
Open Source Research Project

Creative & Scholarly Innovations Project

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PART I, OPEN SOURCE WEB PORTAL

The Open Source Research Project (OSRP), made possible by the Washburn University Creative and Scholarly Innovations Committee, was a challenging, yet rewarding project. The project consisted of two parts: the installation, customization, and testing of Sinapse, a popular open source student web portal; and the installation, customization, and testing of OpenOffice, the most popular open source alternative to Microsoft Office. For reference, open source software is software whose code can be legibly read and modified by programmers. On the contrary, closed-source software is protected and can therefore be neither read nor modified. Both software packages were installed on an IBM Open Power 720 server system, which is a production-grade server, capable of simulating and meeting the demands of a university setting. The project required extensive hardware configuration before any software testing could begin, but we were fully aware of this learning curve and we realized that extensive configuration was a significant part of the system setup. The following details the two parts of our project, (1) Open Source Web Portal, and (2) Open Office Software Suite.

Introduction

As senators in the Washburn Student Government Association traveling to a conference in College Station, Texas, the two of us were exposed to many student life improvement ideas. Sinapse is a state of the art system developed by the University of Oklahoma and other schools to create a student-friendly web portal system. We determined that Sinapse was the best open source platform to test if we were to install such as system at Washburn University.

Criteria for Comparison

Washburn University is currently using a quality, commercial grade student web portal at my.washburn.edu. Both my.washburn.edu and Sinapse have particular advantages and disadvantages, so after installing and comparing Sinapse with my.washburn.edu, we were capable of de-

tailing our results. Our criteria included the ability to process financial aid, facilitate a book exchange, host an online market, relay and store email, manage courses, create and manage groups, create and administer student polls and surveys, host a message board, display local movie show times, facilitate news feeds, present a customizable calendar, allow group file distribution, display realtime weather data, facilitate financial functions, post articles, facilitate course registration, facilitate grade checking, auditing, and management, present targeted announcements, allow online bookmarks, facilitate student elections, and host a local city guide, complete with comments and a rating system for city life.

Comparison Chart for Criteria Tested

Criterion	my.washburn.edu	Sinapse
Financial Aid	X	
Book Exchange		X
Marketplace		X
Email	X	
Course Management	X	
Groups	X	X
Surveys	X	X
Message Board		X
Movie Show Times		X
News Feeds	X	X
Calendar	X	X
Group File Hosting	X	X
Real-Time Weather		X
Finance	X	
Article Posting	X	X
Class Registration	X	

Criterion	my.washburn.edu	Sinapse
Grades	X	
Announcements	X	X
Online Bookmarks		X
Elections		X
Local Guide		X

Findings and Recommendations

Our findings confirm that both systems have suitable strengths and slight weaknesses. In our opinion, my.washburn.edu can occasionally be clumsy and difficult to navigate, especially with regard to financial services, transcript maintenance, and course registration, while at the same time, Sinapse may be completely navigated using an easy-to-understand graphical link system. Sinapse does not, however offer these services. Overall, our findings conclude that Sinapse is easier to use than my.washburn.edu.

Though we found Sinapse to be more easily navigable, my.washburn.edu possesses the greatest functionality. Offering a wide range of services, from student life to finance management and course selection, my.washburn.edu provides students with the greatest access to school-managed resources. Sinapse, on the other hand, possesses the greatest extensibility because its development is entirely open source, therefore facilitating rapid development of new services, services which are usually geared to improving student life.

Overall, we believe that the implementation of both systems would provide the greatest range of services for students. Sinapse is the most extensible system, and it is primarily geared for student life, with services such as a student marketplace, movie times, and student elections. My.washburn.edu is the most functional system because it houses essential university functions such as enrollment and financial aid management, and it provides a great way for students and professors to interact. Essentially, both systems complement one another to a greater extent than they compete, and we would like to see both in place on our campus.

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PART II, OPEN SOURCE OFFICE SUITE



openoffice.org logo

Introduction

Countless institutions from across the world are constantly in pursuit of the most efficient, easy to use, affordable, and compatible suite of office programs available to fit their needs. Though many office suites are widely available, Microsoft Office is by far the most publicized and popularized suite of programs because of its wide compatibility, host of features, and ease of use. However, Microsoft Office is not the only option available to institutions for document productivity, and a new player that recently entered the market on a wide scale, OpenOffice.org, may be a viable option for institutions, businesses, and government entities alike.

Criteria for Comparison

In comparing Microsoft Office to OpenOffice, we examined ease of use, affordability, widespread compatibility, features, and support. These criteria are detailed below.

Comparison Table

Criterion	Microsoft Office (Word Processor, Spreadsheet, Presentation Software)	OpenOffice (Word Processor, Spreadsheet, Presentation Software)
Ease of Installation	Very Easy	Moderate
Ease of Use	Very Easy Most widely taught and used in business	Moderately Easy Similar layout to MS Office; Slight learning curve
Affordability	Relatively Expensive (\$179 to \$499 per computer)	Free
Widespread Compatibility	Moderately Compatible	Extremely Compatible, especially b/w programs and operating systems
Features	Greatest number of features, outstanding spreadsheet functionality; intelligent word processing; great presentation package	All major features from MS Office; More development due to open source environment; Less advanced spreadsheet functionality
Support	Company managed phone support for limited period; self-help courses	Community supported through message boards; no phone support, but a broad base of users.

Findings and Recommendations

Due to its recent, healthy production and widespread development from a large (and rapidly growing) community, we recommend OpenOffice as a viable and extremely cost effective alternative to Microsoft Office for Washburn University. The low cost, high stability, and great functionality of OpenOffice make it an extremely attractive office solution for the institution, and its outstanding compatibility with Microsoft Office deems OpenOffice as the perfect, well-rounded solution for Washburn University.