# UT Dallas Admissions and Enrollment Web Redesign Plan

By: Cary B. Delmark | February 2019

## Overview

In 2014, we embarked on a project to redesign our admissions website and related pages for prospective undergraduate students at The University of Texas at Dallas ([before and after views](http://www.utdallas.edu/webservices/enroll-redesign/)). This was a high visibility undertaking to improve the most utilized resource interested students and parents use to learn about UT Dallas. It would need the well-rounded decisions that can only come from plenty of conversations with and concentrated effort from the right people. To ensure our undergraduate admissions website would benefit from these things, I recommended a five-phase plan for the project consisting of a time- and experience-tested process that ensured we put the planning work before the design work (enclosed “Timeline”). Many web projects fail at the beginning by giving in to the strong temptation to jump into the fun design phase before conducting a content review and proper planning phase. My job was to put a great plan in place with the important details thought through by our peers so that we could design an improved website that met the redesign goals with little risk of failure.

## Planning and People

The most important ingredient of any communications project is listening. We needed to be sure we heard several of our constituent groups: prospective students, prospective parents, those just stopping by the website for ten seconds or so to see a glimpse of the university, executive leaders, senior managers, admissions recruiters, employees, technical support staff, marketers, a web designer and web developers among others. The planning stage would consist of several elements intended to help us develop robust objectives: 1) hearing employee stakeholders talk about what they wanted in the new site, 2) studying actual behavior of parents and students on the existing website, 3) assimilating the input into a Creative Brief (enclosed) and rough plan to review with employee stakeholders, and 4) forming a cross-functional project team that would 5) work up a refined plan consisting of a detailed Sitemap (enclosed) with every page name detailed and every content addition and deletion clearly identified. This team would later add more members of the web services team who would design and code the new site.

Great websites work on a simple principle: put the user first and make the information they seek easy to find. We would ensure we put our website visitors first by listening to prospective students and their parents with a structured method for listening called usability testing. It serves the same intent as focus groups but realizes superior results. Where focus groups emphasize structured listening as customers talk, usability testing is organized around observing a customer in person while (s)he interacts with a website to do common tasks, and then noting his behavior and reactions as he does so. We drew up a list of tasks we would test for three distinct groups, noted in the files with “Usability Questions” in their filenames. We would perform observations via usability testing on the existing website before we redesigned it by teaming with the director of freshman recruiting to gather parents and students while they were touring campus. As an incentive to spend an extra hour with our web team, we offered two gift cards to the university bookstore and campus dining that could be used that day. Some great inputs came out of this process and are detailed in the document titled Summary of Usability Testing. We shared these findings with the executive team, the project team and then used them to inform the design stage of the project.

## Content

Information is the ultimate reason people come to websites and the content on the undergraduate admissions website is critical to the decision-making process for prospective students and parents. It is where UT Dallas delivers information on automatic admission criteria, acceptable test scores for high school students, acceptable GPA for transfer students, admissions process, campus tour information and more. From experience, I knew it would be easy for the stakeholders and project team to become distracted by pretty design and cutting-edge code, so I would need to raise the visibility of the content effort. To do that, I posed the question of who on the admissions team would be best to perform a top-to-bottom content review of the existing 90 pages on this website at one of our early meetings with the senior managers of admissions and marketing. My recommendations were that we call this person the content producer and that (s)he join our project team for several months so we could see strong integration with the overall effort. He heard my request and decided to assign it to the director of freshman recruiting. It would take extra support on his part to reallocate some of her work. Her job required constantly dealing with interruptions in the form of questions from parents and students, so we would have to work to find quiet time for her to concentrate on it. In my mind the “distraction” of continuous parents’ questions was one of the best inputs for our project. Our content producer did a magnificent job ensuring every page detailed in the Content Delivery Spreadsheet (enclosed) was reviewed, edited and delivered in Word document form to the web team for HTML production.

## The Results

The new website launched in July of 2015. Some of the highlights of the new site included:

* an eye-catching [Explore page](http://www.utdallas.edu/enroll/explore) that shows UT Dallas has a little fun to go along with its serious academics
* a more effective [Admissions Counselor page](https://www.utdallas.edu/enroll/contact/admissions-counselors/) organized by geography rather than alphabetical last name
* an [Affordability page](https://www.utdallas.edu/enroll/affordability) that showcased several third-party endorsements of the university’s cost efficiency and lower debt load

We were able to measure success using three indicators:

* a 9 - 14% increase in page visits after redesign, depending on the date comparison window
* a good new problem when events for prospective students began filling to capacity (our admissions colleagues attributed this to the prospective student event registration forms becoming so easy to complete on smartphones.)
* an observed increase in usage of the [#futurecomet](https://www.utdallas.edu/enroll/tagboard/) hashtag

We also achieved all the objectives we established in the creative brief. I am pleased to share that our communication project is still serving prospective students, parents and visitors today at [utdallas.edu/enroll](http://www.utdallas.edu/enroll).