CS 465 Project Proposal

Students at the University of Illinois have an incredible number of resources available to them. Unfortunately, most of these resources are scattered around different corners of the web. Each college has its own website in its own format; useful information organized in a different way by each if even organized at all. Within each college, every discipline has its own method as well. University branches such as CITES (EWS, EdTech, ...), Campus Rec, the Union, Illini Media and so forth are also examples. The University website attempts to act as a portal, but really only provides shortcuts to the structures described above. We propose building a common interface to these resources and, in doing so, make them easily accessible to every student.

Integral to our design will be the student’s, Department’s, or club’s ability to customize our application to suit his, her, or its needs. An Engineering student is unlikely to find the Animal Clinic’s daily schedule useful, for example, but a VetMed student probably would. Modularity of content is crucial since it allows the end user to do much of the work for us. Customization wouldn’t necessarily be done from scratch; colleges, departments, clubs, etc would have the ability to create ‘base’ configurations that students would be able to start from and modify to suit their individual needs. A configuration tailored to the needs of professors seems reasonable as well.

While the scale of this project may seem immense, it is practical in the sense that we are not creating the content and services but merely aggregating them. Ideally content sources will have XML feeds that we can use, but otherwise we will need to get permission to page-scrape. Important applications that have already been developed such as UI Integrate, Express E-Mail, Compass, Scheduale, Mallard and so forth might be accessed through a frame with relevant resources bordering them.

So far our proposal seems simply a wrapper and not much of an improvement over the University website. How we plan to distinguish our project is with visual context for our information. Many people are hopelessly lost navigating through a maze of text. For this reason, we propose using an interactive map of campustown as the central component of our interface. If a user clicked on a building or object of interest, they would get relevant information. For example, clicking on DCL would bring up a floor plan, hours, links to CITES resources and so forth. Clicking on Brother’s might call up the menu, daily special, and a way to order online.

By itself this seems like an information overload. Filters and customization play a major role in reducing this clutter. We envision a user choosing “food”, and campus restaurants being highlighted or signified in some way. Also useful would be an overlay of each individual’s favorite places – for the world or oOther selected users. The math department might have all relevant buildings signified with their own custom overlay. Essentially, customization and unification for better usability.