

Using the UA Web

Observations, Suggestions, and Comparisons

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Introduction

To get an idea of the kind of usability victories and struggles we have in our current MAU web pages, an informal study was undertaken to determine how easy it was to find information and navigate the MAU web sites.

In addition, other web sites in the UA system were examined for both good and bad examples. Good examples of “portals done right” are presented. There is also a brief section on making things useful to the individual.

A bibliography with additional resources and notes is included.

Task Comparisons for UAA, UAF, and UAS Web Sites

To get an idea of the usability of the MAUs' web sites, one must determine how long it takes to complete a task, or to find the desired information. To do this, several student-oriented tasks were chosen. These tasks were designed to be representative of the type of information for which a typical student might search.

The items or pages for which we searched were:

- ✓ The academic calendar (When do I start classes?)
- ✓ Financial aid status (What have I been awarded, and for what do I qualify?)
- ✓ Current classes (What's my schedule?)
- ✓ Intramural sports (How do I get involved?)
- ✓ Student jobs (How do I get employed on campus?)
- ✓ Register a vehicle
- ✓ Pay a parking fine

Note: All these searches were started from the respective MAU's main web page. That is, www.uaa.alaska.edu for UAA, www.uaf.edu for UAF, and www.uas.alaska.edu for UAS.

Academic Calendar

UAA

Click Academics

Nothing there

BACK

Click Admissions and Registration

Nothing there

BACK

Notice "Current Students" link at the top

Click Current Students

Click Academic Calendar

August 30.

Four clicks, six if you count BACK. Could have been two clicks, but my eye was drawn to the list of links on the bottom right of the page.

UAF

Click on Current Students

Click Quick Links drop down --> Class Schedule

Click "Schedule of Classes" but that just lists classes.

Click on Calendar (finally)

Click on calendar again, after waiting to be redirected,

Scrolled down and found that school starts Sept 2.

Five clicks

A google search on the UAF site showed me I should have selected

Quicklinks --> Catalog

On that page, second item in the left column was "Academic Calendar"

That would have been 4 clicks.

An entry of "Schedule of Classes" should have an Academic Calendar link somewhere around it. On the old UAF site, there was a link directly on the "Current Students" page. The new UAF site is harder to use (for me) as it takes much more digging, and I usually

resort to using the Site Search, AKA Google. I have done this, for example, to try to find the Course Finder, as it did not occur to me to look under "Schedule of Classes." When I didn't find it on the Current Students page, as I was used to doing, I searched for it. (The old site had it in two clicks)

UAS

Click "Campus Calendar"

Click "UAS Academic Calendar"

Two clicks

Financial Aid Status

UAA

Click Current Students

Click Financial Aid/Scholarships

Click Check Financial Aid Status

--Taken to UA Online page...no prelude, no instructions

Same procedure as below for UAF

Way too many clicks

UAF

Click Current Students

Click Financial Assistance

Click "Check Your Financial Aid Status"

Click "Go to the Secure Site"

(No instructions to log in, just "You are about to enter a secure site")

Financial Aid Info (Most logical)

There's a link to "UAF Financial Aid Home Page" -- Wasn't I just there?

I see that pretty logo, and it takes me a while to see the line that says "Access your financial aid information at Login to Secured Area from the UAOnline home page"

Click "Login to Secured Area" and I'm back at the UA Online home page

Which is now www.uaonline.alaska.edu

Click "Login to Secured Area"

OOPS - "The IP address of the host www.uaonline.alaska.edu does not match the one the certificate was issued to."

Click continue

Enter User ID and Password and click login
Click student services
Click Financial Aid
Click My Award Information
Click Award By Aid Year
Select Aid Year
Click Submit

Twelve clicks

UAS

Click Students
Click Financial Aid
Click Fin Aid Site Index
Hover over various menu options
Nothing about checking my status
Menu "Consumer Info" -> Information Access -> UA Online, but no instructions or indications that is where I would find my Fin Aid status
After following a logical path, and four or five clicks, I still don't know where to go from here...and I'm usually pretty persistent.

Current Classes

UAA

Click Current Students (I know about it this time)
Not sure where to go from here
Click Course Catalogs and schedules
Nothing here...
Click Enrollment Services
Catalogs and Schedules seems logical
Click Catalogs and Schedules
Nope
Click Current Students again
Click Academic Advising
Click Useful Links
Find a link labeled "Blackboard (UA Online)" that points to UA Online, but nothing indicating I could find my course list there.

BACK

BACK

Type "class schedule" into search

Click "Current Registration Information" -- Nope

BACK

Click "A to Z"

Find Schedule Search

Click Schedule Search

Give up

Ten clicks, 13 if you count BACK, and still haven't found what I'm looking for

UAF

Click Current Students

Click Student Records

Click Class Schedule and Registration

Get presented with any overwhelming array of information

Nothing about my current classes

BACK

Click Scheduling Information and Forms

No good

BACK

BACK

Notice a link at the very bottom of the "Current Students" page about "Academics"

Click Academics

Click Catalogs and Schedules

Nothing here either.

BACK

Click Academic Advising

Nothing there either, so I give up

Seven clicks, 11 if you count BACK, and I still haven't found what I'm looking for.

UAS

Click "Students"

There's that UA Online link again, but nothing that tells me what I can do with it.

Click Course Schedule -- Just course listings

BACK

And I see no other logical links. I give up.

The correct answer, of course, is to log into UA Online, and go to the current schedule, but I was never told that.

Intramural Sports

UAA

Click Athletics

Click Intramural Sports

Two clicks

UAF

Hover Over Athletics

Click Intramural Sports

One click, or two if I had clicked on Athletics.

UAS

Click Students

Nothing really explicit on this page, let's try...

Click "Student Activities Center"

Nothing about it there

BACK

Click "UAS Recreation Center"

BACK

Click Student Senate/Clubs - Nope

Three Clicks, five if you count back, and I'm at a dead end. Anywhere else to look?

Student Jobs

UAA

Click Current Students

Click Career Services Center -- seems most logical of choices

Click Employment
Click Students: View all current job postings
But it makes me log in...never mind

UAF

Hover Over Current Students
Click Student Jobs
Taken to a Financial Aid Page!? HUH!?
Click Campus Jobs
Click Student Jobs
Click "Click here for a list of student jobs"

Four clicks, but could have been three. Or five and four if I had clicked on Current Students.

UAS

Click "Students"
Click "Career Services"
Click "Employment Opportunities"
Click <http://www.ecampusrecruiter.com/uas>

4 clicks...but I have to log in...I just want to see a list.

Register a Vehicle

UAA

Click Current Students
Click Student Life
Click Parking Services
Click Parking Permits
Nothing there
BACK
Click FAQ
Scroll down, and find "How do I pay a citation"

Five clicks, six if you count the BACK, But still not a very logical spot.

UAF

Click Current Students

Click Campus Life

Nothing there

Type parking permit in search

Click First result: Parking Permits, but UAF calls them parking *Decals* apparently, so

Click Parking Decals

Still nothing on getting one

Click Parking Fees

Still nothing about getting a parking decal

Click link for Vehicle Registration Card and get a 404/Not Found

Parking manual has something about needed them, etc, but nothing (obvious) about getting them, where to get them

Six clicks, and I still haven't found what I'm looking for, and don't know where to look next.

UAS

Click Students

Nothing about parking

Search for "parking"

There is a FAQ in the housing section about whether or not I have to pay for parking.

The answer to the question says there is no fee for the main campus, but there is a fee for parking at housing. A flier also found in the search says that parking permits are enforced.

Pay a Parking Fine

UAA

Click Current Students

Click Student Life

Click Parking Services

Instructions right there on the page, with link. Don't even have to come in to the office (hint, hint UAF)

Three clicks, and I have what I need.

UAF

Click Current Students

Nothing there

BACK

Didn't see anything else that made sense...

Click Directory

Find Parking Services on Department Listings

Click Department Search

Empty result set

BACK

BACK

Type parking in the search box and hit enter

First result: parking services

Click the result

Still nothing about paying my fine. Don't know where to go from here.

I finally found instructions on paying a fine in the Parking Manual (a link to which is on the main Parking page).

In addition, parking page has a link to the West Ridge Construction update. Going to that page results in a message that the page was shut down October 24, 2003. The parking main page itself was last updated September 19, 2002.

UAS

Click Students

Nothing that even gives a hint of where to go

Click A-Z

Nothing about parking

Search for "parking"

There is a FAQ in the housing section about whether or not I have to pay for parking.

The answer to the question says there is no fee for the main campus, but there is a fee for parking at housing. A flier also found in the search says that parking permits are enforced.

Searching for "paying parking fine" returns nothing useful

Find English Department and requirements for Degree in English

UAA

Click Academics

Click English

Click Degree Programs & Courses

Click Undergraduate Courses

Click English Major Requirements

But it says *nothing* about needing additional course (core, etc): no links, no notes about completing general requirements, nothing.

So, five clicks, but I was not told I need anything else. If I'm astute, I'll go searching again.

Click UAA (UAA home page)

Click Academics

Nothing under this page about core or general requirements

So it's been seven clicks, but I still don't have everything I need

UAF

Click Academics (but first I tried Future Students, and didn't find anything obvious)

Click Departments

Click English

Click Degrees Offered

Click Bachelor of Arts

Lists the major requirements. BUT!! It says "Complete the general university requirements and B.A. degree requirements" So off I go.

No link back to the main UAF page. Top image is a link back to Main English department page, but is not marked as such, and there is no marked link to main English department page.

Click Image

Bottom right, there is a UAF graphic

Click graphic, now at main UAF page, but in a new window.

Click to close English department page

Click Academics

Click "core curriculum" (assuming, but the English department page should say "core curriculum," i.e. consistent terminology)

Ten clicks and I've found what I need

UAS

Click Academic Programs

Click on the English Graphic; the text 'English' is not a link

Click Literature

Notes that you must complete general education requirements. Now to find those requirements

Click the link for the Catalog, since that seems logical

Click 2004 - 2005 Academic Catalog

Click table of contents

Click General University Requirements

Takes me to a 57 page PDF.

BACK

Oh! It's on page 55 (i.e. page 1-57 is all one PDF)

Click General University Requirements

Click on page 55

Tells me to review my degree program in this catalog to find particular courses needed.

If I go to the next page "General Education Requirements," I find the list I'm looking for

9 clicks, 10 if you include the BACK

For comparison, the Computer Science departments (at both UAA and UAF) list (or link to the list of) the full course requirements. CS at UAF even has a handy checklist you can print out to keep track of what you've taken and what you have left.

Find the IS department and requirements for degree in Information Systems

UAA

www.uaa.alaska.edu

Click Academics

Click Management Information Systems

Click "in Management Information Systems"
Click "MIS Planning Sheet"

In four clicks I know what courses I need, and a good sequence in which to take them

UAF

Click Academics
Click Accounting and Information Systems
Click Programs
Click Accounting and Information Systems
This is not what I want.

BACK

BACK

BACK

The only thing about computers is Computer Engineering

Because I'm familiar with UAF, I know to

Click Mathematical Sciences

Click Computer Science

Nothing about information services

No link back to UAF main page (or even CNSM)

Click link for UAF Catalog

Click Degrees and Programs at a Glance

Click link for Computer Information Systems

Shows it as a minor only

Provides a link to the second Accounting and Information Systems page above

Click that link

No information regarding the minor in Computer Information Systems

Nine clicks, 12 if you include BACK

UAS

Click Academic Programs

Click Information Systems

Click Bachelors

Click "course requirements"

Takes me to a page listing all the classes I'll need, plus a link to all the General Ed.

requirements

Four clicks

Small Annoyances: UAS

When designing the layout and linking in a website, there are certain things to keep in mind. One of them is how to make it easy for a user to get where they want to go. The other, and probably just as important, is to make it easy for a user to get back to where they came from, in a logical, conventional, way. The usual convention on most web sites (including UAF and UAA) is to make the MAU logo a link back to the MAU's main web page. For some reason, UAS does not follow this, despite having two large and prominently displayed logos on nearly all of their pages. The user then must notice a link, in eight point type, near the top-right of the page (not the place the eye is naturally drawn, especially with the two large logos) that is the link to the home page.

Keeping in mind small design decisions and procedures such as these will go a long way in making the user's experience on a web site the best that it can be.

Notes on other UA Sites

UA Online: An exercise in navigational frustration

Getting in (and out)

Many MAU sites link to UA Online for services. But, there is no logical way to get back to the site from which it was linked, unless you work your way through the tree again. These sites should open the link in a new window.

Navigating around UA Online (a few examples)

Log In

Student Services...

Student Records

Academic Transcript

Select Transcript type and hit submit

Now, how do I get back to select transcript?

There is a "Return to menu" option in the top right corner, but return to *which* menu?

And when I click that, it takes me all the way back to the student records menu. I just wanted to change the type of transcript (from Grad to undergrad)

In other areas, such as Financial aid, click return to menu when you're in an eligibility option takes you back to the eligibility menu. That makes sense.

Inconsistency One:

Financial Aid -> My Eligibility -> Academic Transcript -> Return to Menu takes me back to Student records, not Financial Aid. *That's* not right.

Inconsistency Two:

Financial Aid -> My Eligibility -> Student Requirements -> Return to Menu takes me all the way back to Financial Aid menu, not the Eligibility menu.

Mislabeled

What degree evaluation? Click Unofficial Degree Evaluation from the Student Records menu just tells me what I'm currently pursuing.

TVC: course requirements done right

A quick jaunt to the TVC (www.tvc.uaf.edu) site shows that they have all their degree programs laid out very nicely with complete check lists of courses needed. In three clicks I can have the complete list of courses needed for my desired degree or certificate.

Some may argue that due to the general education requirements this presents much redundancy. They are absolutely right. *But*. We are doing this for the convenience of the student, not the site maintainers. Thus, when we make information easy to find, it might be redundant, but it will be in a form that the student can easily comprehend, and it will not force the student to click through many, many links in an attempt to gather all their information.

Good Portal Examples

One of the best ways to learn how to do something is by studying other examples. Thus, if we want to design a good portal, we need to find examples of good portals.

www.FirstGov.gov

Probably one of the most well known portals is the United States Government's FirstGov. To pick a random task, I wanted to find out how to get a replacement Social Security

Card (something I actually had to do recently).

So, I went to FirstGov. Once there, I am presented with several options. At the top of the page I have a search bar. Immediately below that there are a few informational links (along with a link to get the portal in a different language). Most importantly, there is a site map, if you want to dig through the entire site yourself.

Down the left side are 1) links to major government units (including other portals, and other states), 2) Ways to contact your government, and 3) links to reference information.

Across the top are the major categories: For Citizens, For Business and Non-Profits, For Federal Employees, and Government to Government. Below this bar, there is a list of the most popular links, labeled “Get it done,” with a link to more, and below that, a list of most popular topics, again with a link to more.

Along the right side there is a news side bar, and below that, a list of links that groups resources by audience.

So, about this quest for a replacement Social Security card. I went to the main FirstGov site. Under “Get it done,” there is a link to “Apply for Social Security.” That's not exactly what I want to do, so I click on the *more* link. The list is alphabetized, so I scroll down to “Social Security Online,” and click. This takes me to a list of the “Top 10 Most Requested Services from Social Security Online.” I click link number five: “How To Replace, Correct, or Change Your Name on your Social Security Card.” In three clicks, I have all the information I need to replace my social security card.

Other common tasks are listed under the “Get It Done Online” section: E-File Your Taxes, Contact Elected Officials, See Lottery Results (*sigh*), and Shop Government Auctions, among others.

As for something that is buried a little deeper, I went searching for how to apply for Federally Subsidized Housing (something *else* I've had to do recently: newly married, still a student, and all that). Starting at the FirstGov main page, I follow these links:

Family, Home and Community

Homes and Housing (internal link, i.e. Link to somewhere else on the same page)

Home and Community Information , by State
Alaska
search for a HUD-subsidized apartment
Select Fairbanks, select 2 bedrooms, click next.

Six clicks, and I have found the information I need. If only it was that easy to find my current list of classes.

Of Important Note: FirstGov fits the definition of a true portal.

- It, of itself, does not contain most of the content.
- It does not promote or demote any one group, agency, organization, or department
- It has completely neutral branding: it uses the logos and colors of the the United States, letting the individual departments define their own design schemes

<http://www.linuxlinks.com/> - *The Linux Portal*

So I'm a geek...sure I'm going to bring Linux into this somehow. :)

LinuxLinks is another example of a portal that works. Although much simpler than the FirstGov portal, it provides quick and easy access to Linux-related information in a logical, organized way. It breaks links up into categories, and allows you to browse by category, or do a full keyword search. Another nice feature is the ability to create an account on the site and keep a personal bookmarks list of your favorite links on LinuxLinks.

<http://www.esa.int/esaCP/> - *European Space Agency Portal*

Yet another example of a good (and fun) portal. The European Space Agency Portal has sections organized by topic, with the ability to search by keyword. Recent (or important) news is on the main page, and there are links to the full stories. Topics are in the top left area, services in the bottom left. Things that would be most in demand right now are organized on the right side (Mars, International Space Station, Ozone reports, etc).

<http://onestop.umn.edu/> - *University of Minnesota*

This is a good example of a portal that doesn't even require one to login. Clicking on your role on the main page gives you links and tabs that quickly take you to the

information you need. In three or four clicks (five at most) you will be able to find most of what you need to help you along in your student career.

<http://www.washington.edu/protos/myuw/demo/> - *UW Demos*

The University of Washington has several mock ups of portals that pertain to various roles in the university system. Quite an interesting perusal. Especially interesting are the roles that do *not* pertain to students.

<http://www.buffalo.edu/aboutmyub/> - *University of Buffalo*

The University of Buffalo has an active, login required, portal. But they also have demonstrations of various area should you not have an account. Good examples of tailoring content and channels to the specific needs of the audience.

<http://utdirect.utexas.edu/utdirect/> - *University of Texas*

Has a test drive to log in. One of the first things you notice when you log in is the *big* channel labeled “Change your UT Direct Component.” What a concept! Let the user choose the campus they want to use as their primary campus. And once they do that, the page to which they are taken has a common look, feel, logo, and color scheme, regardless of which campus they choose. Multi-campus done right.

Yes, I know UA is made up of three separate, individually accredited, universities, but I think we could still follow something along these lines. Even if the student chooses the campus, when we have skins for Luminis, we can set the colors based on campus chosen.

Information: When I Want It, Where I Want It, How I Want It

As a student, when it comes to getting the information I want, whether it be my list of classes, or the time of the next game, I couldn't care less what the logo in the top left (or right) is, or what colors it uses, as long as it is readable, functional, and logically organized.

When I log in to MyUA, I don't want to have to mess with a UAF Student Tab, and a UAA Student Tab, ad nauseam, if I should be enrolled at different campuses. When I log

in, I want things that pertain to me, and only things that pertain to me: my list of classes (preferably with links to blackboard); system and personal announcements; a box showing my online calendar and any pending events; links to various resources (links that point to resources on my primary campus) such as Library, Book Store, Student Government, and the like; probably a search box, with options as to what site to search (the web, UAA, UAF, UAS, Statewide, etc); links to information about my degree program, degree audit, and adviser; direct links to UA Online functions such as financial aid information, account balances, and registration.

I do not want to be bombarded with propaganda, information, and links that do not currently apply to my situation and what I want to do. If I want more information about my primary campus, I'll go to that campus' web site. If I just want my information, I'll stay on my page.

And my one overarching goal: I want to be able to do everything in my student career (with the possible exception of going to class) without having to set foot in an office: register for classes, pay bills, obtain a parking permit, turn in a graduate student contract letter, check my financial aid status, and apply to for student loans, just to name a few. A good example that shows heading in the write direction is UAF's Privately Funded Scholarship (PFS) application. You can apply online, and then direct your letter of recommendation writers to a URL, and they can submit their letters of recommendation online. No paper, no running around: all electronic. The way it should be.

Portals: Useful to the Individual, Not the Unit

This is somewhat of an extension of the above section, but nevertheless, a more general discussion of how the UA Portal should operate.

Webster's Dictionary defines "portal" as a "door, entrance; especially: a grand or imposing one." Now, MyUA is not designed or planned to be "grand or imposing," even if having a one-stop-shop for all my info would be grand. But I digress. A portal, in this case a web portal, is an entry way. It is designed to present, in an easily understood summary format, most (if not all) the information a person might want to use on a day-to-day basis, and links to other information used somewhat less often. It is not to be site that promotes any one department, group, or unit of the organization it serves. "The portal is a tool for the individual, not the University. The individual must have complete control over the information presented within the portal....The purpose of a portal is to have one

place that brings all the information relevant to an individual together. You cannot do that if the information is fragmented between 'My Library', 'My Alumni Page', 'My Business Office', 'My Student Services' etc. A portal is a tool for an individual, to help that individual manage the information provided to him by all departments in a University. Portals are *not tools for departments* [emphasis mine]. Thus the whole concept of a 'My Library' or 'My Alumni Page' is flawed, because that's taking the emphasis off the individual, and putting it on the department providing this limited department-only portal.” (My University Portals FAQ) A portal *is*, however, a site that allows quick and easy access to the plethora of resources provided by the departments, groups, and units of the organization.

Can the look and feel be customized? Yes, by the user, *if they wish*. Can the content be customized? Yes, by the user to a degree (excepting any mandatory channels). Should a *default* portal page be geared to “any one department, group, or unit of the organization it serves?” No! The portal serves the individual, not the group. Once a user has been presented with an initial layout, maybe even with additional layouts that pertain to their particular function, they are then free to add, remove (within reason), and otherwise customize their portal experience, choosing MAU-specific channels and colors—if they wish.

Bibliography and Additional Resources

University of Kansas Digital Library Portal Design Working Group: Recommendations and Guidelines

http://kudiglib.ku.edu/projects/wgs/portal_wg/portal_report_final.pdf

See especially “Design and Navigation” on page five.

Also see “Customization and Personalization” on page six

Also some good questions that could still be asked about MyUA on pages 10 and 11

Developing Design Recommendations for Computer Interfaces Accessible to Illiterate Users

<http://www.seas.upenn.edu/~matthewh/publications/huenerfauth-2002-thesis.pdf>

Granted, while 99.9%+ of our users will be literate, nevertheless some good guidelines on making things logical and easy to use.

Accessibility Evaluation of the OneStart Portal

<http://www.indiana.edu/~usable/reports/accessibility%20report.pdf>

See especially the recommendations on page seven

Maine State Web Standards

<http://www.state.me.us/CIO/standards/webstandards.htm>

<http://www.state.me.us/ispb/STANDARD/webstandardsjune2003.pdf>

(Same document, one is in PDF format)

Good example of standards for page and site design. Making things uniform from one site to another so that users can find things easily.

User Interface Design Guide for Online Applications

http://www.georgia.gov/vgn/images/portal/cit_1210/9005584Application_Style_Guide_Version_3.0.pdf

Great example and resource of portal standards done right. See page nine for an excellent example of a flow chart for something as simple as a contact form. See page 17 for a screen-shot based flow chart of all possible paths through an application. Excellent idea! Page 23: printing concerns; Page 26: basic layout; Page 46: positive vs. negative imagery;

My University Portals FAQ V1.0

http://www.usask.ca/web_project/uwebd/portals_faq.html

See “How is a Portal different from a normal web site?” for a tips on explaining what a

portal is to those who (still) don't get it. Also read "Customization."