A New Technology Lets Colleges Spread Information to People Who Want It

By DAN CARNEVALE

College researchers and public-relations officials are starting to take advantage of a new technology that can help get their news and information out more quickly and directly to the people who want them.

The technology, called RSS, is already in use on some news sites and Weblogs. But colleges are beginning to catch up.

Although RSS technology was invented about four years ago, its developers still haven't come to a consensus on what the abbreviation stands for. Some say it means "really simple syndication" and some say it stands for "rich site summary," while others have come up with other variations.

The technology allows users to receive information, similar to the way in which one would get messages from an e-mail discussion group, except that users decide who can send what.

For Web designers to use the technology, they must install software called an RSS generator. They can download the software from several Web sites (including http://www.prweb.com/rss.php and http://www.2rss.com/software.php). Then, every time the designer adds new information to an RSS-enabled Web site, the software writes a piece of computer code called an RSS feed.

In order to receive and read the RSS updates, users must download different software, an RSS aggregator, which is also free and widely available online. Examples of the software are on the Institute of Physics Web site (http://syndication.iop.org/about/software.cfm).

After the users select the sites from which they want to get updates by clicking links on those sites, the aggregator collects new information from the sites as often as the users want -- say, once every five minutes or every hour.

Better Than Surfing

In a stand-alone window on a user's screen, the aggregator generates a list of headlines as the updates come in. The user can scroll through the headlines and read a description of each one. When the user finds something interesting, a click of the mouse opens a summary, which offers a link to a Web page.