

Discovery Summary

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Section 1.0

Overview



This report aims to establish alignment for the strategic foundation of Sam Houston State University's redesigned website(s)

This report leverages the feedback and ideas gained in discovery sessions conducted by SimpsonScarborough. It is a summary of the consistent and overarching themes SimpsonScarborough considers to be foundational to this project and its future success. This summary aims to establish alignment for the strategic direction of the web redesign project and its deliverables.

Stakeholder Groups

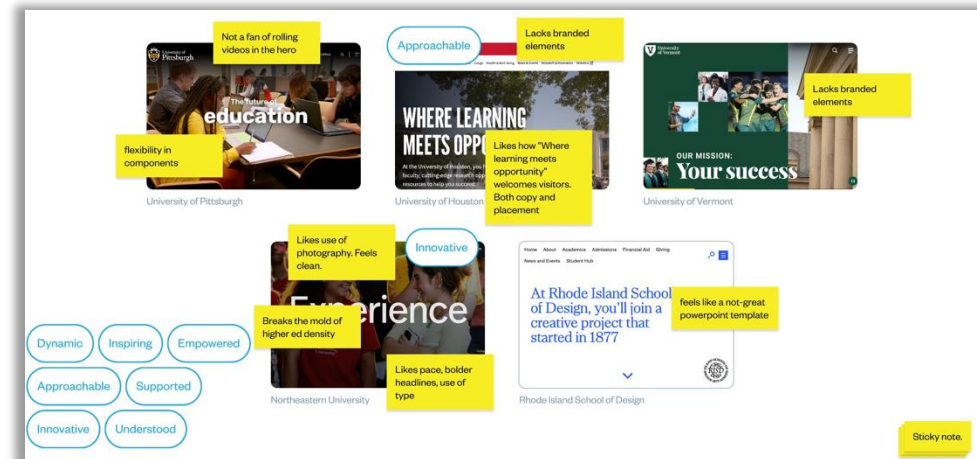
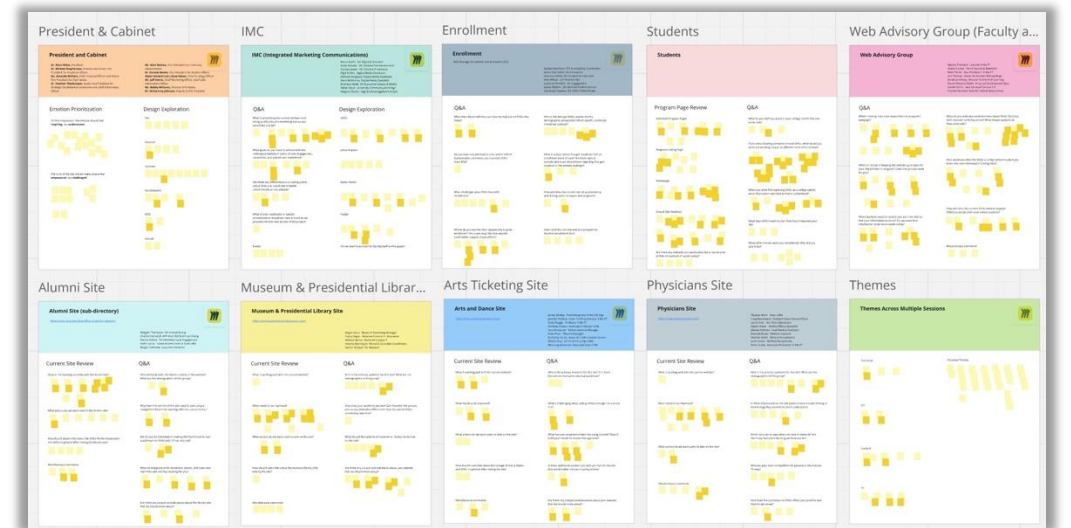
In August 2024, SimpsonScarborough completed a series of discovery sessions with various stakeholder groups from Sam Houston State University and related entities. This included:

- President and Cabinet
- College of Arts & Media Ticketing
- Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC)
- Office of Alumni Relations and Annual Giving
- Strategic Enrollment and Innovation (SEI)
- Sam Houston Memorial Museum and Republic of Texas Presidential Library
- SHSU Web Advisory Group
- SHSU Physicians
- Current SHSU Students



How We Got Here

1. A set of curated questions per stakeholder group guided our discovery sessions.
2. Some stakeholder groups participated in interactive word association and visual appeal exercises, which included evaluations of the SHSU website as well as non-SHSU websites.
3. SimpsonScarborough noted the salient points in response to our questions, documenting them in a comprehensive whiteboard.
4. Our team then evaluated all notes and identified emerging themes across stakeholder groups.
5. Using these themes, we're able to set the foundation for the strategic direction of the websites and identify key tactics for improvement.



Section 2.0

Key Themes



Focus on the Prospective Student Experience

The new site needs to speak directly *to* prospective students, not just *about* them.

The site navigation and page content does not adequately speak to the needs and concerns of prospective students. The needs of first-gen and online students (who make up ¼ of the student population) are particularly neglected, there is little content that speaks to those audiences, which are demographically different from typical in-person students.

The site does little to support prospective students in learning about academic options or student experience at SHSU, ultimately providing little support to prospective students in a decision to enroll at SHSU.

Solution

Thoughtfully consider the verbiage used throughout the site and how comprehensible it is to prospective students.

Ensure that the site reflects the reality of the great student experience that is available to students at SHSU.

“[The website] is not just speaking to internal people instead of students, *it’s structured* for internal people.”

“I didn’t know if I was doing B.A. or B.S., and now I know I’m supposed to do B.S. but I didn’t know at first. *I was confused as to which was which*, so I didn’t know which one to click on.”

“[The website] is not directed for online students. We have the online page and the Sam Houston page, and *they’re almost working against each other*...I don’t know which one is the correct one to go to.”

Build a Site That Stands Out

The current website design feels dated and lacks a branded presence. Despite being extremely text heavy, the current site doesn't say much and lacks engaging visual content.

The new site should feel inspired, not understated, and people should feel empowered when they visit the site. It should be dynamic, bold, and should stand out from other higher ed sites. In summation, the new site design needs to dial up the “wow” factor in order to represent the true SHSU.

Solution

Create a design system for the new site that allows it to stand out (in the right ways) rather than blend in. This may involve thoughtful application of brand elements, using color in fun, unexpected ways, allowing type to take over at times, and aligning photography with the brand guidelines. This system should flex, allowing for louder expression of the brand on high-level pages, and softer expression on deep, content-heavy pages.

“I felt like I had been transported back in time to **the internet of 20 years ago**. The font choices, the navigation, it’s incredibly busy. My eyes have no idea where to go.”

“The website needs to be drawing you in so that you **actually want to be here**, and you want to know more about us and actually attend.”

“It’s **not the time** to be humble or understated.”

Improve Website Navigation

Navigating the website is difficult. It's not clear to users where to find the content they need.

Users do not intuitively understand the structure of the site. This is especially problematic for prospective and current students who may not be able to learn about the services and resources that SHSU offers. Menu labels often use "internal" language that prospective students do not understand, causing a confusing and frustrating experience for those users.

Solution

Develop a new menu strategy that is focused on helping primary audiences locate the content they need.

Establish clear user journeys for different audience types, including subtypes like online and hybrid students.

"The Fast Links list is just insane."

"Make scholarships easier to find...it's one of the most important things and you can't find it anywhere unless you go to the Fast Links."

"We want to have it where [prospective students] can find the right page right away because if they really have to work for it, they're not going to want to come to us. That's going to define their experience, the negative one of 'I couldn't find what I wanted when I needed to find it.'"

Fix the Back-End Authoring Experience

The page authoring experience within the current CMS is extremely cumbersome and CMS training is limited, resulting in a vast number of pages that are infrequently updated and/or improperly formatted.

On both the main SHSU.edu and the other scoped subsites, editing pages and creating new pages is an extreme challenge. Departments rely upon student assistants to make updates to pages and those without access to a person with coding skills are unable to display their content the way they would like.

The result of this poor back-end experience is outdated content, a visually unimpressive site, and demoralized and frustrated site editors.

Solution

Develop a strategy to move the site to a modern, easy-to-use CMS. Ensure that the user experience of the CMS is thoughtfully considered, that page authors receive proper training, and that there are training resources available to them.

“There’s very little content there because we don’t know the CMS. **We don’t know how to use it**, and when we’re changing employees every 2 or 3 years...the website is a huge concern.”

"Dot CMS is complete garbage. **I hope it gets thrown in the trash**. I’d rather subjugate myself to [another CMS] than use it for another second.”

"I ended up hiring student assistants who know coding, but they don’t have experience in managing a website or user experience or content...so it’s my experience doing those things and relying on student assistants to write or update the code. **It’s laborious.**”

Keep Content Up to Date

The SHSU site and related subsites contain outdated content that does not properly represent the university.

The outdated content is a result of difficulties with editing pages within the CMS, as well as a lack of a clear strategy for what pages are necessary on the site and who is responsible for maintaining those pages.

Old and outdated photography is especially problematic, it makes the site seem “old” and prospective students may question the accuracy of the visual depictions on the site.

Another content issue is the lack of syndication of content like news stories and events. There is no system within the CMS for tagging content and syndicating it to multiple locations within the site, so page authors must manually link to stories that are related to their content sections.

Solution

Ensure the new site uses an easy-to-use CMS that encourages page administrators to keep their content up to date.

Develop a governance strategy to ensure that pages are maintained and updated on a regular schedule.

“We'd like to be able to have Today at Sam articles that can be customized to show up at certain division pages or certain college pages.”

“Dr. C and Dr. B look so young in these photos — these are definitely outdated.”

“This is Vegas right? What is set here, stays here.”

Improve Web Analytics

SHSU is experiencing various challenges from the transition from Universal Analytics (UA) to Google Analytics 4 (GA4).

However, the team does not feel equipped to overcome these challenges.

In addition, the team needs the GA4 property to properly track the entire prospective student journey.

Solutions

Use Google Tag Assistant (GTA) to identify tracking issues.

Refine GA4 Reports and Explorations to properly visualize and analyze relevant data.

Update GA4 and GTM settings to accurately track user journeys that span multiple subdomains and root domains and implement learnings from SimpsonScarborough's training sessions to learn how to resolve future GA4-related issues.

“Some conversion tracking on button clicks that worked in UA **no longer seem to work.**”

“Standard reports are not displayed in the same way as they were in UA and **cannot always be changed as needed.**”

“**We would like to learn more** about Google Tag Manager and GA4 Explorations.”

Share School Spirit

SHSU is a great school that provides a great student experience. The website needs to tell that story.

The current site comes off as a bland reflection of the SHSU experience to students, faculty, and administrators alike. It needs to do a better job of showing off SHSU and why it is a great university to attend.

Solution

Focus on benefits like student resources and small class sizes as differentiators.

Highlight outcomes, student stories, and athletics as key parts of the university experience that users can engage with on the website.

Include photography that highlights the campus experience, not just the campus itself. Showcase student activities, campus traditions, and athletics — as well as the classroom experience — visually on the site.

“One of the things I hear from students is how friendly the university is and how much it does...I don’t think that most of them see that before they become a student though.”

“This is a **resource-rich campus**, and I think that’s a differentiator for us, and we don’t tell that story well.”

“We have **amazing achievements in our students and in our faculty and staff** that have been left understated for many years and I wouldn’t want us to continue to be understating what we’re about.”

“The website following into that [branding] work... will get us on a platform that across the board visually, we look like the university we really are: modern, responsive, agile, professional. **Nobody’s second choice for anything.**”

Next Steps



Next Steps

9/4 SHSU to provide “thumbs up” on Discovery Summary Report, with any considerations/callouts for next phase

Strategy Report Phase

- 9/30: Analytics Strategy Report — 5 days for feedback
- 10/3: Technology and Governance Strategy Report — 5 days for approval
- 10/7: Content, UX, UI, SEO & Analytics Strategy Report — 3 days for approval

Information Architecture

- 11/14: Walk-through of IA/Sitemap
- 11/19: Client IA/Sitemap Feedback Due
- 12/4: Approval on IA

Thank you.

Ownership —

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