

Executive Summary

We analyzed 6 competitor websites ranging from direct competition like other junior colleges that are in state, to out-of-state junior colleges to online junior colleges.

These analyses were beneficial in that we discovered a lot of things that we want to avoid in our redesign and how we will go about designing our site differently. Really, out of the six competitor sites, only two stood out as far as a genuinely positive overall experience. But, by examining what works in those two sites, we were able to glean a lot of useful information for our site redesign.

Let's begin with what didn't work with four of the sites. As users, we found that the websites that were least appealing were the ones with too much content or clutter on the homepage. With too much information in one place, you find that you don't really want to explore any further within the site. For example, LA City College had two slideshows on the homepage (going at the same time) as well as 4 columns that look more like coupons cut out of different newspapers. The fonts are inconsistent and the colors (red, blue, yellow, and purple) are off-putting and distracting. This is already enough to make a user look for another college to attend. Lesson Number 1: Less is more. Don't overwhelm the user with too much content.

The site for Pasadena City College, while not as cluttered as the LA City College site, still left much to be desired. There is a background image behind the header, which works well. The eye is immediately drawn to that first. But then, it seems the hierarchy breaks down. The main navigation bar is too small and the gray-on-gray color palette causes the type to get lost.

For our redesign, we want to focus, first and foremost, on hierarchy and navigation. We want to create an intuitive experience for the user. We also want to determine what is most important to a prospective student and then place that on the page. As far as target audience is concerned, prospective students will be the primary focus with currently enrolled students being second, and faculty and alumni being third and fourth. Given this, one of our goals with the navigation is to predict what the prospective student is most likely to click on first, second, third, fourth, etc. But we must also be sure to not lose sight of the needs of currently enrolled students. Given this, based on the client's wishes, increasing enrollment is one of the primary objectives for this redesign.

The University of Phoenix had a clean look and, due to its straightforward navigation, it never felt confusing or overwhelming. The homepage has three sections which are probably what prospective students are most interested in: how to enroll, degrees offered, and employment opportunities upon graduation. But, it must also be noted that, while there is nothing wrong with the site visually, compared to other competitor sites, the design or aesthetic value felt somewhat underwhelming. There is just nothing to get you excited about going to this school. It is possible to maintain a professional and clean look while still creating visual interest for the user. The color palette is white, gray, and either black or blue for the font. Again, underwhelming. Color choice will be important for our site. We want to maintain the user's interest while, at the same time, not distracting he/she with too many colors or disharmonious colors.

As far as sites that we rated favorably, Angelina College is clean and concise with a look and feel that, while not entirely off-putting, could use improvement. The content is well-placed, which makes for easy and intuitive navigation. Again, it could use some improvement as far as the visual aesthetic. There are too many gradients (on every button in the navigation) and the small white type against the dark blue makes it difficult to read. Other than that, it ultimately fulfills its primary duty as a resource of information (with information for prospective students being the primary focus). This is mostly due to the easy navigation and lack of clutter.

And, on the topic of streamlined and user-friendly navigation, Brevard College is an excellent example. The site doesn't go too deep and, therefore, the user can never get "lost." The color scheme is made up of cool colors (blues and greens) that add to the aesthetically pleasing design. Another site that stood out is the DeVry University site. The site is clean, professional, and with its limited color palette (mostly dark

blue, light blue and gray) it's never overwhelming to the senses. What is important to note is that the only time the color palette strays is on the homepage. It has two rollover buttons (one in red and one in orange.) These warm colors create a visual interest and sense of excitement (about the future? about going to this school?) for the first-time visitor. The navigation is intuitive with the most important areas of interest are on the homepage. There is a nice hierarchy here with the image and tagline at the top being the visual focus. There are videos on almost every subpage which creates a personal experience for the user. Also, it's worth noting that the user has the choice as to whether or not to play the videos. If they played automatically, our opinion would be very different for this site. If I was choosing between colleges (but was opposed to online colleges) this site may make me change my mind. It provides a feeling of professionalism and quality that is found lacking in many other sites. And, when one is investing in one's future, this is extremely important.