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Thank you!

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Executive Summary

About This Report

The aim of this report is to provide practical, evidence-based recommendations to improve the user experience on higher education websites. We identify the most prevalent issues on university websites and make suggestions of what works well, and what to avoid. By using the UX guidelines in this report as a checklist, sites will see a dramatic improvement in the user experience, with greater satisfaction and increased productivity from its users.

The 78 guidelines and recommendations in this report are based on qualitative research and heuristic reviews. In total, 33 people, ages 16–58 years, participated in usability testing in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Taiwan. Participants included high school juniors and seniors, transfer students, master’s degree applicants, parents of prospective students, and higher education professionals. We conducted in-person moderated one-on-one usability testing, as well as remote unmoderated testing. In both cases, participants engaged in thinking aloud as they worked through different activities.

This report includes 177 screenshots from 109 universities in 10 countries. Note that the insights here are derived from an even wider scope than we had room to include in this paper. Over the course of our research, we evaluated pages from more than 180 university websites across 19 countries.
Key Findings

A positive experience requires basic usability.
Sites that followed general web usability guidelines were seen as easier to use, and people were more successful on those sites.

User quotes

“That was good. It had a lot of information but it made it easy to compare.”

“It was clear and concise, but still had all the info, but it wasn’t a huge essay.”

“College websites are just so complicated!”

“Off university websites have better information. I would just use Google.”

Academic offerings are unclear and frequently misunderstood.

A big challenge for students on university sites is to find common information such as academic programs. Students struggled to find a straightforward list of academic degrees. Unfortunately, when this information was buried, many potential students incorrectly determined that the school did not offer their degree of choice.

User quotes

On the main Academics page, which listed the colleges: “I don’t see a Math section here, so then, I would probably not go towards this college anymore.” (Mathematics is offered under the College of Science.)
“I liked the other list, because they listed all the programs under a school. Because here, you may not know what programs are under [the School of] Management.”

**Prospective students and their parents struggle to find information about return on investment.**

Parents and students, even high-school juniors and seniors, are conscious about the high cost of attending college and see education as an investment. They need information about professional outcomes but most sites neglected to provide this information sufficiently.

**User quotes**

“The reputation of the school is important. I want to know that the education I’m receiving and paying for will be well regarded when I’m done with it.”

“I want to know from employers why this school is good.”

“Yes! This is what I want to see! It may be $15,000 more a year, but it’s going to land you a job.”

Imagery and visual design are important, and visitors form impressions and judgments based on what they see.

**The images, videos, and visuals on the website should be chosen strategically to ensure that they represent the university’s values.**

This finding is consistent with our research in other areas: aesthetics and look-and-feel create first impressions about a website and organization.
User quotes

“I felt like that university was different, in that it involved common everyday people, they seemed happy. Unlike the other ones we saw that were more stern.”

“I like how this one shows more pictures around the campus. It sort of familiarizes you with the university.”

“The homepage was not inviting. More pictures, people smiling, and stupid stuff like that, it works.”

“I get the sense that they’re really trying to make it a family-oriented university. The things that they have, its just everyday people, its not as stuffy as some other sites. It’s not about taking your money. You’re going to get a degree, and you’re going to be proud of it. I see a lot of smiling faces of people that love what they’re doing.”

“I preferred the last two universities, because they were more visually pleasing and showed more pictures of what the campus actually looked like.”

_Halfway through watching a video on the Future Students page:_ “Okay, they do learning outdoors. It seems like they are specialized in physical education and scientifical things. I personally wouldn’t go here, because that’s not in my interests. It seems really down to earth though. But I didn’t even have to read through [the page], I just watched this video.”
Characteristics of User Groups

When designing for university audiences, it’s important to consider the strengths, limitations, and goals of different users. Below are some attributes for key user groups at universities.

**General college-aged audiences (18–24 years old):**
- Move fast, miss information, and give up quickly.
- Appreciate simple designs and interactions.

**Teenagers in the research phase (16–17 years old):**
- Rely heavily on external search engines and third-party sites to find answers.
- More likely to ask adults for help with complex information.
- More inclined to watch videos about the university.
- Feel overwhelmed by information easily and take frequent breaks.
- Not interested in connecting their social media accounts with the university’s before they’ve been accepted.

**Graduate and postgraduate applicants:**
- More familiar with university system and application process in general, but still susceptible to usability issues.
- Spend more time learning about the academic department, its publications, and the faculty experience.
User quote

“I’m a college graduate, and I had a hard time using this site.”

Parents of prospective students:

• Browse from their child’s perspective first, then their own. They started off by looking for what their child would want to know.

• Look for generally the same information as students when determining fit.

• Tend to explore the Prospective students section before the Parents section.

• More likely than students to comment if they perceived an emphasis on fun over academics.

User quotes

“First, I’m going to Prospective Students, because that’s what my son would be.”

“They definitely emphasize a lot of fun... Finally, some academic pictures here, which is good. Oh wait, more people having fun again.”

International students:

• Behave similarly to domestic students. Similar to our other research with international users, there weren’t remarkable differences between students from different countries when using university websites.

• Depend on plain language and familiar terminology. Nonnative English speakers expect phrases like prospective students, academic requirements, and degree programs, because they seem them so often on other college websites. Regional differences in university terminology occasionally cause confusion. For example,
Academics in the U.S. is a common category name that includes all the academic degree programs, schools, and possibly research. But in the UK and Australia, Academics refers to the faculty and/or full-time research staff. In those countries, the category Study is more common. The word Course is another example; it can describe an individual class (e.g., Introduction to Computer Science), or a degree program (e.g., Bachelor of Science in Computer Science), depending on the country.

- Expect to find content tailored to their needs, such as special steps in the application and visa processes. They scanned the page looking for the word international, and if they couldn’t find it, they didn’t feel confident with what their next step should be.

User quotes

“Even though there are some new words for me, I can still guess the meaning from the context. I can check the details later.”

“I’m looking for something like International Student Center. I can only find About US. I cannot find International Students.”

“I think all of this is for native students. I hope they add a section for international students, because the information for us is different.”

“It would be good to have a special section for international students. They should also show the average TOEFL and GRE scores.”

Faculty and staff

- Need quick access to frequently-used tools and applications.

- Appreciate straightforward, concise content written in simple terms English. Even users with high literacy are faster and more successful on sites that follow guidelines for writing for the web.
How to Read This Report

This report is organized into three main sections representing top priorities for university website usability:

Part 1. General and Utilitarian Information
Part 2. Information for Prospective Students and External Audiences
Part 3. Navigating the University Website

Each part contains subsections and specific guidelines for improving the user experience, based on findings from our user research.

Guidelines include a short description and an example of an implementation on a real university website. The examples are marked to indicate whether the approach is recommended (Do), should be avoided (Don’t), or used with care (Caution).

Do. Don’t. Caution.

Keep in mind that these labels describe the implementation as it relates to a particular guideline. There might be many unrelated good design elements in an example marked Don’t; similarly, examples marked Do might not be perfect in all aspects of usability. Such is the nature of working with real websites: some aspects of a page can work very well while others lag behind. (In other words, please don’t copy an example marked Do in its entirety. Emulate only those components of the screen that are explicitly called out as being recommended.)

Screenshots were taken at various points in time, and some have been updated since they were captured. We can hope that the universities in question performed their own user research after our study and that they improved their website accordingly. By the time you read this report, do doubt even more sites will have been redesigned. In any case, we only use the screenshots as examples of good or bad design. It’s not our goal to criticize any individual university or to judge any individual design team’s work, and each example
remains equally valid as an illustration of its corresponding usability principle, whether or not the designers behind the example did a better job the next time around.
Part 1: General and Utilitarian Information

Given that university websites are so large, often with thousands or tens of thousands of pages, it’s critical that people be able to find key information quickly. The information in these sections addresses some of the top utilitarian sections that people turn to for fast information.

In this section:

1.1 Homepage
1.2 About the University
1.3 Campus Maps
1.4 News
1.5 Directory
1.1 Homepage

The role of the homepage is to support a positive first impression while helping visitors decide where to go to find answers to their questions. People don’t spend much time on the homepage, but even a few seconds is enough for them to form ideas about the values and priorities of the university.

The most effective homepages use specific examples of stories and events to represent the university. The least effective pages focus so much on marketing the school to prospective students that other university audiences are left out. The result can be a homepage that reads like an overt sales pitch.
1. **If you have a hero space, use it to showcase specific news stories, events, or initiatives.**

The main space above the page fold is an opportunity to introduce visitors to the university. For some visitors, the elements in this space will contribute to the first impression of the school. Use the space to convey examples of the type of work and activities happening at the university. For example:

- Recent student or faculty achievements.
- Research and/or academic pursuits.
- Events by well-known professionals in areas relevant to the university.

**Don’t.**

The hero area on this page promotes a general statement that doesn’t say much about the university. Visitors would have a stronger impression about the school if the hero space highlighted a specific story (e.g., an actual discovery made at the university), program, initiative, or event.

sc.edu
Do.

This distinctive headline, *Spinning Manure Into Money*, makes an impression. One participant in our study recalled it fondly, quoting it from memory at the end of a 90-minute usability testing session.

uidaho.edu
2. If you include featured stories, use the headline to describe what the story is about, instead of using generic marketing copy.

A meaningful, descriptive headline has more impact and higher information scent than a vague slogan.

Whether the goal is to have visitors click through to the story, or simply to inform them of an activity, concrete headings are more interesting.

Don’t.

This hero space follows guideline #1 by showcasing a specific achievement. However, the heading, “Competing on the international stage,” is too vague to be enticing, and it is not obvious how the text relates to the image on the right.

ryerson.ca

Do.

When the heading text is rewritten using the descriptive copy from the sub header, the entire hero area becomes more interesting and memorable: Using rescue dogs and robots to help victims. In this version, the association between the image and the main story is obvious.

Adapted by NN/g
3. **If using hero images, choose images that reflect the university’s values and priorities.**

In addition to headlines, the first image that visitors see plays an important role in their impression of a school.

But be wary of using any images that might create an impression contrary to your school’s values.

⚠️ **Caution.**

In testing this site, a user commented “I see immediately an emphasis on sports.” After that, with every image related to sports that she saw, she became more skeptical about how the university prioritized academics. For a school where athletics are an important part of the culture, this first impression might be accurate. Be mindful of the impression that people might get from the first image they see.

colostate.edu
Do.

This leading technology and engineering university in Switzerland appropriately showcases a hero image that conveys scientific advancement.

epfl.ch
4. If images in the hero space rotate, follow guidelines for improved carousel usability.

Carousels are often used as a way to present multiple aspects of a university. Many carousels are designed in a way that degrades the user experience, annoying users with images that move too fast and no way to control the carousel.

Follow guidelines that improve user experience with carousels. For example:

- Indicate how many frames are present, and where the user is within the “progression.”
- Place navigation controls inside the carousel.
- Make carousel control links and buttons large enough to decipher and click.
- Include five or fewer frames.
- Do not auto-forward on mobile devices.

More carousel usability guidelines: [https://www.nngroup.com/articles/designing-effective-carousels/](https://www.nngroup.com/articles/designing-effective-carousels/)

Don’t.

The auto-forwarding carousel does not have visual indicators to show the progress of the slider. Subtle arrows to control the carousel are only visible on hover, which will cause many people to miss them.

bgsu.edu
Do.

This carousel follows many guidelines for carousel usability: arrows to let people control the slideshow, a highlighted circle to indicate the current image in the sequence, and a pause button to start/stop auto-forwarding. It could be better if the arrows to control the carousel were slightly larger targets and if it had thumbnails of the other slides.

targets and if it had thumbnails of the other slides.
federation.edu.au
5. If the site has translated content, place language links in the utility navigation.

People that want a translated version of the website expect to find the language link in the utility navigation, in the upper right corner of the page.

If only a small section of the site is available in that language, explain that on the language landing page. If the school doesn’t actually have phone, email, and in-person support for a language, it may not be worthwhile to create translated content.

Don’t.

The link to information in Spanish (marked in red) is placed just below the hero space on the homepage. The link has low discoverability because of its unexpected placement on the page. In a recent redesign, the university removed the link.

uoregon.edu
Do.

This website places a link to the English translation (marked in black) in the expected, conventional location: the upper-right corner of the page.
dtu.dk
6. **In the footer, include the university name, address, and contact information, at a minimum.**

**Don’t.**

The footer does link to Contact and Campuses pages, but it should also clarify that it is a school based in New York.

[stjohns.edu](stjohns.edu)

**Do.**

The footer has the name of the university in the logo (which links to the main homepage) as well as the address and contact information for this particular faculty. To further help international students and visitors, it would have been even better to also state the country in which Malmö is located (Sweden).

[performingarts.lu.se](performingarts.lu.se)

Visitors look to the page footer when they need basic information such as general location (city, country), phone number and email address. For subsites and microsites, the full name of the university helps clarify and reinforce the relationship to the main university.

If the university has multiple locations, provide a link to a “Locations” or “Campuses” page or link directly to the other campus websites. Even if there are multiple locations, aim to include some information about the city, state, or region.
7. **Put a link to the careers site in the page footer.**

People first looked for the careers page in the page footer of the university homepage. Use conventional labels, such as:

- Jobs
- Careers
- Careers at XYZ.
- Work at XYZ Univ.

Do.

The page footer is typically the first place people look when they want to see what kinds of positions the university has open.

ubc.ca
8. On mobile, prioritize top tasks for current and prospective students.

Don’t.

The brochure style homepage focuses on prospective students. Unfortunately, the most valuable link for prospective students is several scrolls down the page: Undergraduate Programs. Another few scrolls down, there are more admissions-related links. It’s a lot of work for little payoff. Current students may waste time scrolling to see if there are links for them (events, dining information, directory, etc.), only to be disappointed.

unr.edu

On smaller displays, ensure that the homepage serves current students, not just prospective students. Blend the content so that it helps people at all stages of the admissions and enrollment funnel.

For example, provide quick access to tools and pages like the following:

- Directory
- Maps
- Hours of operation (library, bookstore, labs, etc.)
- Academic programs
- Academic calendar
- Dining hall hours and menus
- Search

The top tasks for people visiting the site on a mobile device may be different than the main tasks on a desktop device. Look at the site’s analytics to see what pages people access from mobile; note that it may vary by the time of year. Use that information to decide which top tasks or key pages to prioritize on the mobile homepage.
Don’t.

This homepage is focused on news stories and social media. Links to top mobile tasks, such as campus maps, hours of operation for dining halls, libraries, and bookstores, and access to the course management system for current students, would save people time. Start by looking at analytics data to see what the most common tasks are from mobile, and see if any of those can be surfaced to the homepage.

shu.edu
Do.

The homepage include quick links to Maps, Events, academic links (majors, grad programs, and directory for each academic department), as well as the campus bookstore and library. It would be even better if the links in the Campus section appeared higher up on the page, to reduce scrolling time and increase discoverability.

unl.edu
1.2 About the University

The About page is one of the top places that people go to get a sense of what kind of university it is and to find key statistics about the university. People expect to find quick facts about the school, including enrollment, campuses, awards, administration structure, and information about the town. People are disappointed when this section consists only of dense walls of text that describe the history and mission of the university.

User quotes

“I wish it was just bullet points of cool things to read.”

“There are too many words above the ranking. Why don’t they just put that information on the top of the page?”

More articles on creating effective About pages:

Great Summaries on “About Us” Pages Engage Users and Build Trust
https://www.nngroup.com/articles/about-us-summaries/

“About Us” Information on Websites:
https://www.nngroup.com/articles/about-us-information-on-websites/
9. **Make taglines unique.**

“*Personalized, integrative, active.*”

❌ **Don’t.**

Almost all universities fit this description; it is not unique enough to distinguish the school.

[hamilton.edu](http://hamilton.edu)

“A tagline should describe what the organization does and what makes it unique among competitors.

Two questions can help you assess your own tagline:

- Would it work just as well for competitors?
- Would any university (or anybody, actually) ever claim the opposite?

Read more about tagline recommendations: [https://www.nngroup.com/articles/tagline-blues-whats-the-site-about/](https://www.nngroup.com/articles/tagline-blues-whats-the-site-about/)

✅ **Do.**

This tagline creates an impression about the university’s unique personality and values.

[reed.edu](http://reed.edu)

“Our community is built on inquiry and integrity, and a bit of clever mischief.”
10. Aim to convey what makes the university special, either through the mission statement or supplementary text.

In testing, visitors wanted to read about the university, and they often looked at the mission statement. However, most mission statements are generic and fail to show why the university is unique:

If a mission statement cannot be changed:

- Include supplemental, brief copy that conveys more about the school's character and achievements.
- Use formatting techniques to make copy more scannable.

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**NYU Mission Statement**

Great cities are engines of creativity, and New York University takes its name and spirit from one of the busiest, most diverse and dynamic cities of all. The University lives within New York and other great cities, from Abu Dhabi to Shanghai, Paris to Prague, Sydney to Buenos Aires—all magnets for talented, ambitious people.

Thriving beyond borders and across academic disciplines, NYU has emerged as one of the most networked and extensive worldwide platform for learning, teaching, researching, building knowledge, and inventing new ways to meet humanity’s challenges. Its students, faculty and alumni feed off the stimulating power of swirling intellectual and cultural experiences by mastering academic disciplines, expressing themselves in the arts, and excelling in demanding professions.

New York University’s mission is to be a top quality international center of scholarship, teaching and research. This involves retaining and attracting outstanding faculty who are leaders in their fields, encouraging them to create programs.

---

**Don’t.**

A student on this site commented, “Ok, the mission statement. It sounds like a bunch of fluff they put in here. It doesn’t really tell me anything. It just sounds like fluffy stuff.”

Many visitors that look to the About page for an introduction to the school are disappointed by dense passages describing the university history and vision. Text that is formatted to be easier to scan, along with content that calls out specific achievements, is more engaging.
The About section points students to a Why Choose FHU page, which describes the university’s values and culture alongside key figures about academics, financial aid, and employment outcomes.

fhu.edu
11. **Highlight key figures & quick facts, and make them easy to scan.**

Include these details when possible, and make them easy to scan:

- Number of students
- Number and locations of campuses
- Number of degree programs (undergraduate, graduate, continuing education, etc.)
- Job placement rate for recent graduates
- Awards and/or rankings

Be specific, and offer links to back up the information.

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**Key Performance Indicators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total income (£'000)</td>
<td>115,376</td>
<td>108,541</td>
<td>99,163</td>
<td>102,405</td>
<td>92,576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surplus for re-investment (£'000)</td>
<td>17,899</td>
<td>17,693</td>
<td>13,036</td>
<td>13,875</td>
<td>10,633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash generated by activities (£'000)</td>
<td>22,760</td>
<td>25,990</td>
<td>16,131</td>
<td>21,627</td>
<td>18,027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash for investment (£'000)</td>
<td>21,127</td>
<td>32,359</td>
<td>39,611</td>
<td>40,410</td>
<td>28,586</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial worth of the University (£'000)</td>
<td>164,638</td>
<td>108,347</td>
<td>85,160</td>
<td>80,589</td>
<td>65,613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applications for University FT UG programmes (1)</td>
<td>18,931</td>
<td>19,296</td>
<td>18,867</td>
<td>17,628</td>
<td>16,013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of FT students of the University (2)</td>
<td>10,672</td>
<td>10,649</td>
<td>10,110</td>
<td>9,488</td>
<td>9,039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of staff who rate the University as a good or excellent employer (3)</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee turnover (4)</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of University staff absence</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) Based on UCAS statistics
(2) Based on NSS Student Record

---

**Don’t.**

The *University Profile* page presents facts and figures as graphs, charts, and tables that require people to interpret the data rather than just scan it. This level of detail is better suited for an in-depth page, not the main profile page in the About section.

edgehill.ac.uk
Don’t.

Avoid presenting facts and figures within an image. Text in images does not scale well for users on small displays, it is not accessible for people using screen readers, and connectivity issues might interfere with the image loading.

southwales.ac.uk
Do.

The brevity and formatting of the achievements listed on this page make it easy for visitors to scan through highlights of the university’s accomplishments. Even better would be if each achievement linked to more details about the honor. Quick access to details of each claim increases credibility.

ucla.edu
12. List a few news headlines from a range of areas at the university.

News headlines are an effective supplement to About pages, because the dynamic content provides a glimpse of the school in action.

See more recommendations about this topic in the News section of this report.

Do.

A short list of news stories on the About page gives visitors examples of the types of activities at the university. This is an effective way to surface current events to prospective students and staff who might not seek out a News & Events page on their own.

colgate.edu
13. Include the names and titles of the university’s top administrators, ideally with an image for each.

Provide lists of the university leadership within the About section.

External audiences, such as people from partner universities, government agencies, nonprofits, research centers, or prospective employees, benefit from this information being readily available.

Internal audiences, such as faculty, staff, and students may need to reference this information at some point, and this list may be more helpful than a directory search.

Do.

This list of university administration includes the names, titles, and a photo of the administrators, which is helpful for both internal and external visitors. Note that if any of the administrators have a biography page, there should be a link to it from this page. A biography page is important for researchers and faculty members, but not critical for most administrative positions.

purdue.edu

Prospective students, their parents, prospective faculty and visiting researchers all may have questions about what the city or town is like.

By including information about the town within the About section (as opposed to just the Student Life section), this information can reach a broader audience.

Some information to include:

- Top attractions, community events, favorite places
- Links to travel articles about the town

Do.

A description of the university’s town, links to articles about city from well-known publishers (left column), as well as an interactive map of students’ favorite places in the town (right column) make this page informative and engaging. This page could be improved if the links above the map were labeled (e.g., “Related Links” or “What To Do in Nashville,” etc.)

vanderbilt.edu
15. Offer multiple paths to the Academic Calendar.

Make it easy to find important dates at the university. Include links to the academic calendar from the academics section, the utility navigation, and/or with suggested search results.

Note that sites should generally avoid multiple links to an item, but in the case of information that is a top request or high priority, it is more acceptable.

Do.

A persistent link to Calendars in the utility navigation (top), plus a link to the Schedule of Classes (bottom left) from the Academics landing page, ensures that visitors can find important semester dates. Normally, redundancy should be avoided, but because this is high priority information, and one link is a utility link and the other is on a relevant landing page, this repetition makes sense.

ucsc.edu
Do.

The suggested search results promote quick access to the Academic Calendar from anywhere on the site. The link to the Academic Calendar is also appropriately featured among the links for current students. The calendar will be easier for visitors to find because it is available from both places.

xavier.edu
1.3 Campus Maps

Most university websites made it easy for visitors to find maps of the campus, but they varied in how usable those maps were. Interactive maps that let people move the map, zoom in and out, and see names of buildings were the easiest to use and the most appreciated. Maps that didn’t give users control were the least satisfying. For example, maps that didn’t allow people to show certain types of buildings, or to see the neighborhoods beyond the campus, felt restrictive and limited their ability to get a sense of the campus experience.

For more recommendations about Maps and Location Finders on Mobile Devices:

https://www.nngroup.com/articles/mobile-maps-locations/
16. To direct people to maps, use conventional link labels, such as “Visit,” “Maps,” and “Campus Maps.”

Visitors easily find campus maps when conventional labels are used. Avoid the label “Campus Tours” when pointing to a map page. People may mistake the link to mean only prospective student tour information or signups.

Do.

The simple link to Maps in the footer is easy to find (though the legibility could be better if the text had higher contrast with the background).

duke.edu

Do.

The link label Visit is comprehensive in that it points to a page with campus maps and information about arranging campus tours and attending admissions events.

marymountcalifornia.edu
Do.

The *Maps & Directions* link in the footer will attract visitors looking for maps and recommendations about the best way to get to the campus.

fdu.edu
17. Link to campus maps from either the utility navigation or the page footer, as well as from the *visiting the university* section.

[Image of a webpage layout with links and maps]

Visitors may need this information at varying stages while they are on the website, so maps should be linked from multiple locations, including one in a persistent and discoverable location on the page.

⚠️ Don’t.

At first glance, the homepage does not appear to link to campus maps, even from the *Directions & Contact Information* tab in the footer (top right). The map is not easily found or discovered from the *Quick Links* tab.

middlebury.edu
Do.

Prospective students expect to see a link to the campus map within the Visiting section, but they (and other visitors) may also look to the utility navigation for quick access to maps. In this example, it would be even better to simply use “Campus Map” instead of “CMC Campus Map,” because people unfamiliar with the school might pause to wonder what “CMC” refers to.

cmc.edu
18. If campuses have separate websites, link to those campus pages.

Either list the links directly to the other campus sites, or (if there are many campuses) link to a “Locations” or “Campuses” page.

Do.

In the UBC Campuses section of the footer, the links point directly to each campus’s homepage (Vancouver Campus and Okanagan Campus). This link treatment also informs new visitors that there are two campuses.

ubc.ca
19. Show the campus in context, with buildings, streets, and surroundings.

People wanted to see where a campus was in relation to the rest of the city and which neighborhoods are nearby.

Prospective students used campus maps to gauge how spread out the school was or how close to the city center it was. One student was impressed to discover how many green areas a campus had. Another was pleasantly surprised that buildings were closer together than she’d imagined.

Don’t.

This campus map only showed the names of streets and districts in immediate proximity to the campus. Visitors like to see what’s around the campus, too. One person on this site wanted to see which parts of Philadelphia the campus was closest to, but was disappointed that she couldn’t do that using this map.

psu.edu
Don’t.

The visual details (trees, 3-D buildings, lawn patterns, and so on) make it difficult to scan this map, because buildings of interest are hard to detect and differentiate.

middlebury.edu
Do.

This map, zoomed out (top) to zoomed in (bottom), is informative yet visually simple.

ox.ac.uk
20. Provide a key for the map, and let people filter by building type.

An excellent campus map lets people filter by categories and buildings they want to see. It also allows them to move the map and zoom in and out as needed.

⚠️ Don’t.

This map has marker icons to show the school’s buildings, but without a key or any way to filter by category, the map isn’t very helpful. A Master’s applicant looked at the map and guessed incorrectly that each marker represented a space for bike parking.

nyu.edu
Do.

A key to the location markers on this map helps people see where buildings are throughout the campus.

fsu.edu
Do.

Filters on this map give people control in creating the map view that they want.

uf.edu
21. Show where parking lots are located and indicate visitor lots.

For many people, parking is a top question when planning to visit a university. Make the lots easy to spot on the campus map.

Visitor parking lots are especially important for prospective students and staff.

☑ Do.

The purple areas on this map show the visitor parking lots, because the Visitor Parking filter has been applied.

utk.edu
22. If using a virtual tour, keep it simple: let people navigate via photos instead of 360° navigation.

If incorporating an online campus tour experience, use photo tours instead of virtual 360° walkthroughs. The complex interactions distract from the actual task of finding something on campus.

In our research, very few people ever sought out a virtual tour. Those that did gave up after only a few seconds, because they became frustrated with the moving images. Virtual tours are problematic for several reasons:

- The click and drag is difficult to control in a way that creates a smooth spin experience.
- People feel a loss of control because it’s not clear where to go or where they can click next.
- They make some people dizzy.
- They load slowly, straining users’ patience.

Don’t.

Virtual tours that require people to click and drag through 360° images are difficult for people to control; they spend more time figuring out how to move around than actually enjoying the experience. Instead, people feel more confident and in control when they can look around a campus through photographs with descriptions.

rice.edu
Do.

This campus tour relies on clickable photographs. Each photo leads to a page with more details about the building or area on campus. The conventional point-and-click and next/previous navigation help people move efficiently through the tour while feeling in control of the experience.

unr.edu
1.4 News

Many visitors scan news headlines to see examples of what’s happening at the university. For some, scanning a list is enough to create an impression of the range of activities and academic initiatives. For prospective students, a news story is a chance to read something about the school that isn’t overtly marketing to them.
23. **Include related links for news stories.**

Related links that follow up on the user’s current interest encourage site exploration and reduce bounce rates. Our research shows that people are most receptive to suggested content when they finish reading a page. Always offer related content and/or calls to action at the end of articles.


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**Don’t.**

A student was interested in this article about a new research facility that opened with involvement from the Psychology Department. The article mentioned faculty from the department, but the student was disappointed that there wasn’t a link directly to the academic department. He went back to the homepage and searched for the Psychology Department to learn more about their research. Related links either inline or at the end of the article would have helped the student easily move to other areas of interest.

bucknell.edu
In 1997, Fresno State became the first American university to operate a commercial bonded, on-campus winery.

“California produces 90 percent of all wine made in the United States,” said Dr. Timothy Stearns, executive director of the Lyles Center. “As Fresno State is the only university in the country to feature a commercial winery, this collaboration makes perfect sense on multiple levels. We are excited by the possibilities of this program and this cohort.”

For more information, contact Stearns at 559.278.3735 or timothys@csufresno.edu.

**Related links:**
- Lyles Center
- Fresno State Winery

✅ Do.

This news story includes a bulleted list of links to the two main institutions linked in this article, in addition to inline links.

fresnostatenews.com
24. Offer multiple ways to browse news, including by topic, department, school, research center, and popularity.

When looking at university news, people might want to scan through top stories, browse by category, or search for specific keywords.

Don’t.

The News section within News & Events lets people browse news only by year. It would be better to let visitors navigate by other topics, for example, academic area.

dit.ie
Do.

The News page includes options for visitors to browse stories by various categories, including Most Popular, By Topic, By School, By Department, and By Center, Lab & Program. Hovering over the Browse tab defaults to show the Most Popular news stories.

mit.edu
25. Include a way for internal audiences to submit news and events.

Encourage internal audiences to contribute ideas for news stories or update events calendars. Creating an explicit way for these audiences to make suggestions can help funnel ideas to the right person in the newsroom.

Do.

Within the university’s News section, a promotional area just above the footer invites people to submit their own news or subscribe to updates via email.

csus.edu
1.5 Directory

An easy-to-use directory helps people search and browse names and contact information for faculty, staff, and departments. If the directory works well and people can rely on the information being up-to-date, it can save university resources, for example with fewer calls to the main switchboard.
26. Allow users to search by name, partial name, keyword, department, email, and role (i.e., faculty and staff or student).

People may have only a partial piece of information to go on. Allowing visitors to search by keyword or part of a name increases the usability of both the directory and search.

⚠️ Don’t.

The main site-search page (left) has more than 20,000 results for “Spanish.” After you click the People tab, the new directory results page does not show any matches for that search term, however. The directory search is limited to name, email, work phone or ID number.

stanford.edu
Do.

The Directory allows people to type whichever parts of the entry they know. In this example, searching for “Spanish” brings up a list of people with that term in their directory profile: Spanish language teachers.

kenyon.edu
On the directory page, include an option to browse by department.

When visitors don’t know whom to contact in a department, a list of the people in each unit, with their titles included, is a fast way to get contact information.

Search has a higher interaction cost than browsing, because it forces users to come up with a query and then take time to type it. Browsing is a tremendous help to users who might not know which terms to search for.

Further, don’t force people to go to a department homepage in order to find contact information. You may include a link to the department, but use it as a supplement to the list of people and their contact details.

The link to Browse the Caltech Departmental Directory is a useful supplement to the search box on the Directory page.

caltech.edu
28. Avoid truncation and abbreviation in directory listings.

Don’t.

A search for “cross country coach” does not return any results (left), because the title is truncated. In order to find the cross-country coach, people would have to adjust the query to be less specific. A search for “coach” brings up multiple results, including the truncated title for “Hd M&W Trk/Cro Cnty Coach,” which stands for Head Men & Women’s Track/Cross Country Coach (right).

Directory listings are only as helpful as they are up-to-date and accurate. Listings with spelling mistakes, uncommon abbreviations, or truncations to conserve space will prevent those results from being searchable.
Part 2: Information for Prospective Students and External Audiences

Some prospective students and their parents will have some idea about a school based on what they know from friends, family, and teachers. Others may not know much about the school, so the first impression really forms when they arrive on the website. Those first impressions can determine whether a college makes the students shortlist or gets ruled out early on in the process.

Even though many students will decide on a university after a campus visit, the first impressions can create expectations and ideas about the school that might not be validated (or corrected) for many months.

In this section:

2.1 Appealing to Students
2.2 Admissions, Tuition, and Financial Aid
2.3 Academic and Research Programs
2.4 University Life and Student Services
2.5 Alumni and Donors
2.1 Appealing to Students

The task of researching schools is exhausting for students. They know from experience that university websites are complicated, it’s hard to find the information they want, and it seems to take forever.

The websites that had the highest user satisfaction were those that anticipated users’ top questions and made it easy to move between sections of the website. Students also wanted universities to be transparent about how much it costs to attend and how easily they can expect to find a job after graduation. Even teenagers in the earliest stages of research wanted reassurance that the investment would be worthwhile for their family.
29. **Answer prospective students’ top questions in the places where people look.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top questions</th>
<th>Where prospective students (and their parents) look</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do they offer the academic program that I want?</td>
<td>Academics, Study, Programs, Courses, Google</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can I get in?</td>
<td>Admissions (Acceptance rate, deadlines, standardized testing scores), Google</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can I get a job after I graduate?</td>
<td>Alumni, About Us, Google</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can I afford it?</td>
<td>Cost/Tuition, Google</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where is the campus and what’s nearby?</td>
<td>Campus map, travel sites, Google</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I have to live on campus?</td>
<td>Residence life, housing, Google</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do they have my sport?</td>
<td>Athletics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kinds of food are available?</td>
<td>Student life, dining services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For graduate students: What research has the faculty done in my field of interest?</td>
<td>Individual school, department, or faculty pages, professors’ bios, research centers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
30. For prospective students, videos that show the school, activities, and location are more compelling than interviews with university officials.

Prospective students are more interested in picturing the school, such as its campus, facilities, and city. Videos of long interviews are less interesting, and they waste an opportunity to introduce new visitors to the university experience.

Our eyetracking studies show that users of all ages — not just teenagers — find talking head videos boring; they spend more time paying attention to things outside the video itself.

More on eyetracking videos: [https://www.nngroup.com/articles/talking-head-video-is-boring-online/](https://www.nngroup.com/articles/talking-head-video-is-boring-online/)

Don’t.

A high school student went to the About page and immediately clicked on the video, but she was disappointed that the video was mostly an interview with a single person. “I don’t want to watch her. Why not show pictures of their dance program or New York City or something? I don’t care about her.”

nyu.edu
This About page has a video titled, The Campuses, which shows images from different facilities, common areas, and from around the city. For prospective students, this type of content offers more interesting and appealing information than interviews with officials.
31. On admissions pages, don’t change the personality of the university.

The personality of the university should be consistent across the site, even on pages that are aimed for younger audiences.

⚠️ Don’t.

The visual design of the university homepage (left) is serious, but the colorful admissions page (right) reflects a young and carefree personality. This strong contrast can be off-putting for users trying to get a sense of the university.

sdsu.edu
Do.

The design of the homepage (left) and the Undergraduate Admission page (right) convey the same personality.

gatech.edu
32. If using student testimonials, allow students to write in their own voice, so that their comments sound authentic.

Content written by students for prospective students should sound genuine. Many visitors are hesitant to believe information if it seems to come from the university’s marketing department. Allow student blogs, tips, or testimonials to express students’ personalities.

**Disclaimer**: these tips are based off of my experience with writing college apps and DO NOT guarantee admission to the universities that you are applying to.

*Start looking at universities before your senior year of high school! That way you can immediately start filling out apps once they are released. It takes time to figure out which colleges you want to apply to, and you don’t want to waste precious time looking for colleges when you can already be writing those essays!*

*If possible, visit some college campuses and talk to the students. Can you imagine yourself on that particular campus? Do you feel comfortable with the campus environment and feel like you can fit in? One of the important factors of doing well at school is going to a university that MOTIVATES you to learn. If you don’t like the campus, you won’t enjoy learning/studying there. For me, I fell in love with everything about Berkeley, and as nerdy as it may sound, Berkeley makes me look forward to learning. Really, I can’t wait until the school year starts again! =) (Though I’m not too excited to go back to doing homework…)*

Do.

This post on an admissions blog felt genuine to readers, partly because of the tone and writing style, which included casual language and emoji. As we saw in our research, even parents find this kind of content with a genuine voice to be compelling.

berkeley.edu
33. For prospective students, attempts at being cool are not appreciated.

Prospective students are easily turned off by content that tries to be cool. Students take the investment in higher education seriously; they are more likely to appreciate it when a university demonstrates its value rather than its fun factor.

Don’t

On the Undergraduate Admissions page, the video had a series of images that attempted to be funny, such as a dog wearing sunglasses. However, most students didn’t want the school to act funny and cool. As one prospective student put it when watching the video, “This is annoying. It seems a little bit unintelligent for a university ad. You want something inspiring, showing how it’s better than other universities. That ad would not make me want to go to this university.”

gcu.ac.uk
34. Showcase employment outcomes on the About Us page and academic department pages. Link to that information from the Alumni site.

People look for this information on the Alumni page, About Us page, and the academic department or program page.

People also expect an alumni page to provide information about successful graduates. Unfortunately, alumni pages typically fail to address prospective students and parents.

“I have no idea where to even look. Alumni? Because that’s, like, after you graduate.” – Usability study participant

✔️ Do.

The About Bentley page calls out employment outcomes, such as the average starting salary of a graduate, the percentage of students that do a professional internship, and the percentage of graduates that find employment or go to graduate school afterward.

bentley.edu
35. Reference the source when presenting employment data.

$50,249

The average salary for a Walton undergraduate business major.

3

Walton graduates received an average of 3 job offers during their job search.

View more results from the latest Walton College Employment Survey.

Do.

The proximity and clarity of the link to View more results from the latest Walton College Employment Survey make this link discoverable and increase trust in the information provided.

walton.uark.edu

Mentioning a survey, report, or employment statistics helps build credibility for the data. Just having a link to the full report or results can create trust, even if most visitors don’t read the details.
2.2 Admissions and Tuition

These sections, which are inherently complex, need the most attention in terms of writing in plain English and formatting into scannable chunks. Many students would get to the information about financial aid, struggle to understand it, and eventually give up, saying that they would have their parent read this section. But even parents of prospective students struggled with these sections, and some even said they would have their child read it.

User quotes

“Ok, in Prospective students, I see that I can Request Info, Visit Campus, Apply for Admission, Find Your Rep, Register for an Event, or Ask a Question. At this point, I'm not ready to do any of those things, so let me see where else I can go.”

“I’d go get my mom and have her read over all of this.”

“I’d probably tell my kid to look at this. It’s boring. It’s not me going to college!”

“I wish these were more step-by-step [application instructions]...”
36. For people who aren’t ready to apply, provide an intermediate step such as “Admissions” or “How to Apply.”

People in different stages need different information. Applicants are reluctant to click when the only option is to Apply, because they’re not ready to begin an application form. They want general information about the application process, such as application instructions and deadlines.

It’s fine to provide a link to start the application, just be sure to include a link to the informational step, as in the second example, on the next page.

Don’t.

One visitor saw this Admissions menu and said, “That’s not what I want. I’m not ready to apply yet.” The Apply Now! link asks too much of visitors who aren’t ready to start applying yet. Those people need a middle step where they can learn about the application process and requirements first.

eastern.edu
The Undergraduate Admissions section does not force people into applying. Above the Apply to UBC button, the link to the general admissions page explains that it is an intermediate route: Learn how to apply to UBC: Find out about UBC’s admission requirements, how UBC makes admissions decisions, and important dates and deadlines in the application process.

ubc.ca
37. Put application deadlines (or a link to them) near the top of the main Admissions page.

Despite being critical information for prospective students, application deadlines are consistently difficult to find. Many of our participants groaned audibly when they began looking for the dates.

The easiest way for students to find the deadlines is by placing them above the fold within an Admissions section. A link labeled “Deadlines” is also helpful.

Note: For universities whose application deadline is set by a third party (such as The Common Application, or a national deadline), it’s still important to state the application date clearly. Most students are new to the process of applying to schools, and they benefit from the reminder.

Do.

The main Admissions page (top) has a clearly labeled link to Deadlines & dates at the top of the page. Following that link leads to the Application Deadlines page (bottom) which has a prominent table outlining the deadlines for each type of application. This information is straightforward and easy for students to find.

elon.edu
38. Clearly label sections that address different types of students (not just first-year applicants).

Prospective students who are transferring from another school, or applying as nontraditional adult learners, etc., have questions that are specific to their situation. Admissions information should proactively address their top concerns with sections for the different types of students.

Do.

Navigation on the undergraduate admissions page lists different types of applicants, including First-Year Students, Transfer Students, International Students, Veterans and Non-Traditional Students, etc. This segmentation helps applicants find the requirements specific to their case.

unh.edu
39. List the steps of the application process, along with the materials required.

The application process is broken into *Five simple steps*. Each step is clearly numbered and has links to more details. This type of sequential overview is comforting to applicants, because they feel like they can see the whole process before tackling each step one at a time.

cam.ac.uk
40. Surface information when it’s in high demand.

The sooner visitors can find key pieces of information, the better. Adding high-demand information is also a way to save time for administrators: the more questions that the website answers, the more productive other administrators can be.

Do.

This Admissions menu highlights the university’s unique FAFSA code, which students need in order to apply for financial aid. Providing the code prominently makes it possible for students to find a quick answer and ultimately saves resources for the university, when fewer students email or call to ask this question. Note that we caution against graphics that might distract from menus or cause users to ignore the section thinking it is an ad. In this case, it would be even better if the graphic element were removed and the keyword “FAFSA” were more prominent than the number itself. That way, it would be more discoverable to students scanning the menu with that item in mind.

gsu.edu
41. Help visitors find out about costs of attending by including the words “tuition,” “fees,” or “costs” in the link label. Don’t link only to financial aid.

Don’t.

The link to *Financial Aid* in this menu does not seem to include the cost of attending. It’s not clear where people should go to find that information.

uci.edu

Do.

The link label *Fees and Funding* is more comprehensive, because it isn’t limited to information about loans or scholarships. People can click more confidently on this link when looking for information about the cost of attendance.

ox.ac.uk

When students are looking for how much it costs to attend, they look for keywords relating to fees, tuition, or costs. Students skipped over links that only referred to scholarships or financial aid.
42. If using a tuition calculator, don’t require that visitors use it in order to see costs. At a minimum, show an estimated cost of attendance.

When websites make people work hard to find the price, people start to wonder whether the site is intentionally making it difficult. Even if the estimate varies by school or program, it’s best to provide an upfront estimate.

Tools such as a Net Price Calculator can help create a more personalized estimate, but many visitors don’t want to take the time to go through the required steps. This is especially true if they haven’t seen an initial estimate.

The cost of attendance is one of the top questions that prospective students expect the website to answer, so visitors should be able to find the amount quickly within the Admissions section.

Don’t.

The Admissions page points only to the Financial Aid for Undergraduates page (left), which does not provide any information about the cost of tuition. Instead, the site forces visitors to use the Net Price Calculator, which is a multistep form (right). The university does publish estimated costs, but they are only accessible from within a University Offices section of the website or via a search engine. This information is too important to bury it in a hard-to-find section.

fdue.edu
## Finances

### Estimated Costs of Attendance

Iowa's tuition and fees are among the lowest in the Big Ten.

- **Estimated Costs of Attendance**
  We've estimated the annual cost of tuition, fees, books, living expenses, room, board, and transportation for a full-time student.

- **Net Price Calculator**
  This tool can help you estimate your costs based on the financial aid for which you may qualify (incoming undergraduate students only).

### Paying for Your Iowa Education

About 80 percent of students attending the University of Iowa receive some form of financial aid, including grants, loans, work-study jobs.

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Within the *Finances* section of the *Admissions* area, a link to *Estimated Costs of Attendance* leads to a table with estimated tuition costs and fees. The *Net Price Calculator* tool is offered but not required in order to estimate costs.

uiowa.edu
43. On the tuition page, list any additional expenses or fees.

Prospective students and parents know that tuition costs a lot, so they appreciate when schools are upfront and transparent about the full costs. When visitors only saw one number — without a clear list of everything included and how the number breaks down — they were skeptical that it was the true and final amount. They spent time looking elsewhere on the page for the rest of the expenses.

When people weren’t able to find enough information that explained the full cost, many said that they would contact the university to find out the real amount.

Don’t.

The Costs page on this website only listed tuition per credit hour. A footnote explains that *Per credit hour rates do not include mandatory fees, housing or textbooks*, but it does not show estimates for those extra costs. One participant in our research said, “It should show how much is it going to cost per semester/year to attend. Include all the extras like housing, food plans, etc.” The site does provide a net-price calculator, but most visitors don’t want to take the time to fill out a form during the early stages of their research.

ucmo.edu
This simple table lists four items and a total estimated cost: Tuition and Fees, Typical Residence Hall, Typical 7-day Meal Plan, and Estimated Books, Supplies & Living Expenses.

uga.edu
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Billed Costs</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Emory College</th>
<th>Oxford College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuition</td>
<td>This fixed charge includes 12 (or more) credit hours with a maximum of 32 per semester.</td>
<td>$45,700</td>
<td>$41,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fees</td>
<td>This amount includes fixed athletic, activity, and mental health fees. First-year students also pay a $100 orientation fee.</td>
<td>$614</td>
<td>$614</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Emory students living in residence halls are billed for a specific hall; Oxford students pay the same rate regardless of hall. This figure represents the average charge for a double room and includes all utilities, cable television, and a campus computer network connection. This is an average and may be more or less than your actual charges.</td>
<td>$7,720</td>
<td>$7,636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>This estimated food expense assumes using on-campus dining facilities. All undergraduates living in on-campus housing are required to participate in a meal plan.</td>
<td>$5,410</td>
<td>$3,870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>This cost is variable, depending on what classes you take. The campus bookstore calculates this amount as the average expense for required books.</td>
<td>$1,224</td>
<td>$1,224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel and Incidents</td>
<td>Actual expenses will vary by student. This figure includes a modest travel allowance, incidentals such as laundry, cell phone, grooming, and entertainment. This is not charges to the student.</td>
<td>$2,390</td>
<td>$2,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (estimated)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>$63,058</td>
<td>$56,734</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
44. For universities with in-state and out-of-state tuition, list the costs of tuition near each other, and provide a plain-language description of who qualifies for each type of tuition.

When looking at tuition and costs of attendance, visitors were happy to see tables that clearly broke down the different expenses and showed a total amount.

Provide links to secondary information that requires more explanation or is a less-frequent question, such as the legal qualifications for resident or nonresident status.

Don’t.

It’s good that this page lists the two types of tuition near each other, but the page lacks a description of the difference between resident and nonresident. As one participant in our research said, “I wish it would just say here Resident means ‘In California,’ Nonresident means ‘Not in California.’ Because sometimes I wonder, do you have to live in the L.A. area? I think it’s just in-state, but it would be nice if they gave you that reassurance.”

ucla.edu
Do.

The tuition classification clearly refers to state residence: New York State Residents and Out-of-State Residents (top left), but a link to a footnote is provided for anyone who wants further clarification. The footnote (lower left) leads to a full page Guide to Resident Tuition Policy (right), which describes the eligibility requirements for in-state or out-of-state tuition.

suny.edu
45. Review university guide websites and forums for completeness and accuracy. Request corrections when necessary.

Top types of sites to review, based on where prospective students look for information:

1. Directories of universities. For schools recruiting internationally, review popular directories in those countries. For example*:
   - usnews.com
   - ucas.com
   - collegeconfidential.com
   - cappex.com

2. Peer-to-peer university review sites. For example*:
   - niche.com
   - ratemyprofessors.com

3. Specialized directories by degree or topic

Aim to review the most relevant sources for your school semiannually, as sites may change in popularity among prospective students.

* These sites are intended only to serve as examples. They were chosen because at the time of publication, each site averaged between nearly 1–4 million visits per month.

During the early stages of researching a university, many students look to third-party sites, because they expect them to be a faster way to find overview information about the school.

Students read forums and reviews from other students in order to get a sense of what the school is like, from an unbiased perspective.
46. Ensure that the information that appears on search engine results pages (SERP) is up-to-date and accurate.

For some students, their first impression begins on search engines, when they search for the university’s website. In testing, students skimmed the details about the school on search results pages before clicking through to the website.

Some students spent time reading the details on the search engine results pages, including details about the founding date, school size, and location.

Don’t.

The search engine lists an acceptance rate for the school, but the statistic is more than 10 years old. Search engines pull in data from different sources, so it is critical to verify the accuracy of the information being shown to prospective students.

gla.ac.uk
2.3 Academic and Research Programs

Our research found that the most important factor in deciding to continue researching a university was whether it offered an academic program that the student wanted.

Disturbingly, in 48% of cases, people did not realize the university offered their major or program of choice. They struggled to find a complete list of programs, or they didn’t look in the correct school or division, and they assumed the school didn’t have what they wanted. This happened with prospective first-year students as well as Masters applicants.

For students who don’t know exactly what they want to study, they at least want to look at the range of programs that university offers.

User quotes

“I can’t find what programs they have. This is the first page I entered and I keep seeing Apply. I think I have to show my interest first, and then I can find the programs they have. Some schools show the programs first, but the order of this website is different.”

“I liked how the site did a year-by-year overview of the course I was interested in.”
47. Include a link in the main navigation to view all academic programs or degrees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>About Western</th>
<th>Admission</th>
<th>Academics</th>
<th>Campus Life</th>
<th>Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PROGRAMS &amp; UNITS</td>
<td>FACULTIES / SCHOOLS</td>
<td>POPULAR PAGES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departments</td>
<td>Arts &amp; Humanities</td>
<td>Information &amp; Media Studies</td>
<td>Academic Calendar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliates</td>
<td>Don Wright Faculty of Music</td>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Course Timetable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing Studies</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Ivey Business School</td>
<td>Western Libraries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance Studies</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Schulich Medicine &amp; Dentistry</td>
<td>Office of the Registrar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange Programs</td>
<td>Graduate &amp; Postdoctoral Studies</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Convocation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health Sciences</td>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Don’t.**

The Academics megamenu is missing a link to help students that want to browse the programs at this school. Visitors must choose either Departments or one of the 11 faculties listed. Without a link to view all the programs, students are forced to guess where to go next. For example, students interested in computer science won’t know if they should click Arts & Humanities, Engineering, or Science. As one of our participants said, “It’s easier if it just says “Majors,” and you click on one and it gives you a description. Rather than where you have to do all these weird things to look it up.”

uwo.edu

New and prospective students don’t know which programs are offered under each faculty, school, or department. Provide at least one link that points directly to a page where people can browse by program name.

Other options for link labels include:
- Undergraduate/Graduate programs
- Undergraduate/Graduate degrees
- Programs of study
Do.

The first link under the Academics menu is for Majors & Minors, which leads visitors to a list of all the programs and degrees that a university offers. For visitors who are unfamiliar with a university’s organization, an obvious link to a list of programs like this is easier than having to pick from a list of schools or faculties. See guidelines 48–51 in this report for suggestions on how to display lists of degree programs.
48. Provide a scannable list of programs and a way to organize them by topic.

When clearly grouped by topic or theme, lists of programs are faster to scan than a list of departments, because the latter requires people to click each one and look for a program.

Forcing people to go to a new page for each department list often created unwanted pogo-sticking, whereby users go back and forth until they find what they need.

Read more about preventing pogo-sticking: https://www.nngroup.com/articles/pogo-sticking/

Don’t.

From the Academics menu on the right, clicking on a major, such as Arts and Sciences, shows only a hard-to-scan paragraph of some of the degrees in that program. Links to the various schools that offer those degrees are provided below. But there is no way for prospective students to scan a complete list of the available degrees quickly. This lack of a scannable list creates work for people, as they have to click each major of interest, possibly going back and forth to read the summaries.

rutgers.edu
Do.

This graduate programs page groups degrees by topic. With visually chunked lists, people have an easier time finding programs they may be interested in. For example, under the topic Public Health & Tropical Medicine, subheadings break the list into two smaller categories: Biostatistics & Bioinformatics, and Epidemiology. The two-column layout is effective here, because it makes it easy for people to glance at the categories and subcategories quickly, rather than to have to scroll up and down a long, single-column list.
Courses by department

The University of Oxford has four academic divisions, within which are individual departments, faculties or other centres, and a Department for Continuing Education, which offers courses across a range of subjects.

### Humanities

The division comprises the following departments, faculties and centres:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humanities</th>
<th>Humanities</th>
<th>Humanities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classics</td>
<td>Linguistics, Philology and Phonetics</td>
<td>Philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language and Literature</td>
<td>Medieval and Modern Languages</td>
<td>Ruskin School of Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film Aesthetics</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Theology and Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>Oriental Studies</td>
<td>Women's Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of Art</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences

The division comprises the following departments, faculties and centres:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences</th>
<th>Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences</th>
<th>Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral Training Programmes</td>
<td>Engineering Science</td>
<td>Plant Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>Materials</td>
<td>Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Zoology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earth Sciences</td>
<td>Physics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Medical Sciences

The University of Oxford has four academic divisions, within which are individual departments, faculties or other centres, and a Department for Continuing Education, which offers courses across a range of subjects.

Do.

*Courses by Department* lists degree programs according to academic division; for example, *Humanities, Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences, Medical Sciences*, and so on. Visitors can click either the division name or the program name. Degrees are highly discoverable, because visitors don’t need to know the division name in order to find a program.

ox.ac.uk
49. Offer multiple ways to view program listings, but don’t force people to decide how to display the list first.

Show the list of programs first, and then allow users to narrow the list. Let students search by keyword, browse by course level, study area, program name (A–Z), and so on.

For schools with large program listings, faceted navigation can be effective.

Don’t.

Purdue Majors and Minors page (left) forces visitors to choose one of the four ways to view the majors (right). Although well intentioned, this option requires people to decide how to sort majors before they have seen any. Instead, show a default view and provide a way to switch views.

purdue.edu
Filters on the Degree Programs page let users follow a familiar convention to refine a large list of options. The filters include categories such as Degrees, Career Categories, and Colleges.

berkeley.edu
Do.

The Find a course page provides a browsable list of study areas, options to Browse by course level, and a keyword search tool.
sydney.edu.au
50. When listing academic departments or schools, include a link nearby to view a list of all the degree programs.

Group related links, so that if visitors can’t find what they need in one list, they can discover the information easily.

❌ Don’t.

The Programs of Study link (top left) would be more effective if it were placed next to or below the Academic programs heading (center) and had a clearer label, such as View All Programs of Study. This example is further complicated by similar labels: Academic programs refers to departments and divisions, but Programs of Study refers to the list of individual degree programs. At many universities, those terms are used interchangeably.

uchicago.edu
Do.

This listing of graduate schools ends with a button to *Search or browse our graduate courses*. For visitors that don’t know the scope of individual schools, the option to browse a list of all the programs is helpful. Because of its placement on the page, the link is easily discoverable.

unimelb.edu.au
Do.

The Courses & Units page lists academic areas by topic, but simple text links to View all undergraduate courses and View all postgraduate courses are noticeable because of their placement at the top of the list of topics.

utas.edu.au
51. Consider providing a brief summary of each degree program or type.

A brief description helps visitors differentiate between similar programs, instead of having to go to a separate page for each one. Many students and parents haven’t heard of these programs or careers, and they’re just starting to think about their options.

Kinesiology Department

BS in Athletic Training
BS in Exercise Science

Explore the BS in Exercise Science
The BS in Exercise Science program at Eastern University prepares students for entry-level exercise science careers, involving people on a broad continuum of health and physical fitness and in a wide variety of settings. The Exercise Science program is formed on the biological and physiological sciences and focuses on human work, which encompasses recreation, athletic competition, occupation, and medical therapy.

Program: Undergraduate
Program Type: Bachelor’s
School: College of Arts and Sciences, Templeton Honors College
Location: Saint Davds, PA

Do.

The Quick Info link for each degree expands a short section that describes the program in less than 100 words. For students who aren’t sure of the difference between some degrees, a preview like this can save them time when browsing programs. Even better, multiple previews can be expanded at once so people can compare programs before going to the full description.

eastern.edu
The Course Search page chunks the programs by degree type and briefly describes each major category (left). Instead of assuming that everyone knows what Pathway Options or Concurrent diplomas are, the text underneath describes each term in plain language. Our testing revealed that many people are confused by terminology on university websites, so they appreciate it when sites clarify potentially confusing terms.

unimelb.edu.au
52. **Supplement program descriptions with information relevant to user goals, such as related careers, job placement, and salary expectations.**

Students want to know what they can expect from a degree program while they are studying it and what kind of work they can do afterward. By better informing students at the beginning of the process, the website can help set realistic expectations for the course of study and beyond.

In our research, students appreciated seeing this type of information, for example:

- Subject intensity (for example, math-intensive)
- Careers, job titles, median income, and industry growth for that career

Each program description page contains information that helps students make an informed decision, such as: _Program Math Intensity_, _Career Opportunities by sector_, and _median salaries and growth_ for different careers related to the program.

asu.edu
53. If research is a priority, provide a topical list of research areas and centers.

For universities that do research, prospective graduate students and faculty want to be able to find the areas of research quickly.

A list of topics and research areas should be available, at a minimum, on each department or faculty page.

For universities where research is a high priority, it is best to provide an overview page highlighting the broad scope of research areas across the university, in addition to the lists on each individual school page.

Don’t.

The main research page does not group research by topic or theme. Instead, the categories offered list only recent publications (outputs), theses, and initiatives. The site does not convey a broader sense of the university’s research areas.

bristol.ac.uk
The Areas of Research page lists more than 20 major research areas. Farther down the page, people can scan the subtopics of each major area (for example, within Biological sciences, the list included Evolutionary biology, Physiology, Zoology, and so on). For anyone who wants to know more about a subtopic, each research area also contains a link to the associated faculties.

sydney.edu.au
The website for the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences at this university lists the major research themes according to the faculty’s institutes. Here, visitors can scan the institute names and see where research is being done. Note that if there were dozens of research areas for this faculty, it would be better to group the research by area.

eps.manchester.ac.uk
54. On department and research center pages, list names of researchers and link to recent publications.

For students and faculty, it is important to be able to see the names and recent work of researchers.

For each person in the list, link to their biography page. The biography page should include main areas of focus, recent publications or initiatives, and contact information.

For each person at this research center, the Faculty page links to a biography, a representative publication, and a featured video. That information, paired with the brief summary and photo, helps visitors decide if they want to learn more about that faculty member.

neuroethics.upenn.edu
2.4 University Life and Student Services

The most successful pages in these student sections were those that were oriented toward current students. Because prospective students want to picture what it would be like to be a student at the university, pages that were easy to use and were clearly meant for current students were the most engaging.

A big caution with this section is to avoid organizing information by office or department. Most students, current and prospective, are not familiar with the university’s organizational structure, so the information should be presented in terms that they can understand.
55. Use a recognizable title, such as University Life, Student Life, Life at XYZ University.

Don’t.

This global navigation used category labels that are not specific or familiar, including the term Live to represent the topics related to student life. (A recent redesign updated the categories. The new label is Campus Life, which is an improvement, but it can sometimes be perceived as referring only to traditional students that live on campus.) The category labels Discover and Learn are not recommended either, because they are not descriptive of the category’s contents.

queensu.ca

Do.

The Life at Deakin label is specific and inclusive of various student groups. Labels like this and “University Life” make it easy for people to predict what will be in each category.

deakin.edu.au

Use conventional labels whenever possible to help visitors find and discover content they want.

If the university has a large proportion of nontraditional students, such as distance learners, evening students, and commuter students, use caution with the label “Campus Life,” which is sometimes perceived as excluding nontraditional students.
56. **Show what it’s like to be a student at the university, through pictures, video, and examples and lists of activities.**

When designed well, this section should be helpful and interesting to current students as well as prospective students. Future students want to imagine themselves at the school, and by seeing the links to different activities, dining halls, clubs, housing, etc., they get a better idea of what the school is like.

**Don’t.**

This page fails to entice visitors because, without headings to chunk content, it is difficult to scan to get a sense of what the school is like. The navigation on the right has unfamiliar terms (Assessment, The Bark, Dean of Students, for example), so it misses another opportunity to tell people about the university culture.

lclark.edu
This page includes videos that double as interesting images, enticing categories (Where to Live, What to Eat; Getting Involved; Explore Buffalo Niagara; for example), and it links to familiar topics such as Dining halls, Living Off Campus, Student Activities, and Join a club. This page is useful for current students, too. All of this content helps prospective students picture what it might be like to attend this university.

buffalo.edu
57. Include details about housing, activities, clubs, and dining options on and off campus.

Visitors expected to find information about housing, clubs, athletics, campus activities, and dining options in the Student Life section of the website.

Some students were particularly interested in the types of food available, especially outside of the dining halls. They wanted to know which restaurants were nearby and if there were any non-cafeteria restaurants on campus.

Do.

This university life page groups activities and resources by conventional, student-oriented topics, such as Academics and Learning, Arts and Culture, Athletics, Food and Dining, etc.

uwo.edu
This Where to Eat page lists dining options and includes a picture or logo of each one, along with a short description, hours, and location. The list, which has more than 45 places, is grouped by On campus or Off campus dining. Subcategories, such as “Open Late” or “Vegetarian,” and so on, would be even more helpful.
58. Organize student services according to topic or activity, not organizational structure.

Our research studies consistently show that featuring user-centric language improves reaction time, which is important to web users who tend to navigate quickly.

Students get frustrated when information on a website is arranged according to the organizational structure of the university. Forcing them to browse by department name requires significantly more effort, as they must guess which office handles whatever topic they want to know about.

Instead, organize student services information (such as registration, paying for school, requesting transcripts, and so on), in terms that students can relate to, regardless of which department is responsible for it.

Don’t.

The Campus Life page is essentially a list of student-service offices; however, students don’t know what these offices do, so the list of department names is not helpful. In fact, many sound similar (for example, Office of Student Life, Student Center, and Division of Student Affairs). It would be more effective to list services by topic, instead of by office.

bowiestate.edu
Do.

The One Stop student-services page groups common tasks by category, which makes it easier for visitors to find what they need (especially when they don't know which office handles which task). Categories include: Registration, Finances, Grades & Transcripts, Degree planning, and U Resources.

umn.edu
2.5 Alumni and Donors

Alumni appreciate when this section highlights news about the university and former students. Many go to this section to find out about events or how to get copies of transcripts and other university support. Alumni pages that make it easy to browse news and complete top tasks are more appealing than sites that appear to be primarily focused on fundraising.

Prospective students frequently looked to the Alumni section for information about employment after graduation and to learn about alumni success stories. Unfortunately, in almost every case, they were unable to find this information from the alumni section.

User quotes

“This doesn’t really give me anything [about employment data]. It just tells me career center stuff. Maybe the prospects aren’t that great.”

“Maybe they could also show comments from employers, show career wise what it’s like 5–10 years out.”

“I want to see if alumni were successful.”

For more information about attracting donors on non-profit websites, see: https://www.nngroup.com/articles/non-profit-websites-donations/

Even though this report is based on user research with charity websites, much of the advice also applies to the donation-seeking part of university websites.
59. Give potential donors the option to contribute to an initiative of their interest.

Some donors prefer to give to an area of particular interest. When people feel like their gift will have an impact on issues they care about, they feel more inclined to give. Aim to include descriptions about any fund options, so that visitors can make an informed decision.

Don’t.

On the first *Make your gift now* screen (left), text explains that donors may specify gift designations and other instructions later in the giving process. However, the process requires people to enter their personal information (center) and payment information (right) before seeing the designation options. Donors may be reluctant to give without certainty that they can direct their funds to a particular area. Showing designation areas sooner in the process would also expose donors to other causes they care about, which could impact the amount they donate.

williams.edu
Do.

This Make a Gift page lists options for donors to direct their funds to a particular school, initiative, center, or department. Helpfully, most options include a link to learn more about each fund.

harvard.edu
60. Highlight upcoming and ongoing projects at the university, including any recent achievements and results from donations.

The main donations page should include specific examples of areas where donations will be helpful. Success stories and upcoming projects remind visitors why their support is needed. Having a page dedicated specifically to showing the impact of donations is helpful, but keep in mind that many visitors aren’t likely to go deep into the site to look for those stories. Surface snippets or examples on the first pages of the site.

✅ Do.

The main giving page highlights areas of need, including special funds and research centers.

ucla.edu
A carousel on the donation page features projects that have received funding from donor gifts.

yale.edu
61. Create a path to the donation page that is separate from the Alumni page.

Don't.

The only way to make a donation is to click the Alumni link, which makes it difficult for other types of donors to discover how to make contributions.

Drury.edu

Do.

The university reminds all visitors that giving is an option and encourages other visitors (not just alumni) to consider a donation, by including a link to a separate Giving page. This link is in the global navigation bar, separate from the Alumni link in the audience navigation area.

Umich.edu

Not everyone who wants to donate to the university is a former student. Including a separate link for donations will increase the discoverability of the option to make a gift.

Note that when creating a link for donations, it should not point to the same page as an alumni link. Two links pointing to the same page creates duplication and confuses people.

See more about duplicate links in the Navigation section.
62. On the alumni page, provide quick access to common tasks, such as how to request a transcript and how to attend upcoming events.

Many former students visit the alumni page with a particular task in mind, such as requesting a copy of an academic transcript, finding out when the next reunion is, or learning about alumni groups in their city. Be sure to address the most common tasks for alumni visiting the website.

Be careful not to focus solely on how alumni can contribute to the university. Although it is important to have information about news and fundraising initiatives, visitors will be more satisfied if they can easily find what they are looking for.

Don’t.

The content and links on this page are focused on the alumni organization and its needs, instead of on alumni needs. It would be more helpful if it emphasized links to services and tools for former students.

adelaide.edu.au
The alumni homepage has a section for frequently used links, such as Request a Transcript, Attend Reunion, and Submit a Class Note.

northwestern.edu
63. Highlight alumni achievements.

Many prospective students visit the alumni page to see what graduates do with their degrees and how successful they have become. Visitors look for distinguished alumni both in their areas of interest and from the university generally. Alumni also look here for news about other former students.

Don’t.

This alumni website has great practical information for former students, but it is missing examples of distinguished alumni. Profiles of standout graduates can enhance the image of the school for prospective students and other alumni considering a contribution.

manchester.ac.uk
The Alumni website has a section called Our Alumni, which contains stories about Outstanding alumni, Alumni authors, and recipients of the university's Distinguished Alumni Awards.
64. Include links to university LinkedIn groups or other professional networking sites.

Do.

This alumni website features links to the university’s alumni association group on LinkedIn, in addition to specific alumni groups for different industries, regions, school and club affiliations, and class generations.

brown.edu

The links to professional networking sites can be university-wide and, if possible, by school, current geographic region, graduation year, etc.

Include these links on the alumni page.
65. Present a sample of employment outcome statistics, or at least link to where that data can be found; alumni stories are not enough.

Top places prospective students look for job placement / outcome information:

- About Us section
- Alumni website
- Academic department’s website
- Google or other search engines

In our research, many prospective students went to the Alumni website seeking an answer to their question of whether they will find a job after graduation. Students associate the word “alumni” with anything having to do with after graduation. Alumni profiles or stories about alumni success are appreciated, but they do not answer students’ top questions about employability.
Part 3: Navigating the University Website

In our research, visitors frequently got stuck in a section of the university website without realizing it or without an easy way to get back to the main page. People struggled with navigation that was hidden or that used unconventional, creative labels. The biggest predictors of successful navigation on university websites were reliable paths to the main page and conventional navigation schemes.

In this section:

3.1 Topic-Based and Audience-Based Navigation Structures
3.2 Wayfinding: Moving Through the Website
3.1 Topic-Based and Audience-Based Navigation Structures

In most cases, topic-based organization is easiest for all audiences. Audience-based organization should be used only when there is enough content unique to that group to justify an entire page.
66. Use conventional topics and labels for primary navigation.

Topic navigation tends to be the most effective approach for global navigation on university websites.

Descriptive category names have a greater chance of being discovered and clicked on than clever made-up words or internal jargon, because people understand them.

Labels should be specific, concise, familiar, and comprehensive.

**Don’t.**

The links in the global navigation on this website frustrated people when they tried to learn about the school, admissions, and tuition, because the categories were unconventional and vague. One student in our testing commented, “I really wish that it was like a conventional college site that has at the top ‘Academics’, ‘Financial Aid’, everything like that. This was much harder to navigate.”

bucknell.edu

**Do.**

Conventional category labels work well on university sites, because users are familiar with the terms and they expect certain information to be available from the start.

temple.edu
67. **Save audience-based organization for when there is enough content that is truly unique to an audience.**

Audience-based navigation can create more work for users, because it forces people to identify themselves. Instead, present topics.

Creating pages for specific audiences risks creating many duplicate links, because multiple audiences are often interested in the same topic.

Content should be organized by role only if there is specific content for that group of people and the overlap with other audiences is minimal.

Read more about how to improve audience-based organization: [https://www.nngroup.com/articles/audience-based-navigation/](https://www.nngroup.com/articles/audience-based-navigation/)

Do.

This audience page focuses specifically on content and links relevant to military members and veterans, instead of repeating general information about the school.

[snhu.edu](http://snhu.edu)
68. **Don’t create an audience category page if it is only a shell that redirects to a topic page.**

![Brandeis University Navigation](image1.png)

**Don’t.**

The *Prospective Students* link in the top left points to the *Admissions/Aid* page, possibly because there was not enough unique content for the *Prospective Students* audience category. This dual-naming can cause visitors to wonder how the links differ, or cause them to visit the other link expecting different information.

brandeis.edu

![Cornell University Navigation](image2.png)

**Do.**

The navigation links each point to a different page. Even the *Apply* and *Admissions* links point to different places.

cornell.edu

Links with different labels that point to the same page are confusing, because people expect each link to go to a different page.

Our research shows that redundant links increase interaction cost. Needing to make more choices depletes attention and uses more of people's working memory.
69. As an alternative to audience landing pages, consider listing the top links for the main audience segments.

This university lists top links for three main audiences. Because the links are visible at once, people who may be members of more than one category can quickly scan for links relevant to what they need. For example, a future international student can look to the International Students section for questions related to language or visa requirements, or to the Future Students section for questions about campus life.

vu.edu.au

Do.

If there isn't enough content to justify a full section for each audience, but there are several frequent questions that specific groups have, consider an approach that groups top pages by audience segment. This visible grouping provides additional flexibility, because visitors can scan the links in the other audience categories to verify if they are in the right group.

These quick links would be beneficial on a homepage, in a section such as “Information for Students” or “Quick Links for Students.”
70. If using audience-based organization, label prospective student content as “Future students” or “Prospective students.”

Even though “prospective” seems like an uncommon word for students to encounter, our research found that students easily understood it and that the term is quite common on university websites. Even students for whom English is a second language understood the term.

Note that prospective student pages are not a requirement on university websites. Effective topic-based navigation lets students find what they are looking for without first needing to go through an audience filter.

Do.

The label Future Students was easily understood by prospective students. The audience navigation could be improved, however, by indicating that the categories are “for” the selected audience (“For Future Students,” etc.).

yorku.ca

Do.

The label Prospective Students was easily understood by students as young as 16 years old. This audience navigation could be improved, however, by indicating that these categories are for their intended audiences (“Information for: Prospective students, Current students,” etc.).

potsdam.edu
71. If the site has a page for prospective students, include content for applicants at varying stages.

A prospective students section should provide content for people considering applying, current applicants, accepted students’ pre-enrollment, and parents of prospective students.

In our research, many parents of prospective students visited the future students pages, because they were browsing on behalf of their child.

Do.

The Future Students page has information for visitors at four different stages of the application process: Thinking of Applying, I’ve Applied, I’ve Been Admitted, and First Year & Student Life.

yorku.ca
72. If the site has a *For Parents* page, reserve it for links and information specific to parents of prospective and current students.

Don’t repeat the university’s navigation. Instead, focus the section on content addressing parents’ top questions, such as parent involvement activities.

![Parent Links](image)

Don’t.

The links in the body of the *Parents* page are not specific to parents. Instead, these are duplicate links that most people will look elsewhere for (such as *Academic Calendar*, *Graduate Programs*, *About Stockton*, and so on). This page would be better if the links in the left sidebar (*Pacific Parent Association*, *Parent Newsletter*, *Parent and Family Guide*, *Parent & Family Weekend*) were given priority in the center of the page with more details about each.

pacific.edu
Do.

The page For Parents focuses on information unique to parent questions, instead of repeating links and information from other parts of the university websites.

lclark.edu
3.2 Wayfinding: Moving Through the Website

Many university subsites are silos, with little or no access to the main university page or to other subsites. This lack of connection causes many people to get stuck. For example, one student searching for “Masters of Accounting” got stuck in the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences site. She spent several minutes looking through that school’s program list, and concluded that the university did not have an accounting program. In fact, that program was a part of the Business school. Websites can improve visual design and link placement to help people become aware of other paths to try when they haven’t found what they were looking for.

In our interviews with higher-education web professionals, the debate between centralized and decentralized designs was a big deal. Below are the main advantages and disadvantages of each.

Centralized templates have a consistent look and feel across department sites, visitors can become familiar with the interface and thus be more comfortable using the websites. People may have difficulty differentiating between sites, though, and inflexible templates may not suit the needs of every department.

Decentralized designs allow departments to show their personality and customize their pages to suit each department’s content. The disadvantage is that unpredictable interfaces force people to learn how to use each new website. There is also a potential for a wide range of usability, requiring content managers to follow usability guidelines. Decentralized designs are much easier to use when they at least follow common practices in terms of logo and search placement, as well as color schemes. The goal is to help users feel like they are in a familiar space, even when each site is different.
73. Design for the common user paths.

**Test your designs to be sure they work**

1. Conduct usability testing on the typical tasks for various audiences. Observe the paths that people take from various starting points, and watch until they reach their destination.
   - How easy or difficult is it to get to the desired information?
   - When moving through the site, are people getting closer to the goal, or are they wandering in circles?
   - Are people being sent to landing page after landing page, struggling to reach any specific information?

2. Notice where improvements can be made. Some issues may require larger changes to site structure, while others might improve dramatically with small changes to categories, link labels, or landing-page content.

Ideally, test with representative users, so that you can see how people naturally go about finding the information. Teams can also do this check themselves to gather initial insights into any potential roadblocks.

**For example:**

Imagine that an international student wants to find out about admissions requirements for a master’s program. The student might start at any of the following places:

- Admissions home
- Graduate school home
- Master’s program home
- International office home

From each page, how easy is it to get to the information that the student wants? How easily are students able to get from one department’s website to another, and do those flows make sense?

People often have to hunt around for information on lots of different subsites of the university. It’s exhausting for them. Aim to make this as easy as possible, by anticipating the common paths to accomplish users’ top tasks, and assessing the existing workflow.

Testing does not need to be elaborate or expensive in order to yield important insights. Start with a few users from each main audience, use prototypes to make changes, and test again.

Read more recommendations for discount usability: [https://www.nngroup.com/articles/discount-usability-20-years/](https://www.nngroup.com/articles/discount-usability-20-years/)

For suggestions of tasks to use during testing, see the [Next Steps](#) section of this report.
74. Make the current page name and section visually prominent.

Help people quickly understand where they are on the site. Sometimes they move to a different section and don't realize it. With centralized design templates especially, pages can look the same, which can cause people to not notice when they're in the wrong section.

More about using navigation to orient users:
https://www.nngroup.com/articles/navigation-you-are-here/

Don't.

It's difficult to tell that this is the Getting Started page in the International Applicants section of admissions. The current section is not conveyed (neither is Admissions from the global navigation), and there are no breadcrumbs to reinforce the structure.

american.edu
Do.

At a glance, it’s easy to tell what the current page is about and which section it is in, because the page title is prominent, the current sections are highlighted, and breadcrumbs at the top of the page reinforce how the page is related to the rest of the section. (Although it would probably have been better to have the breadcrumbs appear on a background less likely to cause banner blindness.)

lut.fi
75. Help visitors move between sections by linking to related programs, departments, and offices.

In testing, one of the biggest usability issues was that people got stuck in a silo and were not able to move to a different area of the site. Many websites miss opportunities to link to related content on other subsites, making it difficult for visitors to move around.

Do.

At the bottom of the Research Groups page, related links point to different sections of the website: Research Support in the Staff section, and Research Candidates in the Students section.

rmit.edu.au
76. On every subsite, include a link to the university homepage.

In our research, students frequently felt stuck in a section of a website, frustrated because they were unable to get to the university’s main homepage easily when they wanted to.

Ensure that all pages have at least one link to the university’s main homepage, either in the footer or above the header.

⚠️ Don’t.

This department’s website does not provide a link to the university’s homepage. In order to get there, people must manually change the URL, leave this page to search for the homepage, or use the Back button (if they started on the homepage, which many do not). A link in the footer would be a simple fix.

washington.edu
Do.

On this subsite, three links make it easy for visitors to get to the university’s homepage: a link via the logo in the upper left corner, a link in the breadcrumb for McGill.ca, and a link via the logo in the footer. Because not everyone knows that clicking on a logo will take them to the homepage, it is good that this subsite has redundant links to the homepage and that the links are placed where people would expect to find them.

mcgill.edu
Do.

Above the department’s logo is a navigation bar that is present on all university subsites. This link to the main university homepage is effective because the upper-left corner is where people look for a homepage link, and because the domain name is a good way to convey that this link goes to a different part of the site.

osu.edu
If the design is decentralized (each unit has its own design), prioritize usability on each site.

People have higher success rates and greater satisfaction on sites that follow usability guidelines. Even when visual design varies widely from site to site, visitors can still be successful if each subsite is usable.

For sites using decentralized designs, focus on providing support to content managers and site administrators, so that they can make improvements to the user experience.

Site usability is more important than whether the site design is centralized or decentralized.
78. If the design is decentralized, provide some consistent elements across university subsites and sections.

University sites are so large that it is difficult to achieve a centralized design that works across all the subsites. Decentralized designs can work, if their usability is prioritized (see previous guideline), and if there are enough common elements to help people feel certain that they are still on the university’s website.

Landmarks are useful for representing consistency across different designs. If possible, aim to provide standardized guidelines for logo size and placement, search positioning, color palettes, and possibly utility navigation and/or universal navigation.

Do.

Subsites share common visual elements and design choices, such as color scheme, logo size and placement, search placement, and horizontal top navigation. These commonalities reinforce that they all belong to the same university, even though each site has its own design.

upenn.edu
Next Steps

We hope that the guidelines and recommendations in this report help teams make decisions and improve the usability of college and university websites. If you’re not sure where to start, consider this report as a sort of checklist, which you can review section by section until the top tasks for each area are covered.

As always, we recommend that the best way to ensure a great user experience is through consistent usability testing. Below are a few tips for getting started:

Refer to existing quantitative user data, such as analytics, search logs, and help desk support requests, to see any common problems or issues that could be addressed with the website.

Conduct one-on-one usability testing with representative users for those top tasks that are causing issues. Start with a small sample of users, then prototype some improvements, and test with a different set. For the best results, do this kind of iterative testing regularly. We have included some sample tasks on the next page, which you can adapt for testing your own site, or for testing competitor websites.

For issues with navigation, consider using methods to test and improve the information architecture, such as card sorting, open card sorting, and tree testing.

- Read more about IA testing methods here: https://www.nngroup.com/articles/navigation-ia-tests/

Don’t be afraid to let users test on early-stage prototypes; it’s the most cost-effective way to test out new hypotheses and allows teams to quickly try out new approaches with minimal investment.

- See tips for paper prototyping here: https://www.nngroup.com/articles/paper-prototyping/
Research Methodology

This report offers guidelines for improving usability for college and university websites. The main purpose of our research was to learn what visitors need from these sites, what works well, and what needs to be improved.

Procedure

A total of 33 people participated in the study, 14 men and 19 women. Participants ranged from 16–58 years old. Everyone who participated used the Web regularly.

We conducted our research with participants in the following countries, covering 59 college and university websites:

- United States
- Taiwan
- Canada (Remote testing)
- UK (Remote testing)

Our study had two main components:

- **In-person one-on-one usability testing.** We met with participants one at a time, typically for 90 minutes each, and gave them tasks to do on university websites. To keep the activities as realistic as possible, we began test sessions by asking users to do some of the college research they had pending. We then followed up with our own tasks. When time allowed, we also had participants complete some tasks on university websites that we chose, either because the site had an interesting or unique approach, or because it might suit the student’s interests.

- **Remote unmoderated usability testing.** We used an online usability testing service for remote participants in order to reach a wider geographic range. Participants had
to meet our criteria for the recruit. If they did, they completed a set of activities using their own home computer. These sessions lasted between 20–30 minutes each.

In both cases, participants engaged in thinking aloud as they worked through different activities. They were encouraged to give feedback as they tried to accomplish the tasks. Participants were free to stop an activity at any point if they no longer wanted to continue. (Frequently, participants gave up on a task and said that they would call or email the university to find the answer).

**Participants**

Below are some of the special requirements for the different participant groups:

- Prospective students intended to begin undergraduate or graduate studies at the start of the next academic year, or one year later for high-school juniors. All prospective students were in the process of researching universities, but had not yet decided where to apply.

- Parent participants had at least one child that would be a first-year student in an undergraduate program for the coming academic year (or one year later for high-school juniors). Similar to the student requirement, participants needed to be in the research phase.

- Higher education professionals were currently employed or seeking employment at a higher education institution, in a teaching, research, administrative, or post-doctoral position.

**Tasks**

For the in-person testing sessions, we began with activities that the user wanted to do. For example, we asked participants if there were schools they were researching and if they had any outstanding questions they would like to spend some time working on.

Later, we switched to using our own tasks. Most tasks were predetermined, but some were created in the moment in order to follow up on a user’s comments or behaviors. For
example, if a user said that their next step would be to find out if they can live off campus, we would ask them to use the website to do that.

In the case of remote unmoderated testing, the first task that we asked users was to state their study plans. This helped us confirm from the outset that the user was prepared to do research and to determine if the users’ answers were correct (e.g., Does this school offer the degree you are seeking?):

- Before we begin, please say what you want to study at college, and at what level (undergraduate, graduate, continuing education, etc.

We used tasks that would help us observe users’ problem solving approaches, what content they are drawn to and why. We rearranged task order sometimes, in order to evaluate the university website’s navigation. Depending on the amount of time for each session, we asked a few of these tasks per person. Below are sample tasks we used in this research.

**Prospective student tasks**

- What kinds of things do you still need to research about this university? Let’s do some of that now.

- Imagine a friend told you about XYZ University. See if there is something you might like to study there.

- If you did find a program that might interest you, see if you can find out which classes you would be taking during the 1st year.

- If you wanted to get in touch with someone from the faculty for additional questions, how would you do that?

- Imagine a teacher told you about XYZ University. Browse the website and see if it might be a good option for you. Spend up to [5-10] minutes researching the site, and then name 3 reasons why it may or may not be a good match for you.
• You are also considering XYZ University, and you want to know what it’s like to be a student there. Spend a few minutes on the website, and then name 3 characteristics about what it would be like to study there.

• Use the XYZ University website to get an idea of what it’s like to be a student there. Then name 3 things that you think characterize the university. Take as much time as you need and tell me when you are done.

• Imagine you want to apply to XYZ University. Find out what you need to do to apply, and when the application is due.

• See if XYZ University has a requirement for standardized testing such as SAT, ACT, etc.

• If you had more questions about this process or how to apply, show me how would you try to get those questions answered.

• Find out how much it costs to attend and what types of financial assistance the school offers.

• See if you can arrange a visit to the university for sometime next month.

• Go back to the homepage for XYZ University. Find out what the requirements are to apply.

• You want to know more about the possibilities of getting a job after graduation. See if XYZ University has information about that on its website.

• Imagine you’ve decided to attend XYZ University. Compare the housing options and pick the one that best suits you.

• Find out what the housing options are and how much they cost.
Parent tasks

- Imagine your child told you about XYZ University. Browse the website and see if it might be a good option for you. Spend up to 10 minutes researching the site, and then name 3 reasons why it may or may not be a good match for you.
- Imagine your child is considering applying to the XYZ University. Find out what the requirements are to apply and when the deadline is.
- Find out how much it costs to attend and how you might contact someone if you had more questions.
- Find out what the housing options are and how much they cost.
- Imagine your child is also considering applying to XYZ University. See if they offer a program he/she might like to study.
- You would like to visit XYZ University. Find out how you can arrange a visit for you and your child.
- Your child is also interested XYZ University. Find out how much it costs to attend and how you might contact someone if you had more questions about financing.
- [Adapt other tasks for students so that they are appropriate for parents].

Prospective faculty tasks

- Go to the website of XYZ University. See if there are any job openings that might interest you.
- How you would apply to that position?
- You are also interested in learning about the benefits packages these schools offer. Spend a few minutes learning about the employee benefits at XYZ University. Then, say how they compare to what you expected and why.
Websites

We systematically usability tested the following 59 websites (though we evaluated pages from more than 180 universities). Many of these websites were chosen by our participants.

arizonachristian.edu  humboldt.edu  sjsu.edu
asu.edu  jhu.edu  suffolk.edu
auburn.edu  kenyon.edu  tulane.edu
bc.edu  langara.ca  uchicago.edu
berkeley.edu  miami.edu  ucla.edu
brunel.ac.uk  northumbria.ac.uk  ucmo.edu
bu.edu  nottingham.ac.uk  uconn.edu
bucknell.edu  nsc.edu  ufl.edu
bw.edu  nyu.edu  uidaho.edu
calpoly.edu  oberlin.edu  uleth.ca
cardiff.ac.uk  oregonstate.edu  umanitoba.ca
carleton.ca  ox.ac.uk  umich.edu
clemson.edu  pvamu.edu  unbc.ca
colorado.edu  randolphcollege.edu  unc.edu
cortland.edu  rice.edu  uoregon.edu
cu-portland.edu  rose-hulman.edu  usc.edu
gcu.ac.uk  ryerson.ca  utexas.edu
georgetown.edu  salford.ac.uk  vanderbilt.edu
gla.ac.uk  sdsu.edu  washington.edu
gwu.edu  sfsu.edu
References and Resources

Throughout this report, we cited numerous articles and reports that will be helpful for those looking for more information on a topic. We have included those same links again here, along with a few others, as a quick list of additional resources.

Articles

- Effective carousel design: [https://www.nngroup.com/articles/designing-effective-carousels/](https://www.nngroup.com/articles/designing-effective-carousels/)
- Effective taglines: [https://www.nngroup.com/articles/tagline-blues-whats-the-site-about/](https://www.nngroup.com/articles/tagline-blues-whats-the-site-about/)
- Linking to related content: [https://www.nngroup.com/articles/related-content-pageviews/](https://www.nngroup.com/articles/related-content-pageviews/)
- Preventing pogo-sticking: [https://www.nngroup.com/articles/pogo-sticking/](https://www.nngroup.com/articles/pogo-sticking/)
- Non-profit Websites: [https://www.nngroup.com/articles/non-profit-websites-donations/](https://www.nngroup.com/articles/non-profit-websites-donations/)
• Using navigation to orient users:
  https://www.nngroup.com/articles/navigation-you-are-here/

• Discount usability testing:
  https://www.nngroup.com/articles/discount-usability-20-years/

• Testing information architecture:
  https://www.nngroup.com/articles/navigation-ia-tests/

• Paper Prototyping:
  https://www.nngroup.com/articles/paper-prototyping/

Related Reports

The following reports are particularly relevant to people designing university websites:

• **College Students (Ages 18–24) on the Web**
  Young adults aged 18–24 can be your toughest audience. This report presents 86 tips for enhancing your website and making it compelling for students.
  https://www.nngroup.com/reports/college-students-on-the-web/

• **Attracting Donors and Volunteers on Non-Profit and Charity Websites**
  A strong web presence can persuade people to donate their money or time to your organization. This report presents 116 tips for attracting online donations and volunteers.
• User Experience for Mobile Applications and Websites

Nielsen Norman Group usability research report with 336 tips for improving user interfaces for touchscreen smartphones.

https://www.nngroup.com/reports/mobile-website-and-application-usability/
About the Authors

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- Analyzed thousands of hours of recorded user observations sessions
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TRAINING
Usability Week Events

Usability Week training events are offered in the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Europe, Asia and Australia. Each week-long event features full-day, immersive training courses where attendees learn practical skills directly from experienced practitioners so they can solve complex UI problems and create better interface designs.

More than 40 courses offered in these categories:

- Agile
- Applications
- Content Strategy
- Credibility & Persuasion
- Email
- Information Architecture
- Interaction Design
- Intranets
- Mobile & Tablet
- Non-Profit Websites
- Prototyping
- Social UX
- User Testing
- Visual Design
- Web Usability
- Writing for the Web

Available courses and upcoming locations: [https://www.nngroup.com/training](https://www.nngroup.com/training)
In-house Training

Many of our courses can be taught at your location and customized to fit your unique offerings, methods and resources.

In-house training is ideal for:

- Large teams that want to spread user experience perspective throughout the group
- Teams working on large projects that need to kick start the creative process and head in the right direction

In-house training information:  https://www.nngroup.com/consulting

REPORTS

NN/g has published more than 60 reports that detail thousands of evidence-based design guidelines derived from our independent research studies of websites, intranets, application, and mobile interfaces.
More than 60 reports addressing these topics:

- Agile
- Applications
- Audience Types (e.g., children, college students, seniors, people with disabilities)
- B2B Websites
- Corporate Websites
- Ecommerce
- Email
- Information Architecture
- Intranets
- Mobile & Tablet
- Non-Profit Websites
- User Testing
- Social UX
- Strategy
- Web Usability

Shop for reports here: https://www.nngroup.com/reports

CONSULTING

The same experts who conduct our research and teach Usability Week training courses are available for custom consulting including:

- **Evaluating your website, application, intranet or mobile interface** (average cost $38,000 USD)
- **Usability testing** (average cost $25,000 - $35,000 USD)
- **On-site training with your team** (average cost $10,000 USD, plus travel per day)

Consulting details: https://www.nngroup.com/consulting
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