

Google Analytics at the University of Virginia:

*A Change Request
in Pursuit of
Organizational Excellence*



Submitted by
the uWeb Steering Committee

November 2014

Proposal Summary:

We request a UVA policy change whereby someone in authority—for example, the President, Provost, COO, or Board of Visitors—acts as an executive sponsor to sanction the use of Google Analytics (GA) at the University.

This could be as simple as an **announcement that using Google Analytics in its free Standard Edition is permitted**, or as complex as negotiating a contract with, and **funding the University's purchase of, Google Analytics Premium Edition**. Either way, we make this request to:

- **Facilitate an exceptional University presence online** which strengthens the UVA brand by providing business intelligence to UVA employees who maintain, design, or develop University websites, apps, and marketing communications
- **Enable University leaders and managers to measure and monitor impacts of** UVA websites, email marketing campaigns, e-learning initiatives, etc. and make data-driven decisions around them
- **Eliminate the existing organizational culture** where fear of publicly acknowledging use of GA stifles dialogue, training opportunities, and acting upon data-driven insights
- **Reduce the liability borne personally** by UVA Web developers, designers, and communicators in the course of fulfilling their daily job duties

Contact & Sponsor:

This proposal is brought forth by the uWeb Steering Committee, elected representatives for the [uWeb community](#), an organization of website developers, designers, contributors, and communicators at UVA seeking to provide opportunities for cross-Grounds collaboration and professional development.

Why UVA Needs Web Metrics

Goals necessitate measurement. An organization as large and diverse as the University of Virginia has a wide array of business goals to fulfill by executing strategies across many different digital platforms. These include websites, email marketing campaigns, online advertising, search engine optimization, reputation management, app development, e-learning initiatives, and more.

Without a proper system to evaluate the success of these online strategies or to collect, interpret, and act upon website performance statistics, UVA is at a significant disadvantage as compared to peer higher education institutions. We therefore have a mission-critical need for data to inform our decision-making in the digital sphere and a measurement system that can help us identify and build upon successes.

In other words, we cannot operate online and expect to know whether UVA's digital efforts are succeeding unless we are measuring our online performance.

The ability to make thoughtful, data-driven choices concerning the University's Web presence—both the main UVA website and those of its units, schools, and departments—aligns with both the University's strategic plan and its focus on organizational excellence. Such data enables us to maintain a Web presence worthy of a world-class university, plus:

- Strengthen and unify the UVA brand;
- Attract the best students and faculty by making the UVA website an engaging, user-friendly, global gateway to the University—as it's the initial and often the final “touchpoint” that many have;
- Improve the online experience of all our audiences, including prospective students, parents, donors, employees, and the larger community.

Why Google Analytics?

[Google Analytics](#) is a Web-based metrics service offered by Google that generates detailed statistics about online performance. It can track where website traffic originates—i.e., referral sources such as search engines and shared links on social networks—and can measure the popularity of links, time spent on pages, and website entry and exit points. It also offers information about typical audience usage of mobile, tablet, and desktop platforms, types of Web browsers used, click-through paths, numbers of new versus returning visitors, common search keywords, and more. GA provides real-time monitoring and vital business intelligence.

Armed with this knowledge, website managers and communicators can make informed decisions about what content their audiences are searching for, what content their audiences most value, and how their audiences locate, access, and share it. This information equips them to ensure visitors have the best possible online experience.

Google Analytics (GA) is not only the industry standard for Web metrics, but also the global market leader, universally regarded as the tool of best practice among Web

developers, managers, and communicators. No other system comes close to its rich feature set, overall capabilities, and widespread adoption:

- More than 17 million websites use Google Analytics, and with **81% market share**, GA is the world’s most widely used website statistics service.¹
- Since whether an organization uses GA is evident through viewing the publicly-available source code of its website, we know that **virtually every Virginia state government and public higher ed institution website uses GA.**²
- About **97% of American colleges and universities use GA** on their sites as well.³

A Brief History of GA at UVA

Google buys Urchin, a GA competitor	GA disallowed at UVA, so some departments switch to Urchin	Google discontinues Urchin, pushing users to either use GA’s free or paid versions	UVA debuts Organizational Excellence
2005	2008	2012	2014

Google Analytics had already emerged as the industry standard for Web metrics by 2008, but was discouraged at UVA on advice of General Counsel, Procurement, and former President Casteen. Legal liability, indemnification, and privacy concerns were cited as problematic. To comply, several University departments then halted their use of GA. Some switched to a paid account with Urchin (which permitted local, rather than remote, hosting of data), in order to maintain access to robust Web metrics.

Unfortunately, Google also owned Urchin, having purchased it in 2005, and decided to discontinue it in 2012. This effectively nudged its Urchin users to default into using the free Google Analytics Standard Edition or into paying for its new GA “Premium Edition,” which debuted in 2011—for a cost exponentially higher than Urchin’s former pricetag. Out of options with Urchin’s demise, most if not all UVA schools and units have been using GA’s free Standard Edition since at least 2012, although many hesitate to publicly admit it.

¹ Sources: <http://www.quora.com/Google-Analytics/How-many-users-or-websites-are-using-Google-Analytics> and http://w3techs.com/technologies/overview/traffic_analysis/all

² Our research found that [VA Tech](#), [William & Mary](#), [Mary Washington](#), [JMU](#), and [virginia.gov](#) itself all use GA. In addition, [Chesterfield Co. received a Governor’s Technology Award in 2010](#) partly because of its use of Google Analytics.

³ Source: <http://collegewebeditor.com/blog/index.php/archives/2012/06/04/the-2012-state-of-social-media-and-web-analytics-in-highered-survey-report/>

Over the past couple of years, public discussions about GA and the lack of a central UVA Web metrics system have appeared occasionally on University email listservs. Posts typically question the not-well-understood “policy,” since it has never been formally posted anywhere by any University entity (as far as we know or could uncover in our research). Rather, the “ban” been communicated and repeated solely by word-of-mouth.

In the summer of 2013, UVA established the Organizational Excellence program to make a formal, deliberate, University-wide effort to enhance organizational capacity and advance excellence. Becoming more data-driven and results-oriented are among the guiding principles of this initiative, which seeks to align processes and technology to support institutional priorities. With a focus on streamlining, reducing duplication of effort, and eliminating non-value added activities, Organizational Excellence dovetails naturally with the spirit in which we now bring forth this Google Analytics policy change request.

Why Should Things Change?

Most of UVA is already using GA, but not necessarily effectively. Given the history and confusion surrounding this issue, many UVA Web practitioners are reluctant to discuss GA publicly. Most fear that doing so might risk their department or school’s access to its essential data. Many are also concerned about job security and bearing any potential liability personally. The result has been an awkward “don’t ask, don’t tell” environment around GA at VA. Organizational silos and duplication of effort result:

- Web developers and communicators both in the main UVA communications office and at various schools and units all have their own **separate GA installations**. They do not collaborate with each other on customizations or techniques to maximize the value of GA data while minimizing any security or privacy concerns.
- Many such employees feel they **cannot freely share insights gained from GA** or best practices with one another, **nor pursue training opportunities** that would improve their ability to effectively leverage it.
- Instead, they use GA quietly, and hand reports based on its metrics to their supervisors, who typically read and act upon them **without acknowledging the data source**. Rarely does anyone publicly discuss use of GA (outside of a handful of times it has come up on UVA listservs), mainly to preserve access to its essential data for decision-making.

Employees facing litigation may not be supported by UVA General Counsel. Many UVA Web developers, designers, and communicators are asked—often implicitly and occasionally explicitly—to collect, analyze, or report on Web metrics as a measure of employee accomplishments or to inform decision-making around organizational websites. Some UVA job descriptions even list this as part of the position responsibilities.

- Such employees are effectively **required to use GA to fulfill their job duties**. Many are happy to do this, yet currently do so knowing that they may not have the full support of the University whose mission they are trying to advance.
 - University Counsel has indicated that **these employees are on their own** should any problems with end-user agreements ever arise, essentially asking them to bear all potential liability personally.⁴
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Ways to Move Forward

When the uWeb steering committee took this issue up on behalf of its membership in early 2014 and contacted UVA General Counsel for input, the same privacy and indemnification issues were raised again, and the official position on GA was reiterated.

University Counsel has never addressed the Premium Edition option, however, which turned up in our research for this document. GA Premium might accommodate the University's privacy policy and contract terminology needs—for a price.

In sum, to improve the current situation, UVA has three choices:

- **endorse the use of the free GA Standard Edition** already in use,
- **purchase the GA Premium Edition**, or
- **move UVA to another sanctioned analytics vendor**—in the unlikely event that one comparable to GA in performance could be located and funded.

Any of the above would enable UVA to join its fellow institutions in the state and nation in freely leveraging Web metrics as part of an overall focus on branding and in pursuit of organizational excellence. Specifically, it would enable us to:

- create a flagship Web presence worthy of a world-class university;
- foster a better, more consistent user experience for online audiences;
- craft more strategic digital marketing and communications;

⁴ Direct quote from UVA Associate General Counsel, in an email to the webmasters@virginia.edu list, on April 25, 2013: "Under UVA policy any 'OK' you provide to one of these frequent web-based licenses is being done on your own and as individual, unless you send the agreement to UVA (or Medical Center) Procurement for their review and approval... This is true whether the contract is for services or goods that are 'free' or for which payment is required. These online license agreements typically have terms the University could not agree to as a public entity, for example 'indemnification' terms or agreeing to the jurisdiction and laws of another state. Often when Procurement gets such agreements, they are able to get the vendor to agree to necessary changes. If you, however, sign them as is, you are agreeing as an individual to indemnify and to be sued wherever the vendor stipulates. This may not typically be a big practical problem, as it's unusual for people to get sued under one of these web-based agreements. But it isn't impossible--something each person truly needs to think about [underline *not* added; in the original]...Even if you decide to go ahead and 'click ok,' you'll have a better understanding of the personal responsibilities you are agreeing to, first."

- ensure more effective handling of Web data, University-wide; and
 - liberate UVA Web practitioners to seek training in this essential tool and to speak openly with one another about their work.
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Options & Implications If...

Option a). Proposal is approved and GA Standard is officially permitted.

With support from UVA senior leadership, University Counsel could consider this system an exception to the general click-through agreement rules held currently, or revisit the click-through issue entirely, since so many UVA employees working in the digital sphere *must* agree to many of these in the course of doing their daily work for the University.

- **Pros:**
 - GA Standard Edition is already in use across virtually all UVA and other state institution (both higher ed and government) websites.
 - Many University deans, department heads, marketing and communications officers, etc. have indicated at least tacit approval of GA use by regularly collecting its metrics and using the resulting data to make decisions armed with solid business intelligence. In the current climate, most find it uncomfortable to express this publicly, however. Officially permitting GA Standard would free these leaders and managers to discuss openly the insights they gain from GA data, to collaborate together, and to leverage these insights at the school and department level more effectively.
 - Approving GA Standard would also ensure all UVA website developers, designers, and communicators feel comfortable exchanging best practices and seeking access to GA training, acting upon GA metrics, and focusing on maximizing strategic, thoughtful use of GA data at the University.
 - GA Standard Edition is the most inexpensive tool available—being free of charge—yet also the most robust and standard in the industry.
 - *Additional advantages:* If the University could reconsider use of GA, perhaps other Google services could also be revisited and permitted too.
 - In order to improve website rankings in search engines, webmasters must leverage Google’s Webmaster Tools. Yet UVA webmasters are forced to use their personal, non-University Gmail accounts for this work. While ITS does offer a UVA Gmail service, General Counsel and Procurement have instructed ITS to block UVA Gmail’s access to many Google Apps, including GA and Webmaster Tools—plus

YouTube, Picasa, Google Hangouts, and more—not for any technical reason, but for the same reasons GA has been prohibited.⁵

- This limitation essentially forces UVA Web developers and communicators to conduct significant business on behalf of the University with their personal, non-UVA email accounts, in direct violation of [UVA's guideline against use of personal, non-UVA email services](#) for employees in the Academic division.

- **Cons:**

- Potential legal issues brought up by University General Counsel related to state laws, indemnity, and liability. These would have to be examined and discussed by General Counsel once it is clear the approval is coming from UVA's most senior leadership. Privacy policies may need to be updated where posted on the Web.
- These concerns may be mitigated by the fact that most if not all Virginia state schools, governing bodies, and organizations (including virginia.gov) already use GA on their websites, as do virtually all other peer higher ed institutions, including as noted previously.

- **Cost/Resources:**

- Very few resources required, as GA Standard is free of charge and many UVA employees already know how to use it at a basic level

Option b). Proposal is approved and GA Premium Edition is purchased.

UVA funds and negotiates a contract for the use of Google Analytics Premium Edition at the University. All UVA-owned GA Standard accounts currently in use could be rolled under this umbrella, and any future GA accounts needed for UVA Web developers or communications professionals would be covered under the Premium contract.

- **Pros:**

- GA Premium Edition allows for contractual specifications and modifications that will likely satisfy the indemnification and privacy concerns General

⁵ Procurement has said that as a state institution, UVA is legally restricted from accepting certain types of liability and Google's Terms of Service for these Apps have issues that the University legally cannot accept. However, if UVA could manage to allow these Google Apps, the entire UVA community would absolutely welcome the news—not just webmasters, but students and alumni too (the primary users of ITS's UVA Gmail service)—as exemplified in this sample comment received from a student via the CIO Survey in June 2013: "Can you please turn on all google apps features. I know it is possible in the control panel, and it would help me and a lot of other students to be able to use other google apps with our uva logins. Literally one of the most frustrating things having to log out of email and everything to open up apps like analytics and youtube."

Counsel has raised with the Standard Edition. Specifically, it would give UVA the opportunity to negotiate a custom Terms of Service to ensure data collection and storage is conducted in a way that is in line with our University privacy policy and any state legal requirements.

- Negotiating a custom contract with Google for GA Premium might provide a natural opportunity to revisit the UVA Gmail Terms of Service as well, so its currently blocked features could be enabled. This would allow UVA Web practitioners to conduct University business with Google (i.e., promoting the findability of UVA websites in search engines) while using their *University* Gmail accounts, rather than their personal email accounts, in violation of the aforementioned [UVA guideline against use of personal email services](#) for employees.
- Since GA is already in use across virtually all UVA websites, costs could be shared internally proportionate to users, per the new financial model.
- The upgrade from Standard to Premium Edition would minimize loss of historical data (as compared to switching vendors entirely) and provide a familiar user interface for UVA developers, designers, and communicators.
- GA Premium Edition provides full feature support and training, offering UVA Web developers and communicators customized guidance and consulting to ensure website visitors “convert” to realize UVA’s online goals.
- A GA Premium contract would free University deans, department heads, etc. to publicly acknowledge insights gleaned from GA yet feel confident that the data they are acting upon is well-safeguarded and their employees would not be held personally liable in the unlikely event of litigation.
- **Cons:**
 - GA Premium is offered a non-negligible price. It is an annual fee that is not in any budget, so would necessitate significant funding and consideration.
 - Concern over the high cost of GA Premium could be mitigated by the fact that [UVA Procurement’s Guidelines for Competition](#) include a “Sole Source policy,” which is that when only one firm can satisfy a requirement, price is not a factor in vendor selection. In many ways, GA Premium Edition really is the sole source for the robust Web metrics data that the University needs to compete, gathered and stored in a way that UVA Counsel can support.
- **Cost/Resources:**
 - A flat fee of \$150,000 for the entire University each year
 - Negotiating a GA Premium contract may take significant time and resources, and once established, some transition time required to move the many accounts of UVA Web practitioners from GA Standard to Premium

Other Options:

Option c). UVA evaluates metrics systems across the board and selects one that meets our privacy requirements and legal constraints in a contractual agreement.

- **Pros:**
 - One University-wide system, with clear approval and support from UVA Counsel, would reduce silos and open lines of communication among UVA Web developers and communicators, increase knowledge sharing, and promote greater focus on data-driven decision-making in the online sphere.

- **Cons:**
 - Analytics competitors to GA are typically costly, subpar, or both. They tend to be either somewhat robust but very, very expensive—or free, yet lacking most functionality.⁶ Interactive design, digital marketing, and Web design firms such as [Viget](#), [NewCity](#), and [Digital Pulp](#)—all industry experts—view GA as the clear market leader for Web metrics.
 - Historical data will not transfer from GA to a new system. Schools and units will be forced to have separate data that most likely will not line up between GA and any new analytics program. that does not line up between GA and any new analytics program. Any previous metrics or goal deliverables may be severed with this transition, which causes serious concern for all who currently rely on GA data for reporting.
 - A complete system switch would mean large demands on University Web developers in terms of time and labor to implement new code, replicate old reports in new systems, and locate any lost functionalities or capabilities.

- **Cost/Resources:**
 - Possibly high licensing expense, depending upon the system chosen, and likely in exchange for a less robust tool than (free) Google Analytics
 - High switching costs with major impact on time, labor, and budget

⁶ In preparing this document, the uWeb Steering Committee researched several of Google Analytics' top competitors to see if another option could match the functionality and richness of Web analytics offered by GA. We found this comparison website, which provides detailed information on GA and its competitors, scoring the systems on functionality, privacy, and maturity: <http://www.aboutanalytics.com/select-tools>. GA ranks extremely highly in all categories. See also the addendum at the end of this document for more information on the pros and cons of GA competitors and the remarks about them by uWeb Steering Committee members.

Option d). Change request denied: UVA clarifies existing position on GA.

UVA does not accept the legal risks associated with the use of GA Standard Edition, nor pay for the GA Premium Edition, but does at least communicate clearly about GA to its employees.

University employees who use GA metrics in the course of maintaining, designing, or developing UVA websites, apps, or marketing communications need to be made aware that by using it, they have agreed to its “click-through agreement.” This means that if they choose to continue collecting, using, and acting upon GA data, they are doing so *at their own risk*.

UVA Web practitioners need to be made further aware that they are *not* free to pursue University-funded training opportunities in best and most responsible use of GA.

- **Pros:**

- UVA posts an official, clear statement that it does not condone use of GA, clarifying an issue which has been murky for years.
- UVA still enjoys better positioning in the higher education market, reaping the benefits of GA without having to assume its potential risks at an institutional level, because many UVA employees are so dedicated they are willing to assume personal liability just to preserve access to GA’s essential data. Some feel that litigation is highly unlikely and the data is so vital for well-informed decisions that the gamble is worth it to do the best job they can for the University they support.

- **Cons:**

- UVA Web developers and communicators would continue to bear personal liability for the work they do for the University.
- If any employees decided to halt their use of GA to protect themselves from liability, supervisors and senior leadership in their schools, departments, and business units would have to make decisions about UVA websites, email marketing campaigns, online advertising, search engine optimization, reputation management, app development, and e-learning initiatives *without* Web metrics and historical data.
- UVA employees could not obtain University-funded training that would assist them in maximizing the value of GA data while minimizing any security or privacy concerns.
- UVA employees would also continue having to conduct business on behalf of the University using personal, non-UVA email accounts.

- ***Cost/Resources:***
 - Since multiple disparate installations of GA would likely persist, so would lack of coordination and collaboration among UVA employees using GA. Presumably, this may lead to less effective use of the tool overall.
 - Spotty and ineffective use of Web metrics will foster continued silos and duplication of effort, possibly undetected and unresolved website issues, and sub-optimal setup to facilitate the reaching of University goals—all ultimately leading to a potential loss of UVA revenue and/or reputation

Requestor’s recommendation:

The uWeb Steering Committee recommends Option *a*)—permitting use of the free Standard Edition of GA—for maximum University benefit at minimum cost, both in terms of labor and time. However, Option *b*) would also be welcomed and appreciated and would likely address the potential issues involved with GA Standard.

Either would signal the University’s support for the employees who utilize GA to manage the University’s image and presence online everyday.

Signed by, the uWeb Steering Committee:

Valerie Harness, Web & Social Media Manager
UVA Darden School of Business

Jonelle Kinback, Senior Project Manager & Web Programmer
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Lauren McSwain-Starrett, Senior PR & Marketing Specialist
UVA Information Technology Services (ITS)

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John Rhea, Webmaster
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respectfully submitted on this ____th day of _____, 2014.

Addendum: A Look at Google Analytics Competitors

Please note that in addition to all listed “cons” listed below, every one of the following GA competitors also has the following 2 additional “cons:” 1) Loss of historical data from current GA reporting across all departments and units; and 2) Very small market share, reducing access to training, collaboration, and documentation.

Competitor	Pros	Cons
Analog Analyzer ⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free Requires no code modification Very accurate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potentially unsafe; original developer hasn’t updated it since Dec. 2004 and volunteers have not updated it much since 2009—likely to contain unpatched bugs Offers only basic Web traffic analysis and lacks many of the features of GA
CoreMetrics (IBM Enterprise Marketing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong, 24x7 support Multiple data export options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Costly; exact pricing only offered by custom quote but increases based upon traffic Very complex, not friendly for beginners or the less tech-savvy who need access to Web metrics
Open Web Analytics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free; software covered under General Public License (GPL) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unable to track mobile usage Requires large amount of labor for implementation and tracking organization to begin using software Data cannot be exported for reporting
PiWik	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free Open-source solution in pilot at UVA in some departments Fairly robust/mature (somewhat like GA) Local hosting of data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires server setup and maintenance and the costs associated Hides actionable data for institutional use Lacking all the features of GA; although an import script is available to bring GA data in, it has not been kept updated, so unlikely to pull new features added since the debut of Google’s Universal Analytics
SiteCatalyst (Adobe Analytics)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very robust; closest competitor to GA in terms of functionality Strong, 24x7 support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expensive at a cost of ~\$100,000/year; exact pricing only offered by custom quote but increases based on traffic Very complex, not friendly for beginners or the less tech-savvy who need access to Web metrics Criticized for masking its involvement in data mining and tracking
Smarter Stats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free/inexpensive Local hosting of data Very accurate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lacking many of the features of GA Requires server setup and maintenance and the costs associated
Urchin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Robust; local data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No longer available; discontinued since 2012

⁷ Could not include a hyperlink for this, as company apparently no longer has a functioning website as of 11/5/14.