

Usability Study - Staff Test Results

**For the
Uwalt.edu website**

Research Methods

**Tanisha Hamilton
Arabella Crawford
David Pepper**

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Navigation Recommendations	4
Directory Recommendations	4
Layout Recommendations	5
Test Results	6
Conclusion	8
Appendices:	
A. Screener	i
B. User Profiles	ii
C. Test Script	iii
D. Methodology	iv
E. Task Completion Grid	v

Executive Summary

The purpose of the University of Baltimore's website (<http://www.ubalt.edu>) is to support its mission as an educational institution, fulfilling roles in education, research, outreach, and collaborative partnerships with the greater community. To be successful, the website must serve as both a communicative hub (offering services and interfaces to university systems), and as a virtual repository of and authoritative source for information. The university's main constituents are considered broadly: students, faculty and staff. To a lesser degree, the university also serves cohorts such as prospective students, prospective staff and faculty, alumni, retirees and the community. The focus of our usability study of the web site is staff, but because students (of all types) and faculty are among the primary customers of many staff, the usability of the site for all the cohorts is actually of great concern to the staff cohort.

In the current website design, content is organized mainly according to the administrative structure of the university, requiring web users to search and locate information presented within this model. It seems likely that this organizational strategy is a good fit for staff, who have the benefit of a superior understanding the university's structure, as well as a long term relationship throughout which to study and master the site's navigation. The primary navigation in the existing web site design as well as in the new web site's design is on the left hand side of each page. However, the new website design features the addition of a new horizontal navigation, displayed with great prominence on the home page atop a commanding picture element, which cycles several times a minute. The horizontal navigation is segmented according to the identity of the audience, with separate headings and expanding animated javascript menus for prospective students, current students, faculty, staff, alumni, and visitors.

To facilitate the testing, we identified distinctions among our staff users, dividing them into two groups: nomads and lifers. Nomads are staff who are relatively new to UB and those who make career changes often. Lifers are staff who have been in higher education for many years and are aware of the inner workings of the university. Four university staff members participated in the testing session with two from both groups representing each end of the spectrum.

Nomads – career: migrant; relatively new to higher education (collective 0-6 years); makes career changes often; has participated in different work dynamics at multiple universities; plans for the next year only; seeks better employment, pay, rank, etc; has bigger plans for their future selves; can get bored with work that is consistent

Lifers – career: longevity; have worked in higher education for many years (7+ years); don't make career changes often; believes in longevity and has staying power; plans for retirement; is comfortable in their current work status; plans to remain in position until retirement; likes the consistent nature of their work

One participant from each staff group was tested with each of the two software packages, (Tobii Clearview for eye-tracking, and Techsmith Morae for screen capture).

The test script consisted of 10 tasks, as well as a set of questions during warm-up and wrap-up.

As a result of testing the four staff participants, we came to a number of conclusions regarding the new design and layout of the ubalt.edu website. While some differences seemed evident between the two staff groups, on the whole our conclusions are supported by data from each of the four participants.

Navigation Recommendations

In general, all users specifically mentioned their approval for the identity-based secondary navigation. One user said, “[each column] has the top seven or eight links that you would need to get to,” while another states, “Your eye is drawn to exactly who you are.”

On the other hand, review of the video showed staff users who were often confused about which navigation to use. A common pattern involved users who were searching for information, making circular trips between the primary navigation, the identity-based secondary navigation, the tertiary links at the top of the page, and other points of interest on the pages such as pictures, etc. Additionally, University of Baltimore users consistently made use of the search feature of the web site, even to the point of memorizing searches and intended search results. When used to this degree, the search becomes a form of navigation, and this reliance upon search can be read as a clue to the shortcomings of the primary and secondary navigations.

We advise that an effort be made to harmonize and rethink the two navigations in light of each other. The purposes and organizational concepts behind the primary navigation and identity-based secondary navigations need to be implicitly obvious, so that people know which to use and where to look for what they seek. At this time, the two navigations compete with each other and partially overlap, creating vicious circles. This recommendation will almost certainly be the most difficult to realize, but in order for the website to reach its potential it needs to be undertaken. This would be a good topic for future research about your users.

One way to overcome some of the drawbacks of the identity-based secondary navigation would be to be making landing pages for each of the top-level items (prospective students, current students, etc...) in the cascading menus. This would let less-abled users use them as buttons if there was a need to do so. Likewise, there is also a great need to decrease or removing entirely the transparency of the menus, and to make changes in their appearance to make them easier to discover and explore through visual cues that identify them as menus. To this end, we also recommend retooling the speed/manner in with which they roll-out and roll-back with usability in mind.

Directory Recommendations

The University of Baltimore Faculty/Staff Directory came to our attention as participants attempted to complete task 7 which asked them to look up a phone number based on

the person's job responsibility. The result was that users spent more than two minutes average trying to locate a department's program director. Since the staff and faculty directory is a critical resource for staff, we recommend that a dynamic online directory be created to handle routine phone number lookups.

The dynamic directory should permit partial name searches, and should in some way anticipate the need to search based on organizational structure as well as simply by name.

The existing directory may continue to have a role to play as well, either as a resource for printing, or as a report that shows information that may not be able to be rendered by a dynamic tool. In either case, the PDF should be enhanced by a PDF bookmark navigation of its own.

Layout Recommendations

The new site design features a great deal of emphasis on a rotating picture, which showcases the identity-based navigation cascading on top of it. To the right of the picture is an attractive bar listing current events, with icons and an apparent organizational system of some complexity. The effect is impressive, however the cost to usability to implement these design elements is too great to bear.

After considering a range of scenarios, we recommend promoting the primary navigation to just below the site's persistent header, moving the picture and identity-based secondary navigation to the right and demoting the events bar to a position similar to that currently occupied by the primary navigation (mirrored). This balances the need to make use of and show-off the new identity-based navigation, while preserving the new emphasis on marketing the school, but does so without neglecting the critically-important need for the site to be intuitive to understand and usable.

Finally, there are a couple of other layout changes which would greatly benefit users. First, the "Upcoming Events" link in the events bar should be re-styled to make it obvious that it is a link without hovering over it. Secondly, places where the colors of persistent elements of the design change from page/part of the site to another need to be strictly avoided. This is particularly true when you consider that University of Baltimore website is not really a simple tree-structure of information, but actually is part of a complex network of sites, with different navigations, structures, and aesthetics.

These recommended changes to navigation, directory, and layout mainly represent an attempt to balance usability goals with marketing goals. These solutions intend to address the site's greatest problems with the least effort possible. However, what is equally important will be for you to help the site evolve by learning more about your users and weaving usability goals into the process by which the site grows and changes. Viewed in this light, it is very encouraging that the strength of the new redesign is actually the prominence of the very idea itself that it is important to identify who the users of the site are and to make an attempt to fulfill their needs. As this trend continues we are sure that the site will continue to support the university in the pursuit of its mission.

Test Results

The next section represents the testing results in relation to the sections that were included as part of the usability testing for the ubalt.edu website. Each participant was asked to perform specific tasks that were analyzed according to their ease of use, completion of task, and ability to navigate effectively. Below lists the level of error rankings and the descriptions of each. These rankings will be used to determine which level the errors occur at the user stage.

Major	The most critical level, where the user is unable to correctly complete their task. A common type of this error is when the user simple cannot determine which category to click, information to go through, or sequence, is necessary to complete the task. Products should never be delivered with any critical level errors.
Moderate	Significant problems caused for the user. A common type of this error includes using an incorrect feature, or using he correct feature, incorrectly. These errors typically account for a high incidence of support requests.
Minor	Minor nuisances that encumber the user during the task, such as users having trouble finding the correct category or page therein to complete the task. The leave the user frustrated and dissatisfied with the product.
Good	Indicates that an object is well designed.