Rancho Santiago Community College District

RESEARCH DEPARTMENT

REPORT

Santa Ana College
Students' Preferences for a Great College Website

December 2011

As Santa Ana College (SAC) considers a redesign of its website, exploratory conversation with students can provide a wealth of data to assist designers in identifying key issues of interest to this important group of end-users. By better understanding website preferences and incorporating those preferences into the new site, the college can better communicate with, and market to, this very important audience segment. Students can lose interest in college information in the website if it is not relevant, user-friendly, and current. Towards this end, a series of focus groups were convened in November 2011 to help focus our investigations and development.

By utilizing three award-winning university websites as models (Northern Illinois University, Oregon State University and University of Denver), students offered opinions about their initial preferences in the areas of navigation, engagement with the site, content preferences (length and topic), design, and visual preferences. Prior to the focus group meetings, participants were asked to familiarize themselves with the models by reviewing the three websites as well as the current SAC website. They were then asked to respond (via an online survey) to a variety of questions detailing the above focus areas. In the following week, they were invited to join a focus group on-campus during which responses to the online instrument were used to guide conversation to more detailed feedback.

A series of six focus groups were conducted in November, four during lunch hour and two prior to evening classes. Each session contained eight to twelve students for a total of 60 students. Participants were similar in demographics (age, gender, ethnicity) to that of the SAC student body at large.

Findings

"When students go to a website, they're looking for a reason to pick a campus, not a study program. If you don't like what you see, you won't come to the campus at all, so "great programs" won't make a difference if you don't bring in the students first. Concentrate on your site."

"The SAC site is so boring that it gives viewers the impression that the college is boring too. The site should depict what this campus is really all about…a place for learning."

1

"If SAC's website is lively then students can see how SAC can contribute to their success!"

"We need a site that brags to them [viewers] *why they should be here* [at SAC]*."*

[The site]*"doesn't show that the college is in tuned with students' needs."*

"If you see a friendly life [from website]*, you're more likely to come to this school."*

Overall, participants were divided in their preference among the three model websites for various reasons. They preferred Northern Illinois University's site slightly more due to its focus on student life. Participants did, however, agree whole-heartedly that SAC definitely needs a facelift to better portray what it has to offer its students and community.

General Comments About the Three Model Sites:

Northern Illinois University (NIU) website is easy to read because of the consistent fonts, sizes and color coordination used, white tabs on red bar, simple to navigate, and tab titles are easy references.   The site is not cluttered, but contains the information and links that viewers can utilize if they want additional information. The photos are interesting, with appealing city AND campus photos of diverse student body conducting various activities; sidebar navigation is easy and contain topics of interest; perfect balance of visuals and information.

Participants cited that NIU was very easy to navigate because the site's headings/topic areas are relative to their needs as potential students or as continuing students. There are three distinct areas of information: top red bar (white wordings) list areas that many college students' interests/needs, the left-hard sidebar list who viewers could potentially be and information pertaining to that individuals and tabs in the middle of the page titles such as, "Top Stories," "Events," and "NIU Today" that keep continuing students more in touch with social life at the university. The content describing areas of interest is appropriate in length (two to three sentences). Users can then follow links on the page if they want to read more about the stories, issues, etc.

The NIU site incorporates a static background that uses consistent, vivid color combinations, bold headlines and different-sized fonts that display easy-to-read information. Each page/layer adheres to a similar design (photos, fonts and colors) to maintain continuity, and only the final page/layer is pdf. Participants noted the mascot is prominent throughout the website, giving the school a fun, youthful identity.   Participants also like the tabs in that you don't have to leave the page to preview what is to come.   The user is not overwhelmed with having to search for things and information is very accessible and easy to find.   The site has lots of specific departments and topics that you really don't need to hunt for, just click because *"they've done the thinking for you….just pick from the choices."* Younger participants noted the social links at the bottom are not too small, giving them legitimacy.

Oregon State University site uses colors that participants stated are often found in magazines, which makes the site "very catchy." They like the modern, clean use of color, white space, and compelling titles among the tab selections. They find the sub-links at bottom informative and easy on the eyes, and the topics at the top are clear and concise. They also appreciate the consistency of hyperlink color; links are easily discernible because of the use of color.

Students noted that when they click on a link, it keeps you on the page but only changes what is related to the area selection. Participants also like that the "news" and "events" sections are updated daily and have compelling stories relating to current events (around the world and on-campus) to help them be more well-rounded individuals. They like the use of pictures for each area stated to show diversity of programming/activities/issues.

Participants like the slideshow of students doing things that students do on an everyday basis which showcase the activities as well as their campus and buildings so viewers can picture themselves attending school. There are also pictures showing students engaged in surrounding communities. Some participants note the pictures are mostly of fall scenes and assume the webmaster updates these pictures often. Participants stressed the importance of updating information and pictures to reflect changes going on around us and to portray a current image.

Though many participants liked this site for its color scheme and clean look, some did mention that the site was very corporate-like and that it does not depict a student focus. They also use small fonts and that the pages contain too much information. Participants prefer short explanations accompany pictures.

University of Denver's vivid, exotic, large rotating photos with student testimonials grabbed participants' immediate attention and motivated them to continue exploring the site. The pictures share the message that viewers' have real potential. One participant stated he felt like "*this is what you can be if you come to Denver.*" They like the subtle changing slide show, with the right speed, the clear navigation tabs, short and concise texts that didn't lose readers' interest. Navigation is very user-friendly and students like the call-out boxes. Viewers can identify with the areas listed on the bars across top and can click on it for additional information on those areas. They like the list of additional links situated at the bottom of the page which infers that they are less vital and can be explored as needed.

The website is easy to read because of the consistent fonts, sizes and color coordination, including red text on white background tabs. The front page is not cluttered, and only has a few current events on the right hand side that viewers can clink if they want additional information. The simple Denver logo is on every page so it shows some level of identify for the participants.

Though participants mentioned the exotic pictures draw viewers in and they do reflect global issues in which students can relate to, some mentioned that the pictures were too big in proportion to the screen and that these pictures do not necessary reflect everyday student life on campus, suggesting a need for better balance of visuals. Some also found the white navigation bar with red font at the bottom difficult to read and that Denver's site has too many layers which make users have to "work hard" to find what they are looking for.

Current SAC Site

Participants mostly use the site to access Blackboard for related class assignments and WebAdvisor for registration purposes or access faculty contact information. They do not use the current SAC site as a means by which to keep current with what is happening at SAC. They stated that they often cannot find information needed and expressed much frustration when they see obsolete information. Participants stated that site was not designed for them as it is hard to find information/materials they as students need. "Stories of interest" are mostly on who is hired, nothing to do with if and how it directly relates to their college experience.

Participants find the website boring, not enticing or inviting. Many mentioned the SAC site lacks an "identity," in that it needs a purpose, a mission, and an identity. They felt the site represents the past, in terms of color, design, and information*, "SAC site is like a black and white TV, NIU is like the flat screen."* Website design lack coordination and participants showed example of some individual department pages, some better in design and information while others do not match the SAC main page design. They find the single text size is too small and black and red text lettering on top of the gray (sometime peach) background make it very hard to read or keep interest. They also don't like the "stock" photos and dated headshots and success stories. Additional notes on the various areas made by participants of the current website are below:

- Participants found the length of content to be good and not too wordy. However, it is also very functional, with nothing personal or unique about the college. They found the tab subjects to be sufficient.
- Participants found the information easy to understand, once they are familiar with the site. They noted that they spend too much getting familiar with the site or having to help their fellow students to navigate the site, especially during registration - the process is unclear.
- The current appearance of the SAC site does not encourage you to investigate further, it looks like no effort was put forth in creating/maintaining the site: *"website needs to hypnotize you and lure you into the school, SAC's doesn't do that for me."* The homepage is overwhelming and contains too many lists that are not organized with students' needs in mind. It is too plain, boring, and old-fashioned. The color combination is very flat and not exciting and the tiny fonts on the color scheme chosen make it hard to read.
- They do not like the current head shots of the few students currently highlighted and they should be changed often. The perception is that there are few successes and that is why they have the same people, same stories. SAC needs to see genuine student photos (familiar faces that you recognize sitting next to you in class) with genuine quotes.
- The various pages and links should depict similar design, format, logo, etc. Participants complained that sometimes they don't know if they were still on the SAC site because the format/logo has changed from one page to the next.
- The online registration process is very slow. In registration process, "seat availability"/ "registered students" indications are not clear at first so it better labeling will be better understood by students.

- Many of the program-level pages have different information and designs, some a lot and others not so much. It is hard to make decision on a major when you can't make comparisons because you don't have same level of information.
- There are too many repetitions in links and information. Too many PDF documents and too many "printout" pages with no connection to the viewers/students.
- The use of white space is good; however, SAC's use is not proportionate to the entire screen. The right hand sided of the screen isn't used at all.

Suggestions for improvement

Overall, participants were very appreciative of being asked for their opinions on a tool that is important to the college for communication and marketing purposes. They also were very generous in sharing their many, many suggestions on how to improve the current site. Below is a comprehensive list of items that were most of popular:

- Participants would like to see the SAC site provide more information/opportunities for student involvement, on-campus and in its surrounding communities. Upcoming on-campus events (such as athletic/sporting events, music and theatre events, faculty development having to do with student success, etc.) should be highlighted so students can get involved if they are interested. As of right now, students tend to stumble upon events/activities and get frustrated as they did not plan time to attend. They suggest video links of events and activities happening on campus so it shows that we have things going on of which students can be proud.
- They like to see how the college, its faculty, staff and students contribute to the community. Faculty or staff development events or grants acquisition regarding student learning should also be highlighted so students can celebrate in that success. They do NOT want to see articles regarding hiring of this individual or that individual unless it has a direct association to students. Any hard-copy flyers worthy of being posted around campus should be included in the "what's happening" sections so students can decide and plan for participation should they chose to do so.
- Participants would like to see more genuine student photos that depict campus life/ community life, not stock photos where you know the "students" aren't from SAC. If you recognize the students, then you know they are real, but if you don't recognize them as SAC students, they are illusions. *"REAL STUDENTS=REAL EXPERIENCES" photos that say "picture yourself here* [at SAC].*"*
- They want to see a more interactive site, with more coordination and balance in colors, fonts, designs, graphics, and photos among the different pages to reflect a more modern look. Also, incorporate technology into the design of the new website, such as revolving slideshows, drop down or layover menus, and more interactivity. Invest in the site as a marketing tool to potential students and communication tool to those who are already here.
- Participants would like to see more highlights of STUDENT SUCCESS (different interpretations of success, not the typical of those achieving transfer or graduation, but success in what may be seen as small achievements to many). They do not care for the stories about faculty or staff, unless they have an impact on student learning/success.

- They would like to see more <u>academic program</u> information, such as classes needed to graduate, recommended sequencing of classes that students should take, faculty who teach in the program and their unique teaching approach, program accolades, careers within the major for students to consider, and/or stories of student success within the program. Accompanying photos relating to major would "pull us in." Each academic program should have its own pages with pertinent information and they all should be consistent in design and information and must be updated regularly. Show how each faculty member engages students in that they care about the students and their achievements.
- They would like to see more <u>support services</u> information, specifically as it relates to financing their education (scholarship, financial aid), services offered to them (counseling, health care, child care), defining their educational path (classes needed to complete program, transferring to four-year universities), exploring events/activities in the surrounding communities and internally at the college, etc. These information needs to be up-to-date on a regular basis.
- SAC needs a new logo, mascot and an inspiring/motivating tagline that depict college's mission and purposes! There is a lack of branding...something that *"SAC is like our second home, so why not show how proud we are to be here!"*
- Social networking is there, but not very noticeable. Introduce an online chat room for students to interact and discuss various departments/issues/concerns.
- Content introduction should only be about three sentences; just enough to catch users' attention. If users are interested in reading more, they can click on that site for additional information. Statements and bullet points are more effective. They want good size and font for easy reading, but keep it consistent so it doesn't distract you for the information you're trying to convey.
- Participants only want to scroll up and down the page once, anything more is redundant. Try not to have too many levels (layers/pages) as users find it tedious and not continue on.
- Make it convenient for students; give the information from their viewer's perspective, not that of the staff/faculty/administration. Model the list of topics/services/programs (from the perspective of "usefulness to students") to those highlighted by the model sites of University of Denver or Oregon State University.