English Department Website Usability Report

December 2018

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English 380H

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Summary

The purpose of this usability test was to investigate the effectiveness of the University of Massachusetts Amherst English Department's website. The test focused on the Undergraduate section of the site, as the department is currently targeting new undergraduates to join the major. The usability test took place in November 2018 at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Five undergraduates participated in the test (see Appendix A for testing materials given to them).

Top Results

- **Users were confused by Specializations.**

  Users were unsure as to how specializations differed from certificates, if there was a difference. One of the users specifically asked how specializations could apply to non-English majors, stating, "How can you specialize in creative writing if you're a Bio major?"
- **Users often overlooked the sidebar.**

  While users were able to use the sidebar for secondary tabs, such as Honors, Advising, or Courses, the users rarely clicked on any of the tertiary resources, such as Advising Resources or Career Prep Timeline.
- **Users overlooked information that was presented in large blocks of text.**

  Users skimmed the pages looking for keywords, links, and headings. The majority of users tested avoided reading the large paragraphs, with some verbally expressing, "I don't want to read all of this". Users had trouble finding information on the Honors page and Teaching Paths page, especially.
- **Users admitted that they would look elsewhere for Career & Internship Resources.**

  The majority of users admitted that they wouldn't use the English site to look for internship resources. Users mentioned looking at Handshake or the HFA site would be easier for them to navigate.

Methodology

Seven undergraduates were asked to participate in this usability study at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Two of the seven were forced to decline at the last minute.

Due to availabilities and space restrictions, the testing took place in three locations: the W.E.B. DuBois Library Digital Media Lab, South College E250, and in an undergraduate dorm during the week of November 12th, 2018.

During the test, participants were given a set of tasks to complete (found in Appendix A). Tasks were given in a random order (the counterbalancing technique) so that results for later tasks were not skewed by participants' learning. The site was evaluated based on users' comments and their ease of use.

Test sessions lasted approximately 30 minutes. This time was comprised of greeting the participant, gathering demographic data, completing the tasks, and answering any remaining questions.

Testing Environment

The website evaluation was conducted using a Macbook Pro laptop connected to a monitor. The audio and video were recorded using Zoom.

User Profile

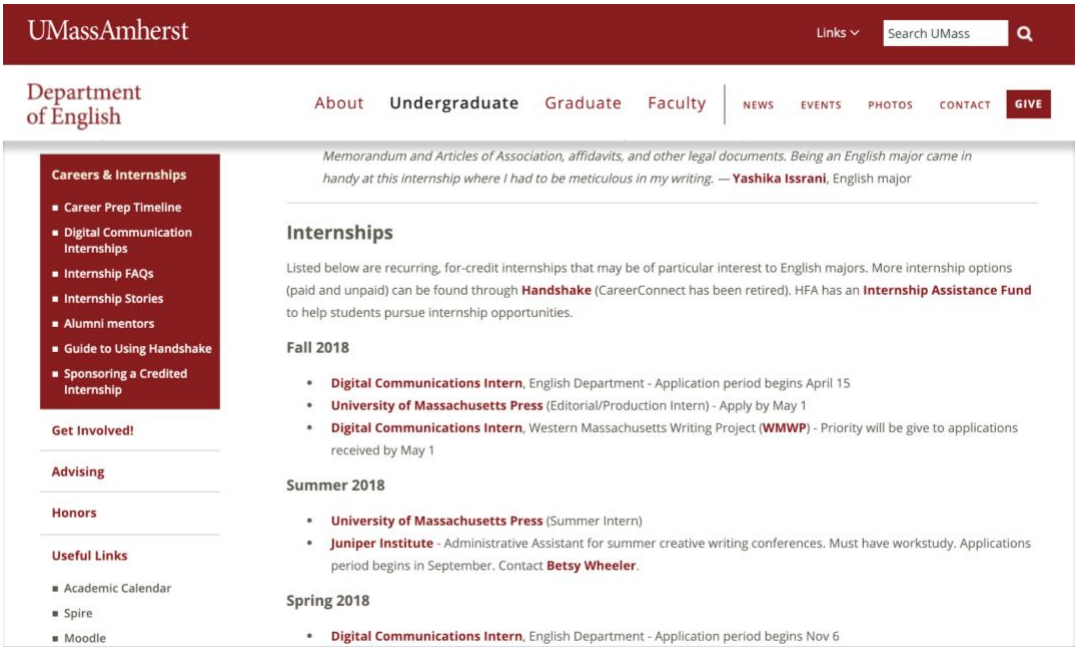
User #	Major	Year	Honors	Internet Usage
1	English, Communications	Junior	Yes	70 hours/week
2	BDIC, English	Junior	No	70 hours/week
3	Comparative Literature	Freshman	Yes	20 hours/week
4	English, Communications	Senior	No	60 hours/week

User #	Major	Year	Honors	Internet Usage
5	English, Communications	Freshman	Yes	30 hours/week

Usability Findings & Recommendations

Task #1 : Careers & Internships

Aaron is interested in applying for internships in the humanities, but they aren't quite sure how to find companies to apply for, let alone what they should be doing to prepare. Where would they find this information?



Observations

Users admitted that they wouldn't think to use the English Department's website to look for internship opportunities. They would be more likely to use Handshake or the College of Humanities and Fine Arts' website as those sites showcase a broader range of opportunities.

Users pointed out their confusion over why there were links to past internship opportunities, rather than any future opportunities. Additionally, two out of the five users clicked on Digital Communication Internships, not knowing that it was an internship for the department.

While clicking through different links within the Careers & Internships tab, two of the users stumbled upon two UMass Press links on the Internships FAQ page that led to a page denying them access.

With that being said, two out of the five users were glad to have access to Alumni Mentors and Internship Stories, though it did take the users a few clicks to find these resources.

Recommendation

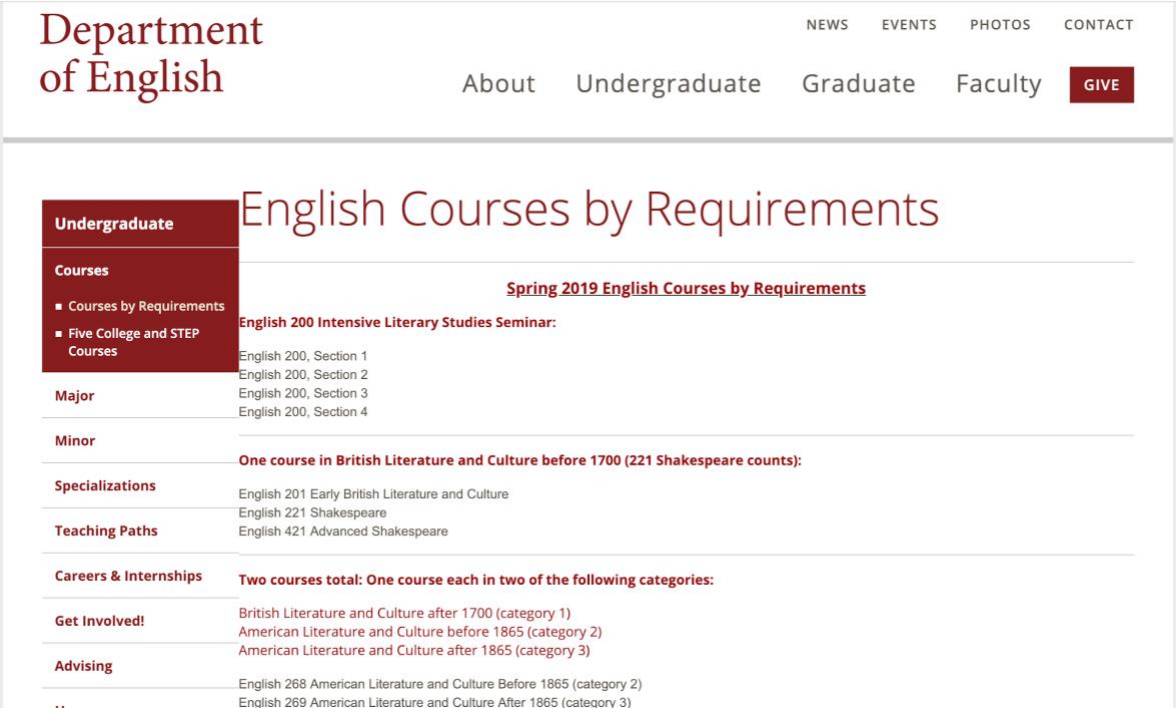
As the University of Massachusetts Amherst already utilizes a number of career platforms, I suggest that the English Department not post job advertisements on their website. Instead, the Careers & Internships tab could focus more on students' experiences with employers via the Internship Stories or the Alumni Mentors. Additionally, since some users gloss over the sidebar, it would be helpful to have links to the sidebar content in the main text area.

Task #2: Majors & Courses

Emily, a 2nd year student at UMass, is looking to change her major to English. She has already taken many classes within the College of Humanities and Fine Arts, so

she wants to check to see if she's already fulfilled any major requirements before picking her classes for the spring. Where could she find this information?

Observations



Users went a few different directions during this task. One user went straight to the Courses tab to look at all of the courses offered, including the Courses by Requirement page. Another went to the Advising tab and explored the Advising FAQs until she came upon the Courses by Requirements page. Three of the users went to the Major tab, with two of them clicking the Printable Checklist of requirements and one staying on the webpage.

Three of the five users found the Courses by Requirements extremely helpful in concept, but the lack of margins and padding left the page difficult to read.

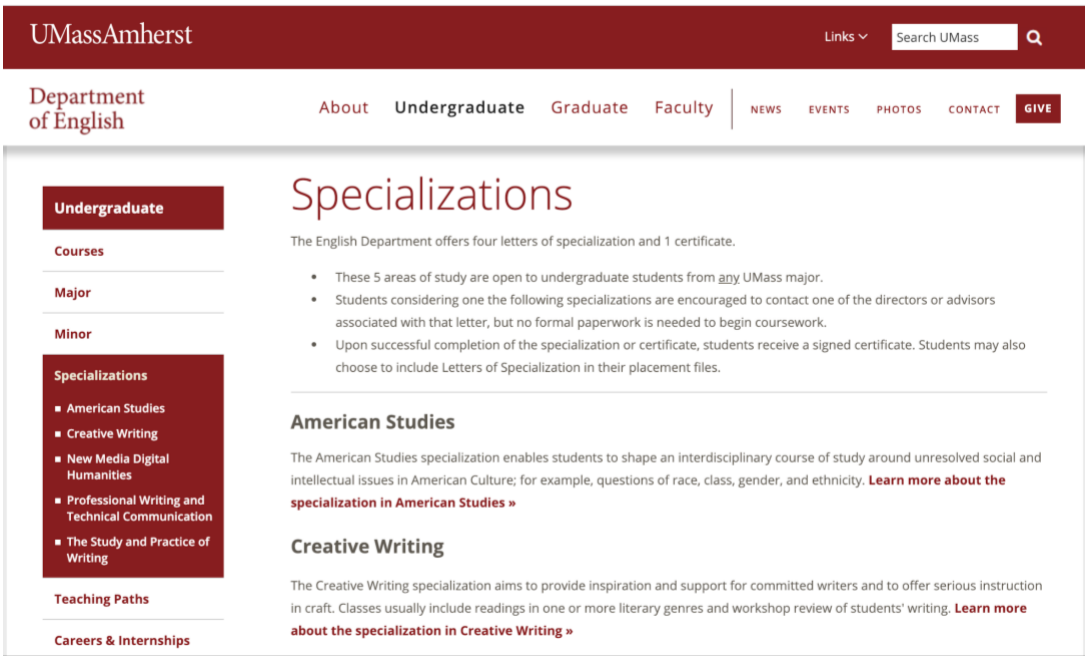
Recommendation

I suggest that the English Department changes the formatting of the Courses by Requirement page. Additionally, I propose that the Courses by Requirement page is displayed more prominently on the website, such as a link to it on the Major page near the

printable checklist PDF. This way, students could look up their requirements and immediately find courses related to them.

Task #3: Specializations

Thomas is interested in writing, but he doesn't want to fully commit to the major. He's heard that he could get a certificate, and would like to find out what certificates are offered through the English Department. Where would he find this information,



and what are the names of the possible certificates?

Observations

All five users had difficulty with this task. While each user was able to get to the Specializations page, they were left confused over the differences between specializations and certificates, especially since both were open to all majors at the university.

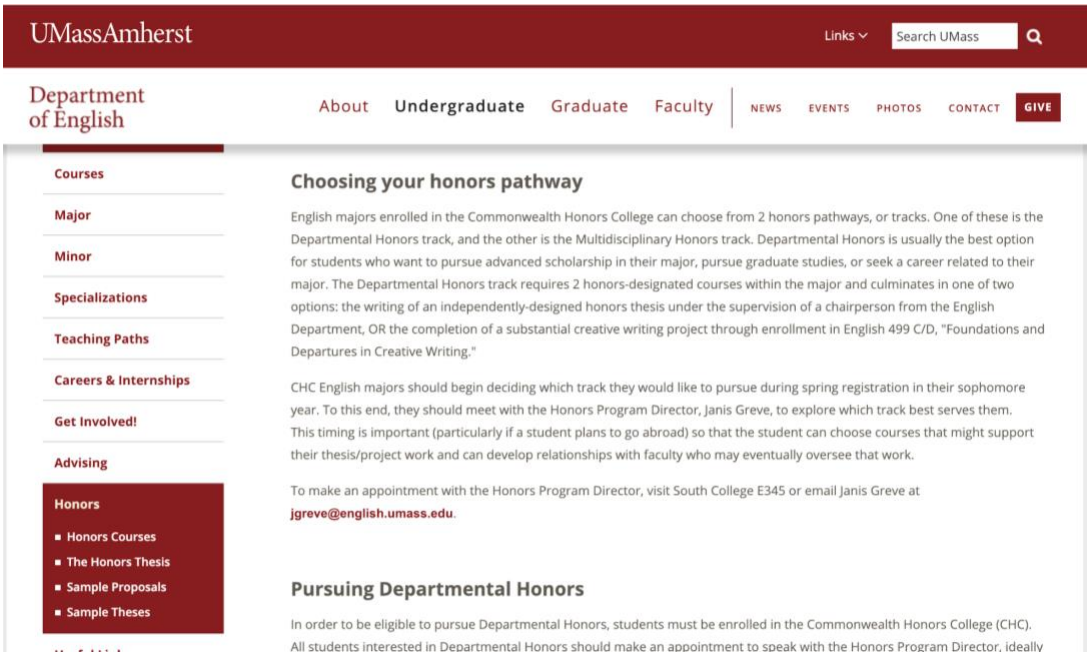
Recommendation

I suggest that the English Department adds a section explaining what the differences between a specialization and a certificate are. Additionally, since the PWTC program is the

only certificate, the program should be shifted to the end of the list, as having the only certificate in the middle of the specializations confused some users.

Task #4: Honors

Avery is an Honors student in the English department. They are uncertain about the possible honors tracks that they could pursue, and would like to get some more information. Where could they get this information? What are the names of the tracks? What makes them different? Who could they contact with more questions?



Observations

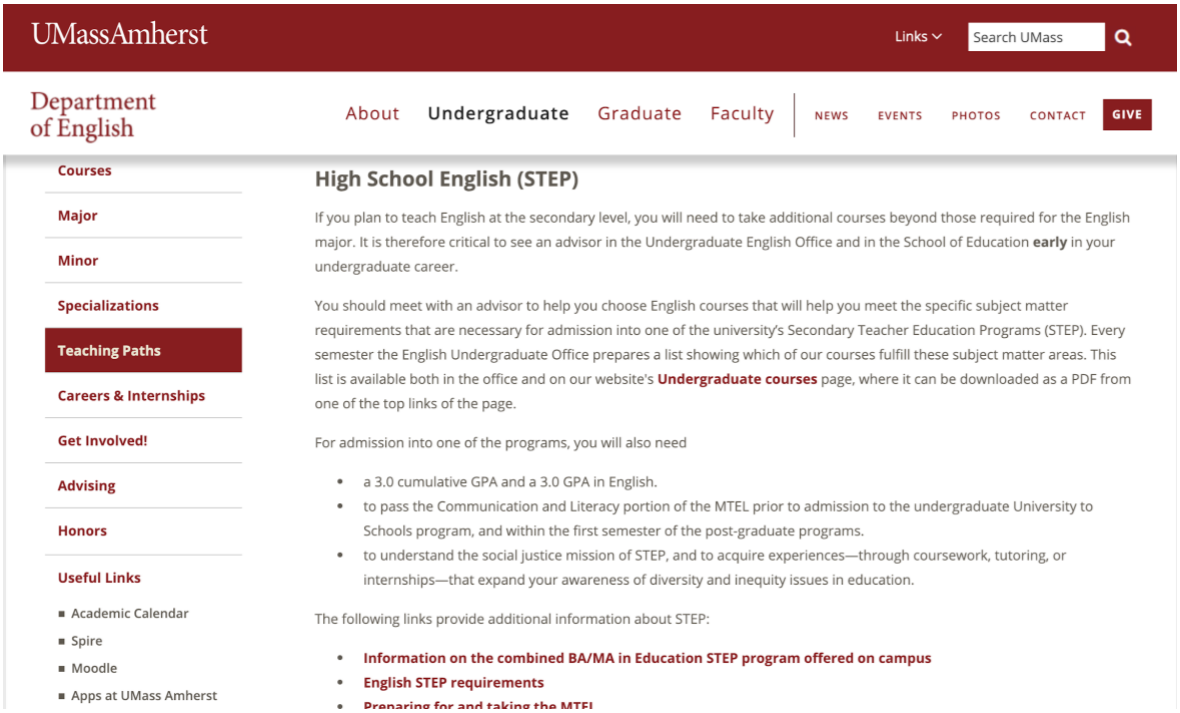
Each user mentioned that the Honors page tripped them up in some way. The most frequent comment on this page said that there was too much text on the page, making it hard to skim for information.

Recommendation

I suggest that the English Department break up the large paragraphs of text into something more skimmable for readers. Alternatively, some of the information can be removed if the department adds a link to the Commonwealth Honors College website, where they explain the different honors pathways. This would slim down the page and make the page less intimidating for students.

Task #5: Teaching Paths

Jordan wants to teach high school English after they graduate. Do they need to take any specific classes? What are the requirements for the program? Who should they talk to in the Advising office?


UMassAmherst
Links
Search UMass
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About
Undergraduate
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Faculty
NEWS
EVENTS
PHOTOS
CONTACT
GIVE
Courses
Major
Minor
Specializations
Teaching Paths
Careers & Internships
Get Involved!
Advising
Honors
Useful Links
Academic Calendar
Spire
Moodle
Apps at UMass Amherst
High School English (STEP)
If you plan to teach English at the secondary level, you will need to take additional courses beyond those required for the English major. It is therefore critical to see an advisor in the Undergraduate English Office and in the School of Education early in your undergraduate career.
You should meet with an advisor to help you choose English courses that will help you meet the specific subject matter requirements that are necessary for admission into one of the university's Secondary Teacher Education Programs (STEP). Every semester the English Undergraduate Office prepares a list showing which of our courses fulfill these subject matter areas. This list is available both in the office and on our website's Undergraduate courses page, where it can be downloaded as a PDF from one of the top links of the page.
For admission into one of the programs, you will also need
a 3.0 cumulative GPA and a 3.0 GPA in English.
to pass the Communication and Literacy portion of the MTEL prior to admission to the undergraduate University to Schools program, and within the first semester of the post-graduate programs.
to understand the social justice mission of STEP, and to acquire experiences—through coursework, tutoring, or internships—that expand your awareness of diversity and inequity issues in education.
The following links provide additional information about STEP:
Information on the combined BA/MA in Education STEP program offered on campus
English STEP requirements

Observations

Three of the five users clicked on a different tab before finding the Teaching Paths tab. Two of those three tried looking in Specializations before realizing that there was a specific Teaching tab underneath Specializations. The other user looked in the Graduate tab first, thinking that the program was something students completed after graduation.

Once users found the Teaching Paths page, many of them expressed intimidation because of the large amounts of text. While the text was hard to skim, the red links had enough contrast to be easily seen, meaning that every user was able to find the person to contact about this program.

Recommendation

I suggest that the information on the page be rewritten to make it easier to skim. Additionally, it would be beneficial for students to have a link to the courses that fulfill STEP requirements for each semester. For instance, the link to STEP courses for Spring 2019, which is currently listed under the Courses tab in the sidebar, could be placed on the Teaching Paths page. This way, students wouldn't have to navigate through as many clicks to get to courses once they check the requirements on the STEP page.

Task #6: Advising

Taylor wants to see an advisor before they pick their classes for next semester. What are their options? Where might they find resources before the appointment? What resources are there?

Observations

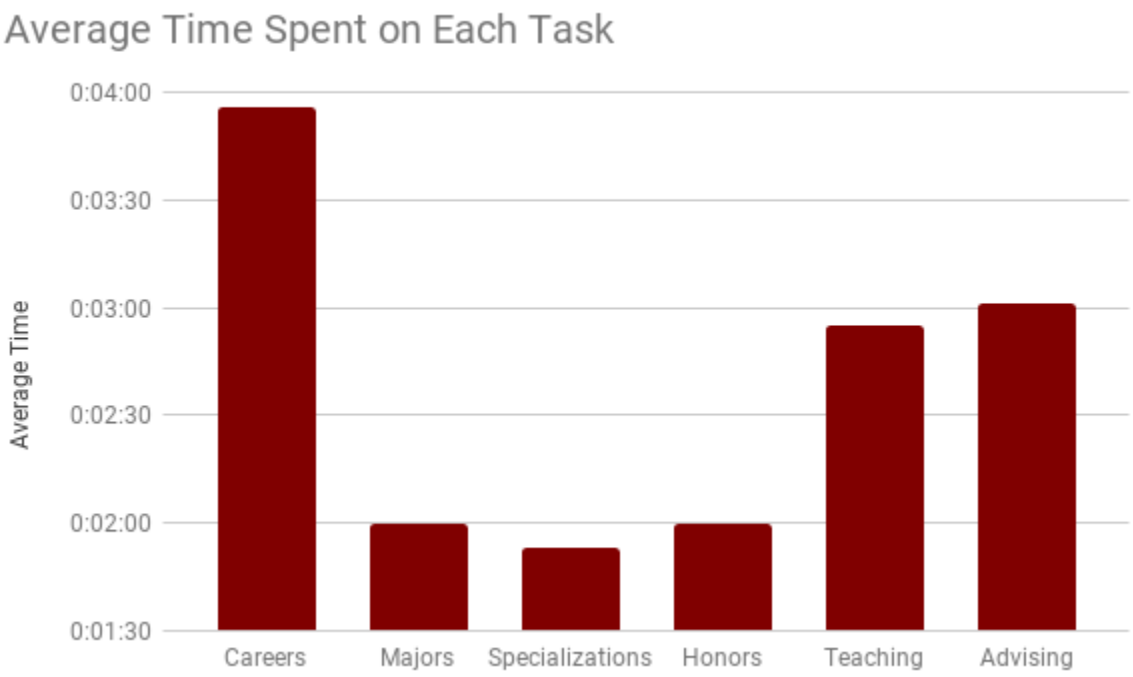
Two out of the five users first went searching for information on advising in the Faculty tab. They assumed that because faculty members also can hold advising roles, that there would be information under that tab. However, after searching through that tab, they both realized that it was more likely to be under the Undergraduate tab.

A four out of the five users found the Advising Resources within the sidebar, but three of those users didn't read through any of the resources after the first page was directed towards faculty. One of the users that left also mentioned that a spelling error in the page also prompted them to leave the page. The user that stayed on the page and explored the links, which led her to the Advising FAQs. She found this page to be extremely helpful for a student. Another user also found the Advising FAQs page, but got to the page via a Google search.

Recommendation

I would suggest that the Advising Resources be displayed more predominantly within the Advising page. Rather than keeping it in the sidebar, these resources (or the links to said resources) could be embedded in the Advising page itself. This would also solve the problem of the main page in Advising Resources being targeted towards faculty, which deters students from exploring the other resources. I would also recommend to remove the nesting of the Advising Resources, as there is not enough contrast between the triangle and square icons at such a small size in the sidebar.

General Findings



The chart shows the average amount of time that users spent on each task. On average, users spent the most amount of time on the Careers & Internships, Advising, and Teaching Paths tabs, respectively. Interestingly enough, even though all of the users expressed confusion over the Specializations task (and particularly the difference between specializations and certificates), users completed this task the fastest.

Appendix A

Testing Script

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Hi, _____. My name is Bex, and I'm going to be walking you through this session today. Before we begin, I have some information for you, and I'm going to read it to make sure that I cover everything.

You probably already have a good idea of why we asked you here, but let me go over it again briefly. We're asking people to try using the English Department's website so we can see whether it works as intended. The session should take about half an hour to 45 minutes.

The first thing I want to make clear right away is that we're testing the site, not you. You can't do anything wrong here. In fact, this is probably the one place today where you don't have to worry about making mistakes.

As you use the site, I'm going to ask you as much as possible to try to think out loud: to say what you're looking at, what you're trying to do, and what you're thinking. This will be a big help to us. Also, please don't worry that you're going to hurt our feelings. We're doing this to improve the site, so we need to hear your honest reactions.

If you have any questions as we go along, just ask them. I may not be able to answer them right away, since we're interested in how people do when they don't have someone sitting next to them to help. But if you still have any questions when we're done I'll try to answer them then. And if you need to take a break at any point, just let me know.

You may have noticed the microphone. With your permission, I'm going to record what happens on the screen and our conversation. The recording will only be used to help the

department figure out how to improve the site, and it won't be seen by anyone except the people working on the website. And it helps me, because I don't have to take as many notes.

If you would, I'm going to ask you to sign a simple permission form. It just says that I have your permission to record you, and that the recording will only be seen by the people working on the project.

Do you have any questions so far? OK.

Before we look at the site, I'd like to ask you just a few quick questions.

First, what's your major? What kind of classes are you taking this semester?

Now, roughly how many hours a week altogether—just a ballpark estimate— would you say you spend using the Internet, including Web browsing and email, at work and at school?

What kinds of sites are you looking at when you browse the Web?

Do you have any favorite websites?

Thanks. Now I'm going to ask you to try doing some specific tasks. I'm going to read each one out loud and give you a printed copy. And again, as much as possible, it will help us if you can try to think out loud as you go along.

Do you have any questions for me, now that we're done?

Recording Consent Form

Thank you for participating in our usability research.

We will be recording your session to allow English Department staff members who are unable to be here today to observe your session and benefit from your comments.

Please read the statement below and sign where indicated.

- -

I understand that my usability test session will be recorded.

I grant the University of Massachusetts Amherst English Department permission to use this recording for internal use only, for the purpose of improving the designs being tested.

Signature: _____

Print your name: _____

Date: _____

Tasks

Aaron is interested in applying for internships in the humanities, but they aren't quite sure how to find companies to apply for, let alone what they should be doing to prepare. Where would they find this information?

Emily, a 2nd year student at UMass, is looking to change her major to English. She has already taken many classes within the College of Humanities and Fine Arts, so she wants to check to see if she's already fulfilled any major requirements before picking her classes for the spring. Where could she find this information?

Thomas is interested in writing, but he doesn't want to fully commit to the major. He's heard that he could get a certificate, and would like to find out what certificates are offered through the English Department. Where would he find this information, and what are the names of the possible certificates?

Avery is an Honors student in the English department. They are uncertain about the possible honors tracks that they could pursue, and would like to get some more information. Where could they get this information? What are the names of the tracks? What makes them different? Who could they contact with more questions?

Jordan wants to teach high school English after they graduate. Do they need to take any specific classes? What are the requirements for the program? Who should they talk to in the Advising office?

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