

2005-2007 LITRE Grant Proposal

1. Project Title:

wolfpress.ncsu.edu & journal.ncsu.edu

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4. College or Unit:

Information Technology

5. Department:

User Services and Systems

6. Project Description:

Wolfpress.ncsu.edu and Journal.ncsu.edu combined is a pilot study of web based publishing tools to be used for pan-academic pursuits. While there has been much discussion of blogs in recent online discussions, behind the scenes there is a larger discussion concerning publishing using programmatic methods to simplify, streamline and repurpose content. The purpose of this grant is to deploy, in a focused manner, two different tools to study their utility in a broader university environment.

The main purpose of this particular grant is to provide the resources needed to evaluate these new ways of sharing information and creating content. However, this endeavor must be a resource that can be supported as a University resource. This is due to the nature of content tools themselves; where their biggest strength is in their ability to be shaped by the content creators themselves, building content, and content infrastructure, as they see fit. It is not a top-down endeavor. It should not be restricted to a single academic department.

One tool is a generalized content creation layer that is widely used for a variety of tasks, such as RSS feeds, blogs, template based publishing and more. It is akin to lego building blocks, simplifying development. We have identified partners that will pilot with us to use these tools for both academic pursuits and for the more generalized purpose of maintaining simple web content. ITD's role will be to offer a potentially new service in a manner that is consistent with other services that ITD maintains. We hope, with our partner's help, to define ways that this new service will be useful to our faculty, students and staff.

Internally, ITD will use the service to publish examples of how to use this technology. These will be simple tools that illustrate functionality, but are functional themselves. One example tool will be a simple syllabus tool, completely web based. This will allow faculty who do not have the time or expertise to publish their syllabus online a simple way to do so. The chief advantage of this approach is that it will not very much time to learn or maintain. However, the end result will still be a static web page that the faculty member will be able to edit with other tools, as they see fit. This allows us to create a scalable system that uses our existing web services to deliver content.

Further, we will utilize this publishing method to enhance and extend the existing "podcasting" service offered by ITD, wolffcast.ncsu.edu. There is a need to add additional functionality to the service, for such things as better meta-tagging, ways to aggregate RSS feeds, and ways to protect feed access for content that must be restricted either due to copyright concerns or privacy

issues.

As a second part of this study, we will evaluate a specialized tool for "blogging". It makes no sense for the university to replicate functionality of existing free services, but it does make sense for the University to take advantage of these services when they can be used for specific academic pursuits. There is much interest on campus in community based publishing, and peer based review of student's work. We will deploy a service that uses a simple publishing model that is much like a "blog", but has the added component of community. A class can be a community. A senior design team in Engineering can be a community. The important aspect of this service is that it can be restricted to just the participants of the community, or can be made publicly available. It is up to the content creators themselves. Comments and feedback can be restricted to the community, or can be left open. Like most "blogging services", it can be used with either desktop tools, or can be completely managed through a web browser. This will preserve the best aspect of "blogging", a simple publishing model that puts little between the author and their audience.

Assessment of the educational impact of these new services will be the responsibility of the faculty participants. Joni Spurling will assist faculty in quantifying the success or failure of the tools and their expected impact on learning. ITD will assess the cost versus outcome of the service, and gauge impact on existing services and personnel.

Because the intent of this project is that these new services be used for a variety of publishing needs, we will need to evaluate outcome from the perspectives of supportability, pedagogy and usability. For this evaluation resources will be initially used for coursework and project related discussions, but can be used for other purposes as well, but with a small, initial group of users (approximately 200 - 300 users) to gauge relevancy to specific course work, but as importantly, to ITD's service portfolio. Based on the findings, the second year goal is to scale out a version of the service to all NCSU account holders that request it, if it becomes clear that this can be a supportable model not only from an academic standpoint, but from a service standpoint.

7. Project Objectives:

Specific goals:

To offer a layer of server based tools to simplify both content creation, and also the creation of web-based applications for content creation and delivery.
To enhance content with multiple venues for delivery and consumption using emerging technologies such as RSS

To expand the variety of content that is available on our campus by presenting new opportunities for our students, faculty and staff to publish electronic content simply

To determine long term viability and reusability of both services for our campus.

8. Estimated number of students affected:

The initial study will be limited to an estimated 300 students. However, these same tools will be used by some of our partners for publishing more general content, such as agricultural extension, which makes the potential impact hard to fully quantify.

9. Outcomes of the Project:

We believe that by offering simple ways for both faculty and students to publish web based content, that there will be an increased use of web publication for not just course materials, but for such pursuits as peer-based review, encouraging students to write and think creatively, and allowing better use of our existing resources for mixed-media projects. Further, we think this endeavor will help fuel adoption of technologies such as RSS on this campus. Instead of relying on spot solutions, we can offer simpler way for web developers to utilize these technologies.

Some of this may be hard to fully measure; we will be relying on our faculty partners to ensure that learning goals are being met.

10. Project impact on NCSU:

There has been a chronic need on our campus for some time to offer a simplified way for faculty and students to utilize their courseware and personal web space. It is clear that for many, it is simply too time consuming or difficult to create web content for specific purposes. Many faculty still deliver simple documents such as a class syllabus by sending a word attachment to all the students in the class. Some faculty are now requiring their students to create web content as part of their course work; it should never be the case that the mechanics of publishing a web page becomes an impediment to the real work at hand, which is demonstrating an understanding of subject matter related to the course. The trend in web publishing is not towards specialized tools such as Dreamweaver, but instead towards publishing systems that allow people to communicate freely and naturally their ideas and insight.

Developing a base solution for deployment of a simple web page publishing system (not to be confused with a more complex Content Management System) allows our campus population to refocus on content. In turn, a standardized platform for creating web based applications allows programmers and web publication specialists to focus on customizing this platform for their unique needs; instead of creating yet another RSS publication system, a programmer can instead focus on utilizing the technology in creative ways to solve a multitude of academic and departmental demands.

11. Project Assessment Plan:

We will measure specific performance data, such as hours of up time, amount of activity, amount of man-hours actually required to manage resources, and scalability of the project. This is a crucial aspect of this project; the intent is to provide an ongoing service for the campus, but only if it can be approached in a way that is supportable.

Faculty will be required to do individual assessment of their course goals and outcome. This will be based on test scores, but also on such things as student engagement, and the amount of content the students generate. One expected outcome is that by making it simpler for students to publish to the web, there will more inclination for faculty to make use of the web for course assignments.

12. Staffing and Support:

ITD will receive funding to support infrastructure and associated licensing costs for server software. The intent is to keep software costs to a minimum. Open source, or free solutions will be preferred, but functionality and supportability will be driving forces in the decision that will made. The major expense will be in hiring a 1/2 time programmer and project manager to focus on delivering a base level of functionality for the partners in this project.

13. Financial Support Requested:

EPA salary total:

SPA salary total: \$20,000

Other salary: \$10,000

Equipment: \$15,000

Cost associated with assessment:

Other financial support requested:

Total Funds requested: \$45,000

Additional Explanation of how funds will be used:

14. Funding Breakdown:

Total funding requested for fiscal year 2005-2006: \$45,000

Total funding requested for fiscal year 2006-2007: \$10,000

15. Staff Support and/or Technical Support Requested:

1/4 FTE for implementation and support

40 hours for documentation and graphic identity

16. Timetable for Implementation:

June -- Servers purchased

July -- Initial software loaded and configured. Testing of functionality begins.

Recruitment of faculty partners

August -- Deployment

November -- Mid Point assessment of functionality and impact

January -- Second round of deployment

17. Human Subjects Protection:

If your proposal project involves research using human subjects, you will need approval from the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human

Subjects in Research (IRB) prior to final approval. IRB information is available at <http://www.ncsu.edu/sparcs/irb>



18. Proposal Release:

By submitting this proposal the applicant grants the LITRE Advisory Board permission to make this proposal available as an example for future grant applicants. All personal information will be removed if this proposal is used as an example.

