Usability testing of the Admissions website prototype

Report completed by Jennifer Brown
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General overview
The purpose of this report is to summarize and document findings from five usability tests of a working prototype of the MSU Admissions website (http://www.mnsu.edu/admissions/). The usability tests were conducted with individual participants on June 17, 18, 19, and 20, 2003.

The general goals of the usability testing were to solicit participation from the target audience (high school students) to assess

- the prototype’s navigation in its two versions (homepage java script vs. interior page hyperlinks/expanding categories)
- the user interface (layout, graphics/photos, color)
- the clarity and coherence of the prototype

Methodology
The usability testing was conducted individually with five participants, all of whom had graduated from high school in May of 2003, and would be classified as freshman students. Four of the tests were administered at the home of the test administrator; the fifth was administered at MSU in Armstrong Hall, room 201K.

In the beginning of the test, each test participant received printed copies of the following materials:

- Demographics questionnaire
- Task packet that consisted of eight real-life scenarios (tasks) and five posttest questions

Usability testing included three stages:

1. Collecting participants’ demographic data
   The first stage consisted of having participants complete demographic questionnaires (Appendix A). This stage was aimed to determine participants’ current college status, their browser preferences, their self-perceived levels of expertise with the Internet, their success in finding information on the Internet, and their familiarity with the MSU Admissions website.

2. Having participants perform real-life tasks
   The second stage consisted of having participants perform real-life tasks (Appendix B) that users would need to perform under normal conditions on the MSU Admissions website. This stage was aimed to determine what kinds of navigation problems the test participants would encounter while working with the prototype of the MSU Admissions website and to solicit any comments from the participants regarding the tasks they performed.

3. Collecting posttest responses
   The third stage consisted of having participants answer five posttest questions (Appendix C). This stage was aimed to gather data on how the participants felt about the prototype’s colors and images, how well they felt the prototype represented MSU, and how well they liked the two versions of navigation.
Participants’ profiles
This section contains participants’ demographic data that were collected using the demographics questionnaire (Appendix A).

- **College status**
  All five participants (100%) were college freshmen

- **Gender**
  Two participants (40%) were females.
  Three participants (60%) were males.

- **Own a computer**
  All five participants (100%) owned computers.

- **Browser preferences**
  Two participants (40%) indicated Internet Explorer as their preferred Internet browser.
  Two participants (40%) indicated Netscape as their preferred Internet browser.
  One participant (20%) indicated that he/she used both Internet Explorer and Netscape Internet browsers.

- **Self-perceived Internet expertise level**
  No one participant (0%) indicated their Internet expertise level as a novice user.
  Four participants (80%) indicated their Internet expertise level as competent users.
  One participant (20%) indicated his/her Internet expertise level as advanced user.
  No one participant indicated their Internet expertise level as an expert user.

- **Success in finding information on the Internet**
  One participant (20%) indicated that he/she is occasionally successful in finding information on the Internet.
  Four participants (80%) indicated that they are usually successful in finding information on the Internet.

- **Visited the MSU Admissions website before**
  Three participants (60%) indicated that they have visited the MSU Admissions website in the past.
  Two participants (40%) indicated that they have never visited the MSU Admissions website before.
Findings and recommendations

This section of the report contains descriptions of usability tasks, what goals the tasks were to achieve, participants’ performance in each task, and recommendations for improvement.

Note: An italicized link indicates a mouse-over to induce the next-level navigation to pop-up. A bold link indicates an actual click on that link.

Expected path indicates cases when the participant followed the most efficient course of navigation to locate the target information using the left navigation and following the links intended for the audience under which the participant would be classified.

Incorrect response indicates cases when the participant located information other than the target information, but believed he or she had found the target information and completed the task; or, when the participant stopped working on the task, believing the information could not be found on the Admissions Website.

Alternative path indicates cases when the participant
- located the target information using a method other than the left navigation, such as the search box or the top navigation
- did not use the most efficient course of navigation to locate the target information, such as following the pop-up navigation into deeper content pages than necessary, then using the breadcrumbs to return to pages higher in the site structure
- located the target information by following the navigation intended for an audience other than that of the participant, such as using the parents link, as opposed to the freshman students link.

Did not know indicates cases when the participant stopped working on the task, stating he or she did not know where to find the information.

Findings from usability tests

Task 1

The goal of this task was to determine if participants would follow the navigation in such order: Freshman Students>Application Guidelines>Requirements, under which the information about what MSU requires of incoming freshmen in terms of completed classes can be found.

Two participants (40%) chose the expected path.
No participants (0%) chose incorrect responses.
One participant (20%) chose an alternative path.
Two participants (40%) did not know which link to choose.

Recommendations: I recommend that consideration be given to possibly re-labeling Application Guidelines as Application Information.

Task 2

The goal of this task was to determine if participants would choose Why MSU on the prototype main page, under which current students’ opinions of the school can be found.

Two participants (40%) chose the expected path.
One participant (20%) chose an incorrect response.
One participant (20%) chose an alternative path.
One participant (20%) did not know which link to choose.

Recommendations: I recommend adding a link to the Life at MSU page labeled something to the effect of Student Opinions, which would link to the “Quotes from Students” page.
Usability testing of the MSU Admissions Website prototype Report

(http://www.mnsu.edu/admissions/quotes.html) that can currently be accessed by clicking the pictures in the Why MSU box on the prototype main page.

Task 3

The goal of this task was to determine if participants would follow the navigation in such order: Freshman Students>Application Guidelines>Application>Online Application>Begin, at which point they can select their student status for the application.

Five participants (100%) chose the expected path.
No participants (0%) chose incorrect responses.
No participants (0%) chose an alternative path.
No participants (0%) did not know which link to choose.

Recommendations: I recommend that an Application link be added in the second level navigation immediately following the Freshman Students link for quicker access. Also, taking into account the confusion of a few participants at the point at which the user either logs in or clicks “Begin,” I recommend that the layout of that portion of the application page be altered to something such as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Time Applications</th>
<th>Saved Applications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you have not already begun to fill out and saved an application, click Begin</td>
<td>If you have saved an application, please login:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E-mail or Username:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Password:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Login</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Task 4

The goal of this task was to determine if participants would follow the navigation in such order: Freshman Students>Tuition and Fees, under which the information on out-of-state tuition can be found.

No participants (0%) chose the expected path.
One participant (20%) chose an incorrect response.
Four participants (80%) chose an alternative path.
No participants (0%) did not know which link to choose.

Recommendations: I recommend that a cost link be added under Tuition and Fees (on the same navigation level as Reciprocity and Residency), as is found under the Parents navigation.

Task 5

The goal of this task was to determine if participants would follow the navigation in such order: Freshman Students>Campus Visits, under which the information about campus tour schedules can be found.

No participants (0%) chose the expected path.
Three participants (60%) chose incorrect responses.
Two participants (40%) chose an alternative path.
No participants (0%) did not know which link to choose.
Recommendations: I recommend that the Schedule a Visit link be re-labeled as Tour Schedule, and that the Tour Guides link possibly be removed, as 60% of the participants clicked Tour Guides and expected they would have to call the number given to find out when tours are available. (I acknowledge that at some point, a prospective student looking to take a tour would have to call for further information, though the available tour times can be found online without the need to call.)

Task 6
The goal of this task was to determine if participants would follow the navigation in such order: Freshman Students>Academics>Programs, under which a link to the gerontology program can be found.
One participant (20%) chose the expected path.
No participants (0%) chose incorrect responses.
Three participants (60%) chose an alternative path.
One participant (20%) did not know which link to choose.
Recommendations: I have no recommendations, as students who chose alternative paths to the target information followed those without searching through the navigation (indicative of no confusion caused by the navigation itself); and the 80% who completed the task successfully (whether by the expected path or alternative) did so in fewer than 35 seconds, suggesting no serious usability issues.

Task 7
The goal of this task was to determine if participants would follow the navigation in such order: Freshman Students>Academic Calendar>2003-2004, producing an Adobe PDF calendar outlining the academic year.
Four participants (80%) chose the expected path.
No participants (0%) chose incorrect responses.
One participant (20%) chose an alternative path.
No participants (0%) did not know which link to choose.
Recommendations: I recommend that the Academic Calendar be available in a more usable, visually appealing format, and one not requiring Adobe. I also recommend that the date of the first day of classes be added to the Important Dates page under the Parents link from the main page.

Task 8
The goal of this task was to determine if participants follow the navigation in such order: Freshman Students>Life at MSU>Parking>Online Permit Ordering, under which an online permit purchase form can be found.
No participants (0%) chose the expected path.
No participants (0%) chose incorrect responses.
Five participants (100%) chose an alternative path.
No participants (0%) did not know which link to choose.
Recommendations: 80% of the students located the target information by following the Parents link (the logic being that “parents do a lot for students”), under which Parking is included in the second level navigation. If Parking is a second level link under Parents, it would seem appropriate to include it also as a second level link under Freshman Students.
Task Completion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Task 1</th>
<th>Task 2</th>
<th>Task 3</th>
<th>Task 4</th>
<th>Task 5</th>
<th>Task 6</th>
<th>Task 7</th>
<th>Task 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expected Path</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect Response</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Path</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Expected paths (%)

Note: Expected paths do not include cases when participants have chosen alternative paths.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task 1</th>
<th>Task 2</th>
<th>Task 3</th>
<th>Task 4</th>
<th>Task 5</th>
<th>Task 6</th>
<th>Task 7</th>
<th>Task 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Incorrect responses (%)

Note: Incorrect responses do not include cases when participants have chosen alternative paths.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task 1</th>
<th>Task 2</th>
<th>Task 3</th>
<th>Task 4</th>
<th>Task 5</th>
<th>Task 6</th>
<th>Task 7</th>
<th>Task 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Input from participants
This section contains participants’ comments and their responses to posttest questions.

Participants’ comments
Participants made the following comments while performing the usability tasks:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Participants’ comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1    | • “High school counselors help students figure out the admission requirements”  
      • “Why would ‘Requirements’ be under ‘Application Guidelines’? Shouldn’t it just be under ‘Freshman Students’ or ‘Admissions’?”  
      • “High school counselors always tell students what they need to have done.” |
| 2    | • “There it is!” after searching for 2 minutes and then returning to main page.  
      • “Clicked on it right away because it was right there” – found target in 1 second.  
      • “That’s where I would find opinions – in student web pages.” |
| 3    | • “Would I download an application?”  
      • “Am I supposed to log-in?” |
| 4    | • “I figured Kentucky was considered ‘out-of-state’ since it wasn’t under ‘reciprocity’.”  
      • “Housing?... Uh oh, what the heck is reciprocity?... It was right there in the beginning!”  
      • “I don’t think it can be found.” |
| 5    | • “Open House is for admitted students… I would call the Office of Admissions?”  
      • “Call the phone number”  
      • “Then you just have to call. It tells me to call.”  
      • “I looked under ‘Parents’ because most parents want to go with their kids on tours of the school.”  
      • “I looked under ‘Tour Guides’ because I thought it would say when they would have tours.” |
| 6    | • “I looked under HS Counselors because I knew that they would have the information, as high school students would seek that information from them.” |
| 7    | • “What if I didn’t have Adobe?”  
      • “How do I know when class starts?”  
      • “I can’t find where it should say first day in ‘Important Dates’ – I would think the first day would be an ‘important date’.”  
      • “After calendar appeared, “Oh, this isn’t what I wanted… oh, wait – yeah, it is!” |
| 8    | • “Looking for anything with parking… I found how much they are, but not how to order… why is parking information under the ‘Parents’ category and not under a student category?”  
      • “There should be a link that says, ‘Buy a parking permit’.”  
      • “I looked under ‘Parents’ because they seem to do a lot for students…”  
      • “I don’t think it’s on the Admissions site… Parents have to park… wouldn’t have thought it would have been there…” |

Participants’ responses to posttest questions
This section contains participants’ responses to the posttest questions.
Five posttest questions were (each was followed by the option to comment):

- How attractive do you find the Admissions website’s colors and images?
- In your opinion, how well does the Admissions website represent MSU?
- How well did you like the pop up navigation on the Admissions website homepage?
- How well did you like the expanded navigation on the second level pages of the site?
- Any other aspects you would like to call attention to:
The first question was aimed to solicit participants’ opinions about prototypes’ colors and images. Participants were asked to rank the prototype on a scale from 1 to 6 (1 corresponding to not attractive and 6 corresponding to very attractive).

The second question was aimed to solicit participants’ opinions about how well the prototypes represent MSU. Participants were asked to rank the prototype on a scale from 1 to 6 (1 corresponding to represents poorly and 6 corresponding to represents very well).

The third question was aimed to solicit participants’ opinions about how well they liked the pop up navigation on the Admissions prototype homepage. Participants were asked to rank the navigation on a scale from 1 to 6 (1 corresponding to did not like and 6 corresponding to liked very well).

The fourth question was aimed to solicit participants’ opinions about how well they liked the expanded navigation on the second and deeper level pages of the Admissions website prototype. Participants were asked to rank the navigation on a scale from 1 to 6 (1 corresponding to did not like and 6 corresponding to liked very well).

The fifth question was aimed to solicit participants’ opinions about any aspect of the site or tasks that was not called attention to during the test itself or in one of the previous four posttest questions.

Participants’ responses were distributed as follows:

### Colors and images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>&quot;Pretty neat and colorful; good combination&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### MSU representation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Pop-up Navigation on Homepage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>“Helpful when looking for things.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>“It worked well except when I need a purple parking permit.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>“I don’t care if pop-up navigation spreads across the entire page; I just want to find what I’m looking for.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>“I didn’t like the pop-ups.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Expanded Navigation in Secondary Pages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>“Also very helpful.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>“I noticed it was there, but different…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Responses to Additional Aspects

- “Why is the parking permit information under ‘Life at MSU’? Why isn’t there a pop-up navigation under ‘Life at MSU’?”

### Recommendations

Participants working with the prototype were all mostly satisfied with colors and images, as well as with how the prototype represented MSU.

Participants were also mostly satisfied with the navigation and found both the pop-up navigation and the expanded navigation to be helpful. There did not appear to be any confusion or difficulties in completing the tasks caused by the change in navigation between the main page and the secondary pages. The aspect of navigation that caused the most confusion was exemplified by task #4; the desired information was not available in the final level of pop-up navigation, but was located in a level of navigation prior to exhaustion of the pop-up levels (see recommendation from “Findings and Recommendations” section of report.) One other possibly problematic aspect of the navigation is brought to attention by a participant in the “Responses to Additional Aspects” box above; the navigation in some sections is not fully exhaustive where it could be, thus leading to some confusion and unnecessary use of excess time and searching.
Appendix A: Demographics questionnaire

1. Class ranking
   - HS senior
   - college freshman
   - college sophomore
   - college junior
   - college senior

2. Gender
   - female
   - male

3. Do you own a computer?
   - yes
   - no

4. If you own a computer and have access to the Internet, what browser(s) do you use?
   - IE
   - Netscape
   - both
   - other:

5. What is your level of expertise with the Internet?
   - novice
   - competent
   - advanced
   - expert

6. How often are you successful at finding information on the Internet?
   - rarely
   - occasionally
   - usually
   - always

7. Have you ever visited the MSU Admissions website?
   - yes
   - no
Appendix B: Usability tasks

Note: Each task was printed on a separate sheet of paper, all being stapled together into a packet for usability testing.

1. You have just completed your junior year of high school and are in the process of applying to colleges for post high school study. To be certain that you are taking the necessary classes in your senior year, you want to find out what MSU requires of incoming freshmen in terms of completed classes.

2. The information you have been sent from MSU makes the college sound appealing to you, but all you know are statistics and facts about the school. You would like to find out what MSU students have to say about the college.

3. After viewing MSU admission requirements, you decide you would like to apply to MSU via the internet. Find the application and follow the instructions to the point of selecting your student status.

4. You are a resident of Kentucky and would like to know what you would pay per year (including room and board) for attending MSU beginning in fall of 2003.

5. Not yet an admitted student, you would like to find out if and when MSU offers guided tours of the campus in June 2003.

6. As a prospective gerontology major searching for colleges, you would like to find out if MSU offers a program in gerontology.

7. You will be a freshman at MSU in fall of 2003, and your family is planning a vacation to Florida from August 20th to August 27th. Find out if the family vacation will overlap with the first day of classes at MSU.

8. As an admitted student, you were sent an MSU information packet in the mail, including information on parking permits. You’ve decided to purchase a purple parking permit online- find the online purchase form.
Appendix C: Posttest questionnaire

1. How attractive do you find the Admission Website’s colors and images?
   (not attractive) 1 2 3 4 5 6 (very attractive)
   -Comments:

2. In your opinion, how well does the Admissions Website represent MSU?
   (not well) 1 2 3 4 5 6 (very well)
   -Comments:

3. How well did you like the pop up navigation on the Admissions Website homepage?
   (not well) 1 2 3 4 5 6 (very well)
   -Comments:

4. How well did you like the expanded navigation on the second level pages of the site?
   (not well) 1 2 3 4 5 6 (very well)
   -Comments:

5. Any other aspects you would like to call attention to:
Appendix D: Prototype

We are excited about your interest in MSU. For more information about MSU, please contact the Office of Admissions.