

Access Missouri final report
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1. What has been accomplished on your project goals?

Our project goals, as originally presented in our original proposal, can be summarized in a few parts:

1. To create a partnership for the project between students and staff at KBIA, MDN, the University of Missouri Informatics Institute, the Truman School of Public Affairs, the MU Department of Political Science.
2. Create a user-friendly interface for journalists and the general public to access and interact with information about the Missouri state government in completely new ways.
3. Create an application to scrape data from the state legislature's .pdf daily legislative journals and crawl selected public websites where data is displayed in html format.
4. Identify other state government data worthy of preservation and analysis to be captured and incorporated into the database.

The Access Missouri project achieved all four of these goals. You can review the site here: <http://www.accessmissouri.org/>

For examples of some of the features of the site, follow these links:

<http://www.accessmissouri.org/campaigns/profile.php?id=121400>

<http://www.accessmissouri.org/legislators/profile.php?id=544>

<http://www.accessmissouri.org/bills/profile.php?id=26311>

The partnership between faculty and staff for this project commenced even before the grant was awarded, and the partners assisted greatly in the conceptualization of the project. Shortly after the grant was awarded students became involved in the project as well, and the best example of the interdisciplinary nature of the project was in the spring 2014 semester when engineering and journalism students began the development of the database.

Two journalism students worked on this project for the capstone project in RJI Futures Lab Director Mike McKean, under the direction of KBIA News Director Ryan Famuliner. The students did in-depth research into how data is kept by a number of sources in the state government, and how that data relates to journalistic coverage. This fulfilled goal four on the list above. The research involved a lot of investigation into documents, as well as visits and interviews with IT staff at the Missouri House and Senate, as well as interviews with statehouse reporters. Phill Brooks with Missouri Digital News assisted this process. The students synthesized all of this information to inform the development of the database. To do that, they worked directly with a group of five engineering students under the direction of MU Informatics Institute Chi-Ren Shyu, often overseen by engineering PhD candidate Mike Phinney. These two

groups of students met on a weekly or bi-weekly basis throughout the semester, and communicated regularly to help each other understand the concepts of database design, and what the data meant to the interworkings of the state government. Through this process, we created a database that is used to power this website. Neither group could have created it on its own. The students presented their work at the RJI Tech Showcase in April 2014:

<http://www.rjionline.org/rjitech14/access-missouri-student-team>

Blake Anderson joined the team in August as a developer hired to design the user interface for the project. (At the time Anderson was a private contractor, but in the spring 2015 semester he became a PhD candidate at MU). He worked closely with Mike Phinney and Ryan Famuliner, as well as undergraduate journalism student Matt Kalish, in this process to fulfill goal two on the list above. Anderson was able to quickly design an interface that allowed us to launch the site the week before the November 2014 election. The results far exceeded our expectations. In the first week the site had more than 20,000 page views and nearly 5,000 unique visitors. The site actually outperformed KBIA.org the Monday before the election, which is a huge accomplishment because that is one of KBIA's busiest traffic days each year. A lot of the traffic was driven by media attention to the project, which is outlined later in this report.

A major component of the project, a .pdf scraper that allows us to “unlock” years of legislators' voting records, is now fully functional. This was a significant undertaking, and the work on fulfill the goal three on the list above was largely led by Mike Phinney and Blake Anderson. Also, the project has led to a major development in this area. The state House now provides a link to voting records on a bill's profile page on its website. This step, allowing much more transparency to the public, was only taken months after our team members began asking questions about this data and its distribution. No one else has been asking these questions, some staff didn't even know how to answer the questions we asked, so it's not unreasonable to think this project led to that change.

2. What remains to be accomplished?

While all of these goals were accomplished, they are not one-time goals. Work on the project continues as Blake Anderson and Mike Phinney will continue to work on the project through the end of the summer (and possibly beyond if the project can secure more grant funding).

Also, journalism masters candidate James Gordon will be working on Access Missouri as a professional project this summer. He will work to find ways to expand on goals one, three and four. Now that the site has been created, there is significant opportunity to expand the collaboration with the political science department and the Truman School. Faculty there have largely been advisors as most of the heavy lifting thus far has been done by the journalism school and engineering department students and faculty. The project can also become more ingrained in the journalism school and Informatics Institute than it is now, and Ryan Famuliner and Chi-Ren Shyu are investigating opportunities there. Work will also continue to improve the user interface and develop new visualizations to utilize the data we currently have. And there is new data to add as well, including state budget data and legislative committee actions - which can tell us very

valuable information about lobbyist and campaign contributor influence. There are also still improvements to be made to make the data more available in real-time and searchable.

3. Evaluation criteria:

Here are the evaluation criteria as laid out in the grant application:

- Creation of a functional application that scrapes data from the .pdf legislative journals to be used in a sortable database.
- Creation of a website utilizing state government data such as the data taken from the legislative journals.
- Interdepartmental cooperation to identify and collect important state government data that is currently underutilized by reporters and the general public
- Multiple KBIA news reports using the data from this site as research.

You can refer to the information above for evaluation on points 1-3. Point four is the one that has yet to be ingrained into the process at KBIA. While Access Missouri data has been used in research in many reports, it's only been cited in one article on KBIA thus far.

<http://kbia.org/post/why-mother-jones-article-about-missouri-abortion-bill-regionalistic-sensational-and-worthless>

There is more work to be done to implement Access Missouri into KBIA's reporting process. One idea is for us to produce a regular podcast based on stories found in the data on the site, but that realistically wouldn't start until this fall at the earliest, when a student could be tasked with the duties. However, Ryan Famuliner is investigating opportunities for partnership with the National Institute for Computer Assisted Reporting, which is based at the MU journalism school, to utilize students enrolled in classes that focus on this kind of reporting. So, in summary, there is still work to be done, and that is in process, on this fourth point.

Current Expenditures:

Domain registration: \$64
Salary for Mike Phinney: \$8,400
Maintenance contract for Blake Anderson: \$8,400
Development server: \$900 (covers costs for five years)
Total: \$17,764

Planned expenditures:

Maintenance contract for Blake Anderson (through Sept 1 2015): \$3,000
Salary for James Gordon For professional project (May-August 2015) \$3,840
Total: \$6,840

Because fixed costs were lower than originally budgeted, and travel expenses were not needed, we re-allocated those funds to pay students to work on the project instead. Considering current and planned expenditures, this leaves \$396 unspent from the original grant amount. We would

ask that this money be left in the grant fund to allow for it to be applied to future staffing costs. Team members are in the process of finding more grant funding to continue work on the project beyond September, and this funding would be well spent to continue work on this site.

Media Coverage of Access Missouri

News coverage of Access Missouri right before the November election contributed significantly to the traffic to the site, and was very favorable to the University of Missouri. The Columbia Daily Tribune wrote an article about the site, which was then picked up by the Associated Press and run in more than a dozen newspapers across the state:

http://www.columbiatribune.com/news/politics/website-made-with-mu-grant-aggregates-lawmaker-votes-lobbyist-gifts/article_dd57e197-de98-5a93-be09-5c8f83ba4328.html

Ryan Famuliner was also interviewed by two television stations for stories about the site, one in Columbia and one in Springfield:

http://www.ozarksfirst.com/story/d/story/new-website-gives-look-into-missouri-politics-mone/20622/7FbOXiW8p0e6iZgn45m_2g

<http://www.komu.com/news/website-launches-that-depicts-individual-legislative-information/>

We also provided Access Missouri as a free resource to other news stations during the election, allowing them to embed the site on their websites. Three websites: the Columbia Tribune, Fox2 in St. Louis, and the St. Joe Channel in St. Joseph, all embedded the site in their sites as part of their November 2014 election coverage. St. Joseph also embedded it again in the April 2015 election. We plan to continue to work with newspapers and television and radio stations in the future to collaboratively distribute the project in this way. You can see an example of what this looks like on the Columbia Daily Tribune's website, where the site is still embedded:

http://www.columbiatribune.com/access-missouri-database/html_ded29693-f526-5046-bc6b-0e9c9b5187e5.html

Due to the significant media attention, the team was also asked to provide a demo of the site to University of Missouri Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin and UM System President Tim Wolfe. That demo took place in a meeting the Friday after the November election, just over a week after the site's launch: a demonstration of the site's significant visibility and impact immediately after its launch.

Conclusion

I don't hesitate to call the Access Missouri project a success. It's achieved the goals it set out to. But it's also still a work in progress, with lots of room for improvement and further utilization for educational opportunity. Because so much time and effort has been spent on the development of the database and basic interface, not as much time has been spent fostering more collaborations with campus entities to enrich learning while at the same time benefitting the site. But rest assured that is one of the current focuses of the project, as well as an effort to find sustainable funding.

We have also already served as a resource for another news agency in Florida hoping to start a similar site utilizing state government data. This grant has allowed the University of Missouri to enter the conversation on this type of endeavor early. The media attention and traffic to the site is encouraging, because the main goals of this project beyond the technical deliverables are to increase transparency and accountability in state government, as well as fluency in the general public. And again, there is significant opportunity to scale up that impact.