KSU Prospective Student Portal Review

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Executive Summary

The analysis findings in the following report reflect the general usability of the 'Prospective Student' Page of the Kent State University Web Site. Aspects analyzed included design, content, labeling, layout, and navigation. Design encompasses the use of color and graphics. Content is composed of the top tab menu, the links on the middle and left side of the page, the main content paragraph, and the small student spotlight. Labeling involves the overall page terminology. Navigation is the heart of any page as it allows the users to find the information they seek.

Introduction

The study was initiated by Professor Gordon Murray as part of the core requirement for the User and Task Analysis for Interface Design Course Fall 2004. The study involved selecting a web site or web page, identifying its main objective and its intended audiences, generating hypotheses to test, and selecting and testing a user pool. The student researchers included Charu Ahuja, Brady Bolyard, Caroline Degg, Jimmy Gonzalez, Jennifer Hackworth-Simon, Marcus Lofthouse, Oussamon Sathaworawong, and Lyndsey Shaeffer.

Site Purpose & Goals

In order to determine the structure, purpose, and overall goals of the website, particularly the 'Prospective Student' page, the research team examined the web page, goals, and strategic objectives of the university itself. This allowed the team the opportunity to compose hypotheses for user testing.

Upon first inspection of the page, it is obvious that this university page is composed of a basic template of a centered page title, a yellow graphic in middle upper portion of the page, a center paragraph, a right hand blue head image, a centered 'Quick Links'section, and left-hand side link menu. It is clear that the page's main purpose is to supply new, transfer, and international students with a surplus of links.

In regards to the overall goals for the page, the team researched the 2004 KSU Strategic Plan which contains the following strategic goals:

■ Encouraging innovation in learning
■ Focusing on those we serve
■ Engaging with the world beyond campus
■ Building and sustaining relationships that foster success

The first goal suggests improving distance learning and introducing creative ways to encourage off campus enrollment. The second goal is particularly relevant to our efforts since it commits KSU to "listening to stakeholders as an important perspective in decision making." Those stakeholders include such groups as students, faculty, alumni, community groups, and scholarly societies. This ties in with the relevance of the third goal that commits KSU to "inquiring about best practices beyond our campuses that may lead to more effective internal practices and processes." The final goal calls for KSU to be "recognized in the communities we serve as a cultural and academic center for lifelong learning." This could be used to make the case for expanding the definition of prospective students beyond high school graduates and transfer students, or the traditional 18-22 year old market. It is clear that the strategic goals also embrace enrollment issues.

User Groups

The following user groups were chosen according to the demographic information provided by Kent State University's 2003 Student Body Profile for Enrollment Management and Student Affairs and the 2004 State of the University Address by KSU President Dr. Carol Cartwright.

■ High School Students (3 Male / 3 Female)
■ Female Kent State University Undergraduate Student
■ Female Kent State University International/ Graduate Student, Business School
■ Femalte Recent College Graduate
■ Female Librarian
■ Female Retiree

Dr. Cartwright cited enrollment as the "fundamental building block" of her five year plan and called for the establishment of the Enrollment Planning Steering Committee to develop a specific enrollment plan. Cartwright calls for KSU to grow beyond its current markets "with a commitment to meeting students wherever they are" by creating new programs to serve the entire lifespan of knowledge, from high school graduates, to professionals and even senior citizens. This information combined with the 2002 Average Age by Student Rank on the KSU Campus being 19-24 years old for the majority of undergraduates and 25-34 years of age for accounting for only 43% of graduate students supports our choices for our 18-65 years of age bracket.

Hypotheses

In order to develop effective data, the research team created a set of questions to test the hypotheses used

by the analysis methods. The following questions were chosen for the testing sessions:

- What is the overall effectiveness of the pages' labeling or terminology?
- What are the users' perceptions of the site template and graphics?
- Which links need to be on this page?
- Open ended question: What is important in selecting a university? Locate information on it.

Methods

The methods utilized during the testing sessions asked the user to 'think out loud' by talking aloud while they navigate the page. This allows for a 'stream of consciousness' perspective to emerge for true opinions. Test proctors brought the site up both on the main home page and the 'Prospective Students' page directly. This step served to test the effectiveness of the term 'prospective'.

PMI Technique

This semester our class applied a technique called a PMI to several web sites. This technique's acronym stands for "**P**lus" "**M**inus" "**I**nteresting" and categorizes the site's aspects as viewed by the user. Testing proctors placed this technique at both the beginning and end of their sessions allowing for a variety of responses. Users were asked for their comments on the site which were then categorized under the appropriate aspect.

Get It Technique

This technique is attributed to usability expert Stephen Krug. In his book "Don't Make Me Think", Krug introduces his method for discovering whether a site's goals and purpose are self-explanatory. The technique involves asking questions relevant to labeling (What site are you at?), design/layout (How is the site organized?), content (What value is the site to a new student?), and navigation (Are you aware of where you are in the site if you click on a link?).

Key Task Technique

This technique involves the creation of tasks for the end-user to complete. The success or failure of the task depends upon whether the user locates the information he or she is seeking. For the purpose of uniformity the following list was compiled for use in the testing sessions:

- Locate the meal plan selections for students wishing to live on campus.
- Locate pricing for a night-only parking pass for one semester.
- Where can you find a list of degrees offered at KSU? (label question)
- How much does it cost to attend KSU?
- Find out if you qualify for financial aid.
- Where can you find a transfer student checklist?
- What are the application deadlines for international students?
- Schedule a campus tour.

Instrumentation

The technology used in conducting our live usability tests included Camtasia Studio Software and Logitech QuickCam USB WebCams. Camtasia Studio records PC desktop activity and sound to create such projects as full-motion video tutorials and presentations. For a live Camtasia demonstration online, please see http://www.techsmith.com/videos/studio/Overview/camtasia_studio_2.html?movie=1. The webcam captured sound, and the facial/body language of the users.

Results

PMI Results (see Table 1)

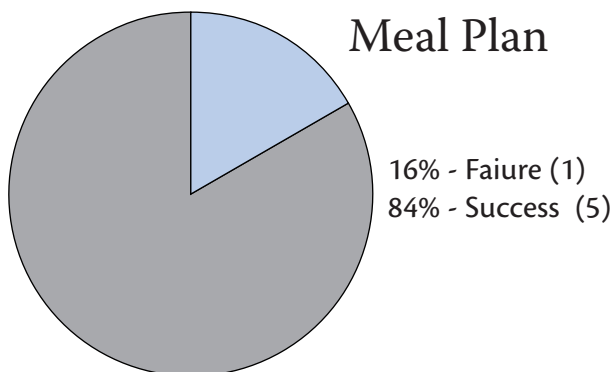| Plus	Minus	Interesting
• Quick links • Side navigation bars • Positioning profile • Use of school colors • Organized appearance of page • Easy to read • Layout • Tabs • Left navigation • Alphabetical quick links • Watermark (Blue face)	• Undergraduate catalog • The word "Prospective" • Left side menu too plain, hard to see • Don't understand the pictures • "…Don't get it…" (student profile) • Need more color variation • Didn't like sepia tone photos • Capitalization of links • Hard to find list of degrees • Hard to know the left navigation is part of the website • Quick links in the middle of the page – kind of awkward	• The colors • Positioning of the prospective link on the home page • Blue head graphic • Drawn to sports/Recreation link • Quick links • New student orientation • Address given above • All Kent colors used in design • Just a regular page • Nothing that makes me want to stay, nothing that makes me want to leave • Student life bio

Table 1

Get It Analysis

When asked to explain what they expected to find under the Prosperctive Students tab, 5 of the 8 users understood its purpose; the other three gave ambiguous or inaccurate answers. Non-traditional Students were drawn to other sections like 'Academic Transfer', 'Continuing Education', and 'International Students'. Only high school students were lured by the 'Prospective Students' label. Other Labels were tested as part of the key task questions:

- Dining and Food: the meal plan question
- Parking: the parking pass question
- Catalog: KSU degrees question
- Tuition and Fees: KSU cost question
- Financial Aid: the financial aid question
- Academic Transfer: the transfer checklist question
- International Students: deadlines for international students question
- Campus Visit: Schedule a campus tour question

When asked to schedule a visit of the Kent State Campus, 4 out of the 8 users tried the 'Campus Visits' Quick Link with the remaining four using the 'Virtual Tour' Quick Link . When asked to find information about degrees offered at Kent State, 7 out of the 9 users did not look at the Catalog Quick Links. The majority of users looked under the 'Academic Programs' link. When asked to find out how much it would cost to attend KSU, most participants ignored the 'Estimator' link under the 'Financial Aid' link on the left-hand menu and chose the 'Tuition and Fees' Quick Link or the 'Financial Aid' link on the left-hand menu.
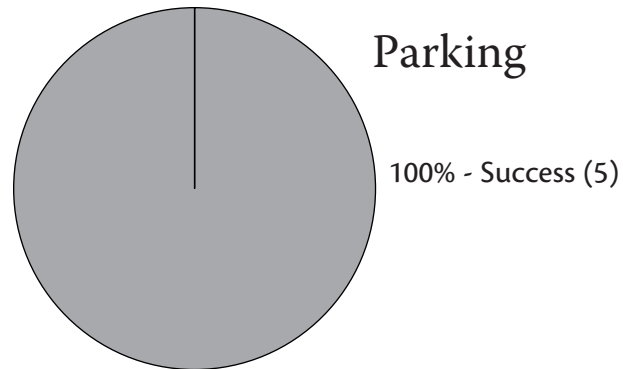
Key Task Analysis

The key tasks for this usability test were questions that any incoming student might use the page to answer. Tasks were determined to have an optimal path of the left navigation bar, the central Quick Links, or the top tabs. Sometimes a task could be answered equally well using more than one of these options.

Meal Plan

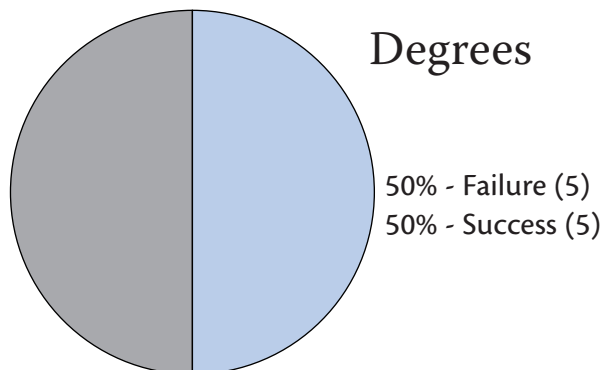16% - Faiure (1)
84% - Success (5)

Locate the meal plan selections for students wishing to live on campus.

The optimal path to answer this task is the left navigation bar "Dining & Food". The test subjects had an 84% success rate, with 5 test subjects using the correct path and 1 answering incorrectly.
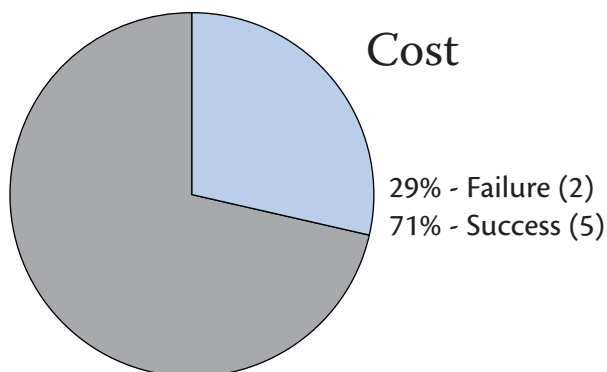
Parking

100% - Success (5)

Locate pricing for a night only parking pass for one semester.

The optimal path for this task is in the left navigation bar. The test subjects had a 100% success rate with this task. Five subjects were tested with this task.

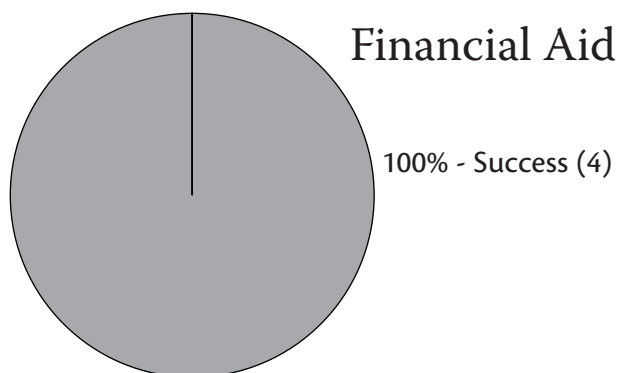### Degrees

50% - Failure (5)
50% - Success (5)

Where can you find a list of degrees offered at KSU?

This question could be answered by links in the top tabs, Quick Links or left navigation bar. The link in the top tabs is "Academics", the left navigation bar link is "Academic Programs" and the Quick Links link is "Catalog- Undergraduate". This task had a 50% success rate, with 5 subjects answering correctly and 5 answering incorrectly. 4 out of the 6 high school students thought that they could find appropriate degree programs under the "Graduate" heading, showing unfamiliarity with the terms "graduate" and "undergraduate". There is no clear way to find a list of degrees.
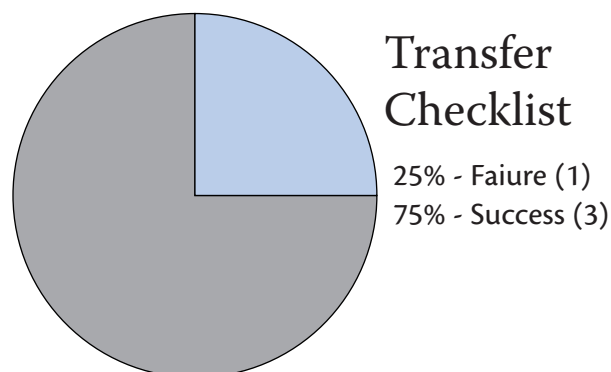
Cost

29% - Failure (2)
71% - Success (5)

How much does it cost to attend KSU?
This task could be answered with a link in the left navigation bar, "Financial Aid- Estimator" or a link in the Quick Links, "Tuition & Fees". This task had a 71% success rate, with 5 subjects answering correctly and 2 answering incorrectly. The Student Financial Aid page did not allow browsers to return to the prospective student page by hitting the back button, thereby creating an inescapable loop, and causing frustration. When given this task, one subject was so overwhelmed by the choices on the prospective student page that they gave up immediately, not even trying to answer the question.
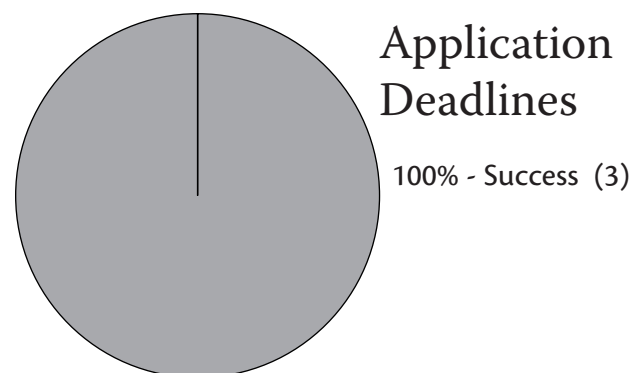
Financial Aid

100% - Success (4)

Find out if you qualify for financial aid.
The answer to this task could be found by clicking the link "Financial Aid" in the left navigation bar. This task had a 100% success rate. 4 subjects were tested with this task.
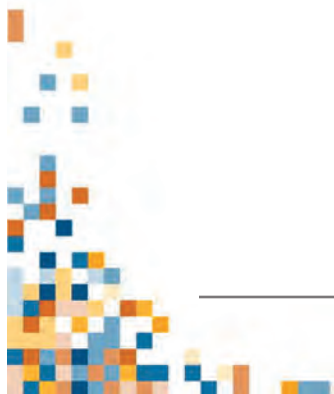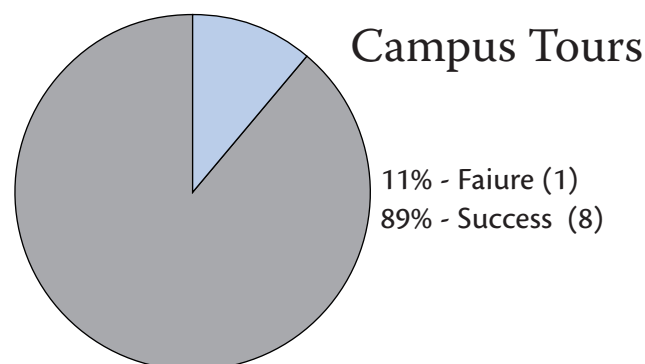
Transfer Checklist

25% - Faiure (1)
75% - Success (3)

Where can you find a transfer student checklist?
The optimal path to answer this task is the Quicklinks link "Academic Transfer". This task had a 75% success rate, with 3 subjects answering correctly and 1 subject answering incorrectly. One test subject went to the "Continuing Education" link in the left navigation bar (label confusion). This subject did not use the Quick Links for any task.

Application Deadlines

100% - Success (3)

What are the application deadlines for international students?
The answer to this task could be found in the left navigation bar "International Students" link or in the Quick Links "Apply for Admission" link. This task had a 100% success rate, with all 3 taking the correct path.

Campus Tours

11% - Faiure (1)
89% - Success (8)

Schedule a campus tour.

This task could be answered by a link in the Quick Links section "Campus Visits". The success rate of this task was 89%, with 8 subjects giving a correct response and 1 giving an incorrect response. Some subjects thought that tours could be found in the "Maps & Directions" link.

Looking at the data provided in the individual usability reports, it is clear that the "Find information on the degree you are interested in/find a list of degrees" created the most problem for the users as a group—50% of the usability subjects failed. This number is actually somewhat false because a number of the successes were actually the four high school students who located the Graduate Catalog instead of looking at the undergraduate catalog due to terminology issues. Finding the catalog still does not tell us if users would have been able to find the program that they might be interested in studying. For example, how would one find IAKM (Information Architecture and Knowledge Management) if they were searching under 'Web Design'? One participant even looked for 'Communication' under the English department, while it is located under the College of Communication and Information.

It is clear from the course catalog, and its subsequent posting in the Quick Links, that to find information about possible programs, one needs to know Kent's organization system (i.e. current students, professors, and administrators who happen to already know Kent State's internal structure). For prospective students we feel that having a search box, or a web index, isolating vocabulary/terminology from the student's perspective would be a great asset in helping students find needed information about the degrees Kent offers. The academics page already offers a good start (see

http://www.kent.edu/Academics/undergrad_progs/index.cfm, the right hand links offer a degree lists and a degree search engine). We have found that in general when looking at the paths the participants took, they had a first choice, be it Quick Links or the left hand side navigation, which they chose to begin each search with; unless really stumped, users tended to 'satisfice' from their preferred list (Satisfice is Steve Krug's concept of taking what looks 'ok' for the sake of speed). People using the Quick Links would probably never find the degree search box since course catalogs would seem like a good place to find the information on degrees. Moving the degree search box onto the Prospective Students page would be a good start; however, as already suggested, studying the terms and vocabulary used by students not currently enrolled in programs at Kent would help students find more

Labeling Recommendations	
Original Terminology	**Change To....**
'Prospective Student' page title.	'Future Students' or 'New Students'
'Estimator' link under 'Financial Aid' link	Relocate under 'Quick Links' as 'Estimate Your Tuition Costs' or 'Estimate Financial Aid Award'
'Undergraduate' link	'First Year Students' or '
Quick Links	Rename to be more action-oriented in nature (i.e. 'Apply for …', 'Request a…', 'Learn about…')

Table 2

relevant information (i.e. searching for 'web design' only brings up two undergraduate minors programs, yet people interested in web design should at least have IAKM brought to their attention as a possible option). For this sort of search engine, further study of prospective students would be needed to help identify how they would classify broader career paths.

Design/Layout Recommendations
Make left-column menu more visible and legible by changing background color and spelling labels in upper/lowercase.
Resize ore relocate yellow watermark graphic between left menu column and the main content column. It creates too much competition for your attention.
Keep school catalog links under 'Academic Programs' and remove them from Quick Links, or rename them to: Find your Degree, List of Degrees; Combine the virtual tour with information about campus visits under one link. Many links repeat in both sections lending to confusion.
Improve and or create alternative pages for non-traditional students in regards to Continuing Education Students, International Students, and Transfer Students.

Table 3

Recommendations:

In analyzing the testing data the following recommendations have been compiled. Some of the main points deal with labeling. The following table (see table 2) contains suggestions that would help to eliminate the ambiguity for visitors who may not understand terminology indigenous to higher educational organizations.

The following table (see table 3) contains recommendations for the page's overall design and layout:

One final recommendation involves competitor sites. The Vision statement envisions KSU "building distinction not only for academic excellence but also for our strong connections regionally, nationally and globally." The clear implication here is to grow beyond the traditional communities KSU has served in the past. This is a strong argument for comparing KSU pages with similar institutions in the region (see Table 4).

Summary

As the analysis of our results show, the Prospective Students Page can improve significantly with some minor changes to labeling and layout. We believe the recommendations included here are reasonable, affordable, and address most of the problems encountered. Most users felt that finding information about the degree programs offered at KSU is the most critical task when selecting a university. Close attention should be paid to the recommendations made in this area.

Ultimately, the revised page should provide clear and concise pathways to the information that is most critical when choosing a university. Eliminating multiple paths and unrelated content will further this goal.

Site	Features
Lorain County Community College http://www.lorainccc.edu/LCCC/Institutional_Development/ CM/Future_Students.Normal.12.lccc	While it is a community college, Lorain offers a four year plan in conjunction with KSU. The first link on the within the page is to a list of associate degrees. Lorain County Community College
University of Akron http://www.uakron.edu/admissions/AkAdv.php	Akron differentiates between current and future students on the home page navigation.
Bowling Green State University http://www.bgsu.edu/offices/admissions /choose/welcome.html	BGSU also differentiates between current and future students on the home page navigation. On the future student's page they use the term "Majors and Programs" to link to a list of academic programs. The language is more non-academic person friendly. Overall, a good example of a clean design.
Ohio State University http://www.osu.edu/index.php	Contains a nice drop box that lets you select what type of student you are with a link especially for "Freshmen and Transfer". They've done a nice job of breaking out the key areas of interest to prospective students on the "Freshmen" page. If you think to scroll all the way down the page the index is nice too).

Table 4