6936 Digital Media Law & Ethics  ONLINE
MMC 6936 DJJ Social Media  ONLINE
MMC 6936 ST: DJJ Web Publishing  ONLINE
MMC 6950 Applied Research Project  ONLINE
VIC 6007 Visual Communication Theory  ONLINE
JOU 2100 Beginning Reporting
JOU 2100 Beginning Reporting
JOU 3308 Magaz Article Feature Writ
JOU 3308 Magaz Article Feature Writ
JOU 3940 Reporting Practicum
JOU 4181 Public Affairs Reporting
JOU 4201 News Editing 1
JOU 4938 Senior Seminar
JOU 4941 Editing Practicum
JOU 4944 Magazine Practicum
JOU 5105 Newswriting and Editing
JOU 5105 Newswriting and Editing Contact instructor for meeting information.
JOU 6107 News Coverage Public Life
JOU 6191 Sem: Contempo Issues Journalism Race, Gender & Class in the Media
MMC 2100 Writing for the Mass Media
MMC 2100 Writing for the Mass Media
MMC 2110 Scientific Writing Restricted to Seniors
MMC 4106 Science Writing Preview
MMC 4120 Media Convergence
MMC 4131 Video Storytelling  Pre-requisite: MMC 2100
MMC 4200 Hist Principles of Comm Law
MMC 4203 Communication Ethics
MMC 4503 Literary Journalism
MMC 4900 Dir Reading in Mass Comm
MMC 4910 Dir Research in Mass Comm