



SF State Web Template Program

Phase 1: Assessment Report

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Program Overview

The objective of the SF State Web Template Program is to create a unified, cohesive, branded, elegant, efficient and accessible design system for ongoing Web development and retrofitting of existing Web properties at SF State.

The Web Template Program is focused on visual redesign with mild changes to site information architecture and interactivity. This project does not include back end development, content management system installation, server configuration, database architecture or final implementation.

The Web Template Program's primary goals are:

- o **Reinforce Visual Identity**
Create a system with which to apply the SF State brand and visual identity in a consistent manner to the University's wide range of disparate web sites.
- o **Improve Usability and Accessibility**
Improve usability by encouraging best practices in interface and navigation design and accessible web development.
- o **Support Standards-Based Web Development**
Provide tools and resources for creating, updating, and maintaining university sites using standards-based web markup and code.

The project will be divided into four phases:

- o **Phase 1: Assessment**
Assess existing SF State Web environment, identify key issues, engage with University Web managers and strategic decision makers.
- o **Phase 2: Definition**
Define categories, page types, content elements, site map, wire frames.
- o **Phase 3: Design**
Apply design presentation layer to underlying architectural wire frames; write html code.
- o **Phase 4: Implementation**
Create documentation, migrate content into new templates.



Assessment: Summary

Assessment of the University's Web environment revealed significant issues that can and should be addressed by the Web Template Program. Successful implementation of the strategies proposed for addressing these issues will enhance the University's ability to fulfill its mission and improve Web based communication to all University constituents. This report is the primary deliverable of Phase 1 (Assessment) of the Web Template Program. A Web-based version of this report can be found at http://www.industrious.com/SFSUPLOAD/sfsreport_html/intro.html.

Process

The assessment process followed three primary courses to evaluate the SF State Web environment:

- o A heuristic review incorporating standard web benchmarks including brand strength, access to content by users, access to content by search engines, portability to non-browser-based devices, disability access compliance, maintainability and extensibility
- o Quantitative analyses of key University Web sites, focusing on visual design, navigation and information architecture
- o Qualitative feedback from key decision makers, Web managers and the general SF State Web site audience.

Scope

While the sfsu.edu Web environment is too large to allow for a complete site analysis within the scope of this project, a core set of pages was addressed by all assessment activity. These include:

- o The home page and secondary pages for all Colleges
- o The home page and secondary pages for key sites in all vice presidential areas
- o The list of top sites currently under review by the Web Access workgroup for the Accessible Technology Initiative Taskforce. (Note that this list overlaps with the previous two lists.)

Results

An assessment of SF State's web sites revealed issues that interfere with the University's ability to effectively communicate with its constituents and manage its content. The primary areas in which these issues arise are:

- o Identity
- o Usability
- o Standards

See next section for details.



Assessment: Report

A thorough understanding of the primary issues of concern in the SF State Web Environment will help shape the strategy for addressing those issues and improving the impact of the University's Web sites.

Identity Confusion

A lack of perceptible and consistent visual identity within and among University sites causes brand confusion, undermines messages that the University wishes to project to its audiences, and inhibits its strategic goal of positioning itself as a reputable institution of higher learning.

Examples of identity confusion on SF State Web sites:

Inconsistent application of SF State logo

- o Placement relative to page
- o Size inconsistencies
- o Missing altogether
- o Mistreated (violating SF State identity guidelines)
- o Badly reduce/processed
- o Old logo

Inconsistent use of typefaces

- o No standards for display/graphic typefaces—anything goes
- o No standards for Text/web typefaces
- o Size
- o Color

Inconsistent application of colors

- o Palettes vary from site to site
- o No established palette within site

Inconsistent photograph quality

- o Photos vary in quality based on source
- o Photos vary in quality based on web image processing
- o Photos vary in style

Inconsistent design and layout

- o Layperson design
- o Ad hoc design/no design
- o Default content management system templates (Drupal, Word Press, Blogger)
- o FrontPage templates

Lack of Visual Standards

- o 25 of the 51 sites surveyed did not follow standard University logo guidelines
- o 4 of 51 did not have traceable elements of the standard University web site design
- o 11 of 51 had the standard University footer
- o 20 of 51 had easily findable links back to the University home page
- o 24 of 51 had similar navigation to the University's home page (left aligned)



Navigation and Usability Difficulties

Ad hoc, decentralized interface design by multiple professional and non-professional designers and developers has resulted in the creation of a negative user experience embodied by inconsistent, moving-target navigation and dead-ends that render information hard to find or inaccessible. Examples of navigation and usability challenges on SF State Web sites:

Inconsistent global and sub navigation

- o Global and sub navigation placement inconsistent relative to page
- o Global and sub navigation placement inconsistent relative to each other
- o Global navigation content and links inconsistent
- o Missing navigation
- o Logo not linked to home (not following established navigation conventions)
- o Dead ends
- o Back button escape

Missing “just-in-time” navigation

- o Most sites assessed during this phase lack features that provide sitewide help to users at any time, otherwise known as “just-in-time” navigation. These features support frequent and common global (sitewide) actions such as search, site map, login, contact.

Inconsistent footer navigation

- o Legal, copyright, terms and conditions, privacy, accessibility

Poor information organization and hierarchy

- o 2-D, flat organization (not enough drill-down)
- o Too much drill-down (no breadcrumbs to extricate)
- o Lack of organization impedes semantic HTML markup

Poor visual hierarchy and user feedback

- o Unclear about first action to take
- o Unclear about what information is important
- o Where am I? Which department, which site section... which academic institution?

Too many words and poor choice of words

- o Paths to information obscured by overwriting
- o Needless didactic text accompanying basic precepts
- o “Click here” as a call to action is vague, unconvincing, and a problem for disabled users browsing with screenreaders.
- o Different words for similar processes generate confusion

Code Inconsistency

The HTML code supporting University Web sites is inconsistent and often not in line with current Web programming and accessibility standards. ‘Code anarchy’ at the level currently present in the SF State Web environment does not halt the publishing process, but it can significantly hinder maintainability, accessibility, portability, searchability, and extensibility of University sites. Examples of code inconsistency on SF State Web sites:

Legacy HTML

- o Tables used for layout
- o Deprecated tags and attributes
- o Extensibility impeded by faulty foundations
- o Endangers the long-term viability of the web as a communication medium

No separation of content from presentation

- o No CSS
- o Inline CSS
- o Must touch every page file for maintenance (a significant resource burden)
- o Device dependence (content can’t port to other media)
- o In-document and inline CSS impedes search engine access
- o Inefficient markup bloats pages (server overhead and page load time)

Non-semantic markup

- o Lack or improper use of semantic tags such as h1, h2, blockquote, p
- o Negatively affects search engine results, re-purposing of content, multi-device compatibility

Markup fails accessibility checkpoints

- o Lack or improper use of alt attribute on img tags
- o Lack of longdesc attribute for information-carrying visuals
- o Improper or incomplete markup for forms and data tables
- o Lack of clear navigation mechanisms and constructs
- o Inattention to colors relative to color-blindness and contrast for low vision

Markup fails validation

- o CSS validation failure
- o HTML validation failure
- o Accessibility checkpoint failure
- o Javascript errors and warnings



Conclusions

Insight Gained

The insight gained during the assessment process will help us craft strategies to address the following issues:

- o The University's brand, stature and public profile are diminished by underwhelming, uncoordinated web design
- o SF State Web sites engender user frustration through a lack of consistency that creates obtuse and treacherous paths to information
- o A haphazard approach to development and standards inevitably leads to inefficient and costly resource allocation

Solutions

Because the University does not currently support a centralized web development unit or content management system, the proposed deliverable for this project is page templates, standards and guidelines for use by developers in creating or updating SF State sites in a variety of hosting and publishing environments. The template program will:

- o Lock in required branding and global navigation elements
- o Provide an overall look and feel with a variety of schemes for site-specific identity and navigation
- o Offer flexibility for different types, amounts, and depths of content
- o Use accessible, standards-based markup and code along with the application of best practices for usability
- o Separate presentation and content using XHTML and CSS to allow for global modifications to presentation and style without altering content
- o Ensure extensibility—the provision for future change while minimizing impact to existing systems

A Positive Step

The SF State Web Template Program is a positive step toward greater consistency, better branding and increased user satisfaction. The program will provide a solid foundation for creating University Web sites that are:

- o Powerful
- o Accessible
- o Maintainable



Next Steps

The next steps in the SF State Web Template Program will seek to standardize key site components and provide developers with tools and resources to help them effectively create, update, and maintain compelling, consistent and attractive University sites.

Phase 2: Definition

- o Define page types, content components, user profiles, organizational entities, template list
- o Create org chart (web-oriented only)
- o Create site map
- o Create wireframes

Phase 3: Design

- o Create page designs based on wireframes, content definitions
- o Create html templates

Phase 4: Implementation

- o Create template delivery system
- o Create guidelines and documentation
- o Create migration plan
- o Create internal communications plan
- o Migrate



Appendix

Quantitative analysis

Survey results