University at Buffalo
Web Content Initiative:
Discovery

UB 2020 Site
University Communications

April 2009
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Executive Summary

The UB 2020 Web site (www.buffalo.edu/ub2020/overview/) has a large purview. It must convey both the broad vision of UB 2020, while communicating updates and important details on its primary components. These are Strategic Strengths, the Building UB physical plan and IT reorganization/operations, plus other campus initiatives that have been grouped under the UB 2020 rubric. Each of these subtopics has its own range of complexity, thus making it a challenge to organize and present the material in a clear and compelling manner online. It is not always apparent how these various initiatives relate to UB 2020, or what UB 2020 is exactly. Even when drilling down for specific information, parts of the site are confusing to navigate. Moreover, one’s visit is often marred by outdated reports, notices of meetings now in the past and a general lack of editorial organization and discipline.

Each UB 2020 stakeholder has identified a need to share information about UB 2020 clearly, authoritatively, and in a way that encourages the campus community’s involvement and participation in the larger initiative and its components. Another key business need, stakeholders said, is to portray UB’s impact and its accountability to the public, as well as to position the university for optimum recruitment, particularly in the academic ranks. At the same time, the UB 2020 site should demonstrate that UB has the teams in place to conduct interdisciplinary research and scholarship of utmost quality. Importantly, it must also “sell” a positive image about the university, particularly in what it hopes to accomplish with UB 2020.

The UB 2020 Web site would benefit from brief, easy-to-understand information on UB 2020 and its principal parts (what some might call “an elevator speech”), followed by progressively more detailed information on each initiative or theme that merits such treatment. Furthermore, a revitalized UB 2020 Web site must be sustainable and scalable, as the university embarks on new projects and initiatives. Finally, it should convey a dynamic quality in keeping with the character, make-up and purpose of UB 2020 itself. To support the identified business needs and build support for the university and its programs, the current site must change radically.
Part I: Stakeholder Needs Analysis

Purpose of Site

Identified business needs (What role does the Web site need to play to support those needs?)

Primary
- Builds support for UB 2020:
  - Serves as a platform to communicate UB 2020’s vision, benefits and impact
  - Builds a coalition for achieving UB 2020 vision by building pride among constituents, communicating transparency and providing opportunities for feedback
  - Raises the university’s profile and builds its reputation—excites and inspires supporters and potential supporters
- Puts a face on UB 2020 initiatives:
  - Clearly conveys both vision and context for this ambitious plan
  - Articulates key outcomes
  - Communicates next steps and why they’re so important to UB’s future
  - Aligns UB 2020 within the UB brand (Research that makes a difference, Global, Community, Excellence, the “Buffalo way”)
  - Defines a consistent set of messages concerning UB 2020’s vision and initiatives
- Functions as a one-stop Web site for the latest information on UB 2020:
  - Dashboard for progress
  - Opportunities for involvement

Secondary
- Serves as a repository for archived reports and other materials to document UB 2020 progress and to preserve institutional knowledge as well

How this fits into Overall Communication Plan
The UB 2020 Web site needs to support and be supported by the President’s site messaging. It also needs to be supported by communications plans throughout UB that align with UB 2020 messaging.

Target Audience

Primary
- Internal UB audience (faculty, staff, students)
- UB leaders/communicators
- Potential faculty and senior administrators
External influencers/funding sources or sources of potential funding, i.e., foundations, government agencies, legislators

Secondary
- Higher ed leaders/media
- Western New York community (to gain a sense of what’s going on “in their backyard”)

User Profiles (Audience Segments)
The UB 2020 audience can be grouped into the following segments:
- **UB supporters** use the site to see how they can advocate on UB’s behalf. They believe in UB and want to actively support UB’s success through advocacy, coalition building or providing funding. This segment goes across the board for all primary audiences.
- **Pulse-takers** use this site as a dashboard for progress, messages and what is in the center of UB’s radar screen, as well as to foreshadow where we are going next. Most of the UB leaders or communicators and grassroots internal leaders within the UB community fall into this category, as well as those influencers, higher ed leaders and external audience members who are “on board.”
- **Future supporters** come to this site to verify what the buzz is all about. This group might be those who are considering “joining” the UB community as faculty, staff or students. These users may also be interested in supporting our goals through funding or advocacy, finding out more about how this plan affects them or wish to benchmark its successful practices. This segment goes across the board for all primary and secondary audiences; future believers ideally become pulse-takers or UB Believers.

Desired Outcomes
- What is the primary “action” the user should take?
  - This site does not call for direct actions. Rather, it builds the sense of urgency, coalition and the desire for change within the audiences. Optimally, it would influence the audience segment to act out their segment role—verify the buzz and spread the word—and to inspire the audience group to become a member of a “higher” segment (a future believer becomes a UB Believer).
  - Some of the major desired outcomes, divided by each target audience, would be:
    - **UB supporters:**
      - Feel pride
      - Desire to support UB through funding or advocacy
    - **Pulse-takers:**
      - A stronger sense of the UB 2020 vision
      - An understanding of the scope and where we are in terms of progress
    - **Future supporters:**
      - Enhance perceptions – Get a better sense of what UB 2020 is and its positive impact
• Desire to become part of the organization (e.g. prospective faculty, staff, students, national/international collaborators)
• Desire to support UB through funding or advocacy (e.g. donors, government- or grant giving-related audiences)

Positioning (How the user should perceive your site)

• What we want them to think:
  o Keywords from our stakeholders: innovative, collaborative, informative, accurate, interdisciplinary, bold, inspiring and relevant
  o Desired outcomes
    ▪ Define UB 2020, put a face on the vision in clear understandable language
    ▪ Communicate how world-class research and scholarship leads to individual and collective opportunity: Innovative research equals a great place for my child to go for a world-class education; the building of a 21st century research university; cutting edge research transferred to the marketplace. Articulate the essence of UB 2020:
      ▪ UB 2020 is the university's long-term strategic plan.
      ▪ It was created by faculty, staff, alumni and administration all working together.
      ▪ It's designed to position us to be more competitive in a challenging time.
      ▪ UB 2020 is designed to help the institution realize its true potential as a national, even world-class, research university.
      ▪ The UB 2020 plan has us do things that help us achieve that vision—an interdisciplinary approach to research, developing our physical facilities in a way that supports our vision, working in partnership with our community and with elected officials to get the support, along with the changes that we need to implement this plan.
    ▪ Connect UB 2020 initiatives under one umbrella and also to the overall mission and activities of UB
    ▪ Define the benefits and impact of our vision
    ▪ Connect to university-wide messaging and branding
    ▪ Contain timely and relevant information
    ▪ Evolve with the vision (the strategic plan is not just a two-dimensional document, but a living, breathing organic document and where you can see real manifestation of it on campus)
    ▪ Layer information in a way that users can choose to “sip or dine”
    ▪ Inspire participation and support

• Self-assessment (how well we think we are doing):
  o Have lots of information that is current, but also much information that is dated and, in fact, far too much information!
Do not have enough of the right information packaged in a way that tells the UB 2020 story, or that gives a good sense of the context of the UB 2020 vision, its impact and its benefits.

Each “component” of UB 2020 needs its own contextual information, setting the stage for the initiative and marrying it to the overall UB 2020 vision.

Often not clear that the subject matter portrayed or the information given are part of an overall plan.

The site is more about how we got there than where we are going.

Nobody “owns” it.

- Is the Web site positioning in alignment with other decanal materials (print, email, etc.)?
  - Since there is no “positioning” or core set of messages the communications are not aligned.

**Success Measurements**

- There are currently no success measurements in place. The following is a list of suggested success measurements that could be put in place:
  - **Hits:** Number of hits tracked by Web analytics software; track access per day, week, month and year
  - **Coalition building:** Building pride among constituents, communicating transparency and providing opportunities for feedback
  - **Decanal units integrating messaging:** Determining how UB 2020’s strategic messages penetrate into the decanal units of the university
  - **Feedback:** Putting in place various mechanisms (e.g. “Was this page helpful?”) for soliciting feedback and gauging levels of success
  - **Pages (thoughts) linked to by outside audiences:** Putting measures in place to identify most discussed (i.e. e-mailed, blogged about) pages
  - **Spikes of activity that correlate to the (future) communications strategy tactics:** By tracking Web site traffic patterns over time, patterns can be identified that correlate to increased interest generated from specific Web site initiatives
Part II: External Benchmarking

Best Practices: Higher Education Sites

Building support
Serves as a platform to communicate strategic planning vision, benefit and impact

Defining purpose
- Outlining the fundamental reasons for strategic planning

Example(s)
- University of Colorado at Boulder: “Why Flagship 2030?”
- Duke University: Introduction letter from the president on main page – legitimizes this campaign by literally putting the president’s face on it
- University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign: Succinctly defines the fundamental purpose of strategic planning

Aligns with: Building support

Letter from the university president or chancellor
- Introduction on home page or linked to prominently from home page
- Strong backing from president/chancellor creates legitimacy

Example(s):
- University of Wisconsin – Madison: Chancellor explains relationship between university’s strategic planning efforts and the current economic crisis
- UC Irvine: Letter from the Chancellor and Executive Vice Chancellor/Provost

Aligns with: Building support
Coalition-building for university’s vision
Aligns with the university brand
Reputation building, excites and inspires

Transparency
- Clear indicators of plans for action and dates of completion
- Creates a sense of accountability

Example(s):
- University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign: Annual reports of progress documents that summarize the key accomplishments of the campus towards the goals of the strategic plan.

Aligns with: Coalition-building for university’s vision
Transparency
Feedback opportunities
- Invitations for feedback, usually via contact form on Web site

Example(s):
- Case Western University: Contact form inviting comments and questions
- University of Missouri – Columbia: Open invitation for feedback

Aligns with: Coalition-building for university’s vision
Opportunities for involvement

Vision and context
Puts a face on initiatives

Single-sentence mission statement
- Summarizes strategic planning goals in a straightforward and succinct manner
- Provides audience with a clear picture of the guiding principles behind strategic planning

Example(s):
- Emory University: “Emory University’s core purpose is to create, preserve, teach, and apply knowledge in the service of humanity.”

Aligns with: Puts a face on initiatives
Vision and context

Core values
- Typically bullet-point list with a brief summary of each
- Serve as guiding principles to the strategic plan

Example(s):
- University of Cincinnati: Lists the following core values: Scholarship, Citizenship, Stewardship, Leadership, Partnership, Cultural Competence
- University of Wisconsin – Madison: Defines core values through a list of guiding principles

Aligns with: Vision and context

Strategic goals
- Top strategic goals typically listed on front page or prominently

Example(s):
- University of Georgia: Divided into six strategic goals, with succinct overviews of each
goal

- **Emory University**: “Five Pillars of Courageous Inquiry” with accompanying PDF ([http://www.emory.edu/strategicplan/the-plan/SP_overview_graphic.pdf](http://www.emory.edu/strategicplan/the-plan/SP_overview_graphic.pdf))
- **University of Missouri – Columbia**: Current strategic initiatives divided into four strategic goals
- **Duke University**:

Aligns with:  Core values
        Puts a face on initiatives
        Defines a consistent set of messages about the vision and initiatives

**Outcomes and next steps**

- Outlining quantifiable outcomes, success measures and future plans
- Creates accountability and facilitates seeing growth and progress

Example(s):

- **University of Iowa**: “Indicators of Progress”

Aligns with:  Outcomes and next steps
        Puts a face on initiatives

**Integration with university brand**

- Aligning strategic planning initiative with overall brand of the university

Example(s):

- **Duke University**: “Knowledge in the Service of Society: A Duke Signature”

Aligns with:  Integration with university brand
        Pride building

**One-stop Web site to get the latest information**

**Progress updates**

- News updates and status updates on various initiatives

Example(s):

- **University of Georgia**: News updates specifically related to strategic plan

Aligns with:  One-stop Web site to get the latest information
        Progress updates
        Transparency

**Timeline**

- Visual indicator of progress
- Provides a sense of overall scope

Example(s):
• University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign: Timeline of activities for implementing strategic plan – needs to be current in order to be meaningful and useful

Aligns with:  
One-stop Web site to get the latest information
Progress updates
Transparency

Overall Trends

• For the most part, we have not really seen an overall best practice site. The sites are about laying out the plan and fail to convey:
  o Inspiring people to come on board
  o Transparency in process
  o Communicating progress in a timely manner
• Many major university sites are without a university-wide strategic planning site; instead, strategic planning occurs on a department-specific level (e.g. Information Technology, Libraries)
• Some sites that were found appear to be several years out of date
• Difficult to find consistent trends among strategic planning Web sites
• Sites are very light on content and focused around annual updates
• Site are focused around a single report-style PDF or series of PDF documents
Part III: Current Situation Analysis

Overview

The current UB 2020 Web site has four major divisions devoted to Strategic Strengths, Building UB, IT reorganization/operations, and a potpourri of other initiatives that have been grouped under UB 2020, not always clearly or convincingly so. The current site contains detailed information that is valuable in portions of the site, but that is old or unnecessary in others. The site was initiated when UB 2020 was an idea to be discussed and formed, but does not reflect the current status of UB 2020, a robust active plan whose vision is in progress and whose future needs to be supported. While some sections of the site show attention to visual appeal and timeliness, others are dated to various degrees, or—worse—do not look well cared for. There is no process for “archiving” or giving closure to initiatives that have matured from a plan to being actualized. While the UB 2020 Web site offers voluminous detail on various initiatives and programs, it unfortunately lacks a clear statement of what UB 2020 is in its essence, or how the components of UB 2020 relate to the whole.

Overview of content audit outcomes.
A detailed content audit, or inventory, of UB 2020 pages and the site as a whole, reveals a pattern of uncontrolled growth—322 pages plus hundreds of other linked pages or cross-links to try to navigate. A great deal of in-depth information has been added, as specific UB 2020 programs and initiatives have developed and unfolded. While the content audit shows the presence of much valuable information on a range of important initiatives, too many pages desperately need pruning, realignment or excision. This way, the user could more easily find information and better understand how the myriad parts relate to the whole of UB 2020. The audit offers recommendations for both long-term and immediate remediation to this end.

Support plan (who supports, how often—assessment of how well “cared for” it is):
Because the UB 2020 site has four major sections—each with multiple sub-sections that become progressively more detailed—its content originates from a variety of sources at UB. Although the Office of University Communications has put the site together from a technical standpoint—and to some extent has helped to determine its content—the lack of consistent ownership for the site as a whole and in its components is much evident and clearly problematic. Overall, the uneven presentation is jarringly out of sync with 2020’s essential purpose and its ambitious scope.

Perceptions of Performance

Usage (Data)
The UB 2020 Web site receives a total of 204,204 hits per year. The site averages 559 daily hits and 3,916 hits per week. Though the overall site receives the majority of its traffic from external users (62%), a substantial 38% of the site’s visitors access the site within the university.

- **Overview:**
  The Overview section of the site receives a total of 29,565 hits per year. It averages 81 daily hits and 567 hits per week.

- **Strategic Strengths:**
  The Strategic Strengths section of the site receives a total of 9,573 hits per year. It averages 26 daily hits and 183 hits per week. It receives 57% of its traffic from external users. This section receives regular, consistent traffic and virtually no surges.

- **Building UB:**
  The Building UB section of the site receives a total of 127,752 hits per year. It averages 350 daily hits and 2,450 hits per week. It receives 58% of its traffic from external users. This section receives relatively little regular traffic, but there are extremely high surges in traffic that are affected by campaigns.

- **Initiatives: ITST:**
  The ITST Initiatives section of the site receives a total of 17,819 hits per year. It averages 48 daily hits and 341 hits per week. Traffic to the ITST site is split almost evenly between internal and external users, with 55% internal users. The traffic patterns are consistent, with some occasional surges.

Overall, it is not anticipated that future usage will alter dramatically. Sections of the site that receive heavy traffic from campaigns will continue to do so, and sections that experience a steady flow of traffic will likely see similar patterns in the future. In anticipating future traffic, it should be more of a priority to attract the “right” visitors to the site rather than simply trying to increase the volume of traffic.

### Site Strengths and Weaknesses

- Achieving purpose (business needs and fitting into strategic communications)—weak
- Delivering consistent strategic messages—weak
- Quality of the user experience—neutral
- Quality of content (integrity, tone, consistency)—neutral
- Structure, user experience/usability (Is it easy to use, sustainable?)—weak
- How well it stacks up to the competition—neutral
Part IV: Recommendations

Conclusion

The purpose of the site has evolved, but the site itself has not evolved with it. In order to support the identified business needs, the current site has to change radically.

We need to reposition this as a sustainable site that supports the core focus:

- Builds support for UB 2020 (communicate the vision, build pride and reputation)
  - Puts a face on UB 2020 Initiatives (our initiatives, outcomes and next steps)
  - One-stop site to get the latest information regarding UB 2020 (progress, updates, involvement opportunities)

In addition, the messaging on the site needs to closely coordinate with the President’s site, each supporting the other’s focus.

- Services provided
  The site should be a platform for collaboration. With that said, a directory of the faculty involved in the strategic strengths, their areas of focus and collaboration points etc. would do much to enhance and inform collaboration. We do have the beginnings of this service within the built-out strategic strengths site. However, this needs to be institutionalized and blended with university-wide products such as eCV, or the reporting database housed by Institutional Analysis.

- Identified opportunities for change
  - Create an overall communications strategy that UB 2020 and its supporting initiatives can follow.
  - Assign ownership and staff the site appropriately.
  - The site has to shrink in scope; it is too large to be sustainable. To accomplish this:
    - Create a sustainable content plan that supports the creation of timely and relevant information.
    - Realign content to focus on the present (and future) – shift the focus of the site to where we are and where we are going rather than how we got here.
    - Archive past progress, just keeping highlights – The site does not have to be about tracking every memo we have ever written.
    - Eliminate low-value pages.
  - Create context for content, put a face on UB 2020:
    - Package information in a way that tells the UB 2020 story.
    - Develop a brief introduction to UB 2020’s overall vision and purpose.
    - Integrate with the UB brand and tie in with messaging from the president to give strong backing to the UB 2020 mission.
- Include overviews on more UB 2020 initiatives such as Great Place to Work or the Undergraduate Transformation.
- Define the relationship between UB 2020 progress updates and the UB Reporter.
  - Create a format for context and updates; link to SharePoint for project details.
  - Layer the information with a “sip or dine” approach with a shorter summary style for the audience segments who want a basic “elevator” talk, plus links to deeper information for practitioners who need deep, robust information.
  - Facilitate a transparent strategic planning process through continuing feedback opportunities and other opportunities for open involvement.
  - The site should also have some downloadable “take aways’ that summarize UB 2020, the economic impact, and the initiatives.
Appendix

Appendix: Stakeholder Interviews

Stakeholders Interviewed

- **Joseph Brennan**
  Associate Vice President for University Communications

- **Alex Cartwright**
  Vice Provost for Strategic Initiatives

- **Beth Del Genio**
  Chief of Staff, Office of the Provost

- **Bradshaw Hovey**
  Staff Associate, Architecture

- **Rick Lesniak**
  Director, Academic Services, CIT

Stakeholder Interviews

Copies of the full interviews are available here:
https://prv-sharepoint.pn.buffalo.edu/Web-Content-Initiative/Shared%20Documents/Forms/Priority%20View.aspx?RootFolder=%2fWeb%2dContent%2dInitiative%2fShared%20Documents%2fStoner%2fUC%20Discovery%20Materials%2fUB%2020%20%20Stakeholder%20%20Interviews&FolderCTID=&View=%7bFAAEF9A7%2d0202%2d4F04%2d87E9%2dBAA077C676E1%2d7d

Interview Questions

**Audience/Desired Action**

Do you have a communication plan?

What role does your Web site play in that plan?

How well does it accomplish that?

How and how well does your Web site reflect your strategic messages?
What is your Web site's target audience? If there is more than one, please rank secondary audiences in order of importance.

Describe a typical user from your primary audience. How often is the user online and what does s/he generally use the web for? (Use as much detail as possible in profiling your target user. Profile more than one type if appropriate.)

What is the primary “action” the user should take when coming to your site? (apply, join, search for information, etc.). Does the primary action differ for secondary audiences? If so, how?

What are the key reasons why the target user chooses your products and/or services? (cost, service, value, etc.)

Do you measure usage? If so, how many people (as far as you can tell) access your site on a daily, weekly or monthly basis? Do you forecast usage to increase over the next year and, if so, by how much?

Perception of organization

Use a few adjectives to describe how the user should perceive your site. (Ex: prestigious, friendly, corporate, fun, forward-thinking, innovative, cutting edge, etc.) Is this different than current image perception?

How are you currently perceived offline? Do you wish to carry through the same kind of perception through your Web site?

Who are your competitors?

How do you differentiate yourself from competitors? Do you think your current audience differentiates you from your competition? Please list competitor URLs.

List any URLs of sites you find compelling (competitors and industry). What specifically do you like about these sites?

Perceptions of current site

Do you feel your current site promotes a favorable user experience? Why? Why not?

What specific areas of your current site do you feel are successful? Why are they successful?

What shortcomings exist with the current site and what three things would you change on the site today, if you could?

Have you conducted usability tests on your current site? If so, how long ago? What did you find? (Please ask for copies or reports, findings)

Planning change
Do you have plans to change your site? (Only proceed with remaining questions in this section if the response is “yes”)

When will changes be implemented? What stage are you at?

What are the main reasons for changing your site? (New business model, outdated site, expanded services, different audience, etc.)
What are your primary online business objectives with the site redesign? What are your secondary objectives? (Increased applications, marketing/branding awareness, operational efficiency, etc.) Please discuss both long- and short-term goals.

What is the main business problem you hope to solve with the site change? How will you measure the success of the solution?

What existing strategy (both on and offline) is in place in order to meet the new business objectives?

How do you envision the content of this site, as well as functionality and navigation, expanding or differing from your current site?

Do you have an existing sitemap for the current site structure? Do you have a sitemap or outline for the proposed redesign?

**Technology**

What is your target audience platform and browser (if you know)?

Are there specific technologies (Flash®, DHTML, JavaScript, video, social media, etc.) you are currently using in the site? If so, how do they enhance the user experience? Please describe in detail.

Do you currently have database functionality (dynamic content generation, search capabilities, personalization/login, etc.)? Do you already have a database in place? Please describe in detail, including specific information regarding existing programs and software.

Will you have a need for secured transactions (e-commerce)? Do you already offer transactions online? Please describe in detail.

Does your site currently integrate with other sites? Will it need to in the future? Please specify.
## Appendix: Comparable sites evaluated and key findings

### Best Practices: List of higher education sites evaluated

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Appendix: Content Audit Outcomes

UB 2020 Content Audit available here:
https://prv-sharepoint.pn.buffalo.edu/Web-Content-Initiative/Shared%20Documents/mStoner/UC%20Discovery%20Materials/University%20Communications%20Content%20Audits/UB%202020%20Content%20Audit.pdf

Appendix: University Communications Discovery Team Members

- **Rebecca Bernstein**
  Web Strategist, WCI Project Director, University Communications

- **Arthur Page**
  Assistant Vice President for News & Periodicals, University Communications

- **Eileen Ruberto**
  Information Architect, University Communications

- **Ann Whitcher**
  Senior Editor, Content & Web Editorial Team Member, University Communications