

Clark Site Usability Test Results and Recommendations

While the Berndt Group's report's findings are in agreement with ours, it misses or omits many significant opportunities for improvement. This document expands on and supplements theirs. For methodology and the usability test tasks, see the Appendix.

Visual Design

Success: Overall, response to the new look and feel of the site has been positive from faculty, students, staff (throughout UM), and friends of the Clark School.

Opportunity for Improvement: The header graphics, especially the “billboard” on the home page, have significant unused space and are large enough to push some important content “below the fold”. While visually impressive, there is sometimes not enough screen real estate for content “above the fold.” Some participants did not scroll down, and missed information they might have needed.

Recommendation: This is difficult to address, because it would involve some complicated and significant modification to a design which went through a substantial approval process. However, we are addressing these issues as we proceed to help departments design their sites.

Navigation

Success: Most of our participants responded very positively to the “red” (topic-oriented) menus, both in the Flash file and the HTML pages.

Opportunity for Improvement: Some users had difficulty scanning section summaries, even when bulleted, because many links were “in-line” (in other words, **in a sentence** like this), which reduced their ability to scan.

Recommendations: Bullet content summaries on section homepages and format each one the same way, with the link as a subheader above the information. We have already started to do this.

Opportunity for Improvement: Several users expressed that they did not understand why some of the menu was black and some was red. They usually didn't identify the grouping of subjects (red) and audiences (black).

Recommendations: “Chunking” of global, subject, audience, and task navigation is fairly common—so what happened here? It could be in the layout; the fact that the menus are all in one column instead of divided into across-the-top and down-the-left. Retesting with prototype designs will help us learn more.

Opportunity for Improvement: Participants took longer to discover the “black” (audience-oriented) menu, sometimes missing its top level links that would have led them directly to what they were trying to find. Others did not notice or had difficulty reading the black menu’s second-level text links. In one test, the black menu did not seem to register at all with the participant.

Recommendations: In the short term, we can explore using larger font sizes. We might consider making the black menu’s look and feel more like or the same as the red menu’s. The problem might also be solved with a change of layout (see above).

Opportunity for Improvement: As previously discussed, *the site was not designed with any means of handling third-level (or deeper) navigation or content—it is a “broad” design.* What was second-level navigation and content in formerly autonomous sites became third-level—and more difficult to provide navigation for—when absorbed into the new Clark School site. We have used the right-hand column for tertiary navigation with mixed results: Some participants identified navigation there quickly, but they often had to search and scan, and sometimes did not notice what they needed. In some cases, this navigation competes with callout material (whose photos draw attention away).

Recommendations: In the short term, we can explore using larger font sizes and/or a tinted background for third-level navigation in the right-hand column, but in the long run, we will either have to rethink our site architecture and/or redesign the navigation. We could also consider using sub-sites again.

Content, General (Text and imagery)

Success: Our staff and faculty have complimented us on our completely rewritten content, and the Berndt Group noted that several of our participants were impressed by the wealth of information.

Success: Participants responded positively to our new photography, and short stories (callouts) in the sidebars which were accompanied by imagery.

Opportunity for Improvement: Some of the header graphics are inappropriate for their sections, or unclear as to what they represent.

Recommendation: We are in the process of updating the headers.

Tone and Length of Content

Opportunity for Improvement: Users, particularly younger ones, tend to scan text online. One precollege student, responding to our request to think aloud, actually murmured “Scan, scan, scan...” as she scrolled though many long pages of text. The precollege students in particular were turned off by long unbroken texts, but expressed

interest in our photography and captions (one suggested we caption our header graphics and allow users to click them to learn more about the activity depicted—I think this is a great idea—let’s put that space to work for us!).

Recommendations: General opinion is that texts should be kept as short as possible on the web. When users do want details, they will read, but we should encapsulate longer texts into a sort of “teaser paragraph” where appropriate. Guide interested users to in-depth information without distracting people who want to “get in and out” quickly.

Comment: It is perhaps worth noting that the alumni participants very quickly noticed the shift in tone, content and graphics, describing it as having marketing slant or “more like a corporate site than a university site.” GET EXACT QUOTES.

Content vs. User Needs and Expectations

Opportunity for Improvement: The message from Eric Gwin, president of the Alumni Board of Directors, is of potential interest to alumni, but crowds out Cornelia’s need to promote events, and makes contact information harder to find.

Recommendations: Revise the Alumni home page to contain the current bulleted items, and give top-center space to what Cornelia needs or wants alumni to know now. Put a colorful “Message from the President” graphic in the right column, and add a similar link in the list of bulleted items. By giving the president his or her own page, we 1) allow the Alumni homepage to be updated regularly, which will draw users back, and 2) give the president a potential forum to add messages to as desired.

Opportunity for Improvement: The Prospective Students home page provides a great introduction to what it means to choose engineering as a major and career—and our precollege students almost completely ignored it. They expected to find easy paths to applying, visiting information, majors, school ranking, courses, and departments. At the time this information was typically relegated to a list of tertiary links on the sidebar, and most prospective students had to spend time scanning pages for the links they needed.

Opportunity for Improvement: (related): After launch, staff contacted the web team about the need to promote assorted news and events, but as with alumni, there was no place to add them on the homepage.

The Prospective Students home page reflects *what we’d like to say about ourselves, but not what prospective students and staff actually expect and need.*

Recommendations: The creation and implementation of the “Ready To Apply?”, “Visit Us!”, and “Visit Maryland Days” graphics have provided a good short-term solution. Implement a solution similar to what is recommended for Alumni. Rethink how and where we present the in-depth information and “our message”—it may be better suited to

print, and we may want to even allow prospective students to request print materials via the site (but we must be careful about collecting information from minors).

Going Home

Opportunity for Improvement: Perhaps surprisingly, about half of the participants did not know how to get back to the home page. Some used the “Back” button, and some never got back. The trend with the precollege students was the expectation of a “Home” link in the upper right or left of a page. Those familiar with the “click the logo to go home” convention were very confused when they clicked on the *UMD logo* (instead of the *Clark School wordmark*) and ended up on the *UMD* homepage.

Recommendations: Linking the logo to UMD and the School name to the School’s site may be a University convention, but that doesn’t mean it’s a good one or one a visitor will simply know. Our logo should link to our homepage, and we should explore the addition of a text “Home” link. We could feature the UMD logo in the footer of our pages (there is already a text link).

Appendix

Methodology

In August 2005, we asked 9 participants representing two of our major audiences—4 alumni and 5 prospective students—to try to accomplish several tasks on the new Clark School web site. The tests were held in the DETS studios, allowing us to capture audio, video, and screen activity. The study was qualitative in nature.