User Experience Brief

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Introduction

About this Document

This document's focus is on user experience strategy (determining, prioritizing, and designing a website's content, features, and functionality to meet both the College's business goals and end-user needs) and content strategy (planning for the creation, publication, and governance of useful, usable web content). It does not contained detailed specifications for the new Thomas website. Rather, it provides context for developing those specifications.

The main purpose of this document is to set the stage for success in this project. More specifically, it is intended to provide additional background and align project owners and key stakeholders on:

- The project's background, purpose, and specific challenges to overcome
- Organizational goals and project objectives
- Target audiences and their goals and tasks
- Communications strategies, including key messages, perception and tone, and look and feel
- Content management and governance considerations to ensure that the redeveloped website is sustainable
- Team responsibilities, timelines, and processes for the redevelopment project In addition, this document will be used as a reference for the Lawlor project team of strategists, writers, designers, and developers throughout the remainder of the assignment.

Methodology

The information in this document is based on in-person interviews with key stakeholders, faculty, staff, students, and alumni at Thomas College. Interviews were conducted with:

- Laurie Lachance, President
- Jonathan Kent, Vice President of Enrollment Management
- Wendy Martin, Dean of Admissions
- Chris Rhoda, Chief Information Officer
- Todd Smith, Board of Trustees Co-Chair
- Jen Buker, Director of Public Relations
- Beth Gibbs, Chief Financial Officer
- Tom Edwards, Provost
- Bob Moore, Vice President of Advancement
- Small groups of:
    - Current students
    - Student ambassadors
    - High school guidance counselors
    - Faculty and staff

It is also based on additional documents available (including the College's strategic plan, marketing plan, and SWOT analysis), and takes into account findings from the Qualitative Perception survey.

Project Background

About Thomas College

Thomas College is a small, private, liberal arts and pre-professional college in Waterville, Maine, with approximately 700 students enrolled in undergraduate, degree completion/continuing studies, and graduate programs.

For most of its history, Thomas has been known for its business focus—even referred to as "Maine's Business College." Today, however, the College offers an expanded academic program and attracts students who are interested in a "practical" liberal arts education. Popular areas of study include criminal justice, information technology/computer science, sports management, elementary education, and psychology]. A distinguishing feature of Thomas is its Guaranteed Job Program, which is offered to all students who meet the program's requirements and ensures job placement within six months of graduation. Most of the Thomas student body comes from Maine and stays in Maine after graduation, serving as an attractive source of hard-working and well-trained employees for Maine employers.

Students who attend Thomas are "average" students grade-wise, but often wise beyond their years. They're frequently the first in their family to attend college and have a strong work ethic. Many students become better poised for success by participating in the College's "Edge" program, which provides a "jump start" on their college education through a free one-week intensive program and individualized coaching throughout the fall semester.

The Thomas community was described to us as close-knit, where students develop close relationships with faculty and staff. With a small student body and faculty, "you can't get lost," described one student. Interview participants recounted stories of faculty going above and beyond to ensure students' success— including calling students who missed class, or even providing cab fare to attend an important program for incoming students.

Thomas College is undoubtedly "on the move." The late 1980s and early '90s were difficult for Thomas, and financial difficulties caused the College to nearly close its doors. These difficulties were a catalyst for prudent fiscal management and an organizational culture of resourcefulness that created a solid foundation for Thomas to engage in positive momentum seen today. Under the leadership of a vibrant new president and an active and engaged Board of Trustees, the College is focusing on "Thomas tomorrow." Residence halls are bursting with new students, a new campus master plan is unfolding, and new and innovative programs and partnerships are being offered. It is an exciting time to be a part of the Thomas community, and appropriate that the College is embarking on new marketing and communications initiatives to spread the good news and heighten awareness for its institutional brand identity.

The Thomas Web Property

The Thomas website contains content for prospective students; alumni and friends of the College; and current students, faculty, and staff. In addition to the primary Thomas URL (www.thomas.edu), there exists an extranet/intranet (connected to the College's database systems) at www3.thomas.edu and an athletics website at athletics.thomas.edu. (Note: The focus of this work is on the public-facing Thomas website only at www.thomas.edu.)

The Thomas website—like many college and university websites—has evolved over time. It was most recently redeveloped in 2011—a project, that was not deemed a success by the campus community. In many key areas of the site, content isn't compelling; in other areas, it is simply poorly written. The photography on the website is sparse, and the photos that are on the site are of a quality that is hit or miss. The visual design observed did not reflect the professional nature of the College.

The Thomas community also evealed that the College seems to lack a "digital culture." The website has never been at the forefront of the minds of faculty and staff; many interview participants stated they had no idea how to get content on the website. Others stated that when they have tried to update content, they either had to wait an inordinate amount of time to see the content published, or their content was not used in a way that they felt was appropriate.

These challenges primarily stem from the fact that the College has long been understaffed to maintain an institutional website, and its current distributed content management processes are unsupported. Various faculty and staff do have the ability to update "their" content through the site's content management system, DatAvenger, but the system was described as not user-friendly, and due to a lack of oversight, allows inconsistency to be introduced throughout the site's pages. Until recently, the site did not have a dedicated web manager overseeing editorial processes or providing strategic direction for the site's content, features, and functionality; the Sports Information Director was serving in this role in an ad hoc fashion while also maintaining his other responsibilities in the Athletics department.

User Experience Strategy Insights

User experience strategy focuses on determining, prioritizing, and designing a website's content, features, and functionality to meet both the College's business goals and end-user needs.

This section of the document describes what was learned about what Thomas is trying to accomplish (both as an organization and with its website) and the audiences that the College is trying to reach. It also describes the specific needs of those audiences—specifically, what they're trying to achieve with their use of the Thomas website. Combined, this information will guide us in the future development of content, features, and functionality that successfully bridge the gap between the two.

Organizational Goals

Project stakeholders view the website as critical in helping the organization to achieve its goals and objectives. At the highest level, Thomas is operating under a new strategic plan. In particular, the following two pillars of the plan are relevant to the website redevelopment:

> Pillar III: Enrollment, Branding, & Marketing
> Thomas College will be recognized for its distinctive educational program and focus on career and life preparation, which will be a draw for increasing numbers of both undergraduate and graduate students.

> Pillar IV. Advancement & Governance
> Thomas College will benefit and grow from the increasing engagement and support of its Board, alumni, business partners and the community.
> It will be important that these two pillars serve as guideposts for the redevelopment process moving forward and play a key role in influencing decisions on content, features, and functionality.

Project Objectives

In addition to College-wide strategic goals, several objectiveѕs specific to the website redevelopment project itself. Through our early conversations with Thomas, a clearly identified and high priority objective for the redevelopment was to improve the overall user experience of the site for its intended target audience of prospective students. Additionally, through our on-campus interviews with project owners and key stakeholders, we derived that the Thomas website should:

- Provide a more accurate reflection of Thomas College by:
    - o Clearly communicating the attributes of an "ideal" Thomas student.
    - o Elaborating on points of differentiation, including the College's size and location, its focus on a practical education, and its Guaranteed Job Program.
    - o Communicating to alumni and the Waterville and regional community that "this isn't the same Thomas" they once knew.
- Better serve target audiences through:
    - o Providing clear, concise, and to-the-point information to prospective undergraduate students (and their parents and other influencers) about a Thomas education.
    - o Providing more robust content that focuses on the needs of prospective continuing education and graduate students.

o Expanding content for Thomas alumni, the community, and employers about the value that Thomas College brings to the state of Maine.
- Be easily and effectively maintained through:
  - o Establishing roles and responsibilities for content oversight.
  - o The development of an information architecture that is flexible, extensible, and can adapt to the College's growing needs.
  - o The implementation of a more effective content management system that can ease the burden on the site's managers and encourage more regular, frequent updating.

Target Audiences

Based on these goals and objectives, the website should serve two constituent groups: a primary audience group of prospective students; and a secondary audience group of alumni, donors, and supporters (e.g., community members, business partners, etc.). Following is a summary of the key characteristics of two segments of the primary target audience and their particular goals and tasks when using the Thomas website.

TRADITIONAL, FULL-TIME UNDERGRADUATE PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

Characteristically, this individual:
- Is an average or below-average student. (While Thomas has had the reputation of "letting anyone in," the College is working to increase the academic profile of incoming freshmen.)
- Is likely interested in one of the College's core offerings in business and/or criminal justice.
- Is hard-working—possibly holding one, two, or more jobs while a student. He or she may have had to play a role in supporting his or her family during high school.
- Is an active student, playing multiple sports and volunteering; knows how to multitask.
- Is often the first in his or her family to go to college, and takes it seriously.
- May be a transfer student—trying out a state, community, or less expensive college first before transferring to Thomas to complete his or her degree.
- Wants to stay close to home, but still experience college life while living on campus.
- Is focused on outcomes—and getting a job after college.
- Desires to stay in the Maine area post-graduation.

Goals and Tasks:
- Get at-a-glance, to-the-point facts about the College. A prospective Thomas student is likely to begin the college search late in the process—close to the deadline—and as such is not necessarily in "exploratory" mode.
- Gather admission requirements. Given the lower academic profile of prospective students and the strong likelihood that they are first-generation, it's critical they know of any barriers to admission. On the other hand, a higher-profile student needs to clearly know if he or she might not be a good fit for Thomas.
- Find information about transfer credits.
- Get clear information on costs and financial aid.
- Determine whether Thomas offers the students' desired major or area of study. Most students who come to Thomas know "what they're here for," described one interview participant. Very few are undecided.

- Get an honest view of what the College looks like—from the physical plant to the size of residence hall rooms. (Some students set foot on the campus for the first time the day they move in.)
- Find information and evidence on outcomes—from graduation rate to job placement.

ADULT, PART- AND/OR FULL-TIME CONTINUING STUDIES OR GRADUATE STUDENTS

Characteristically, this individual:
- Is from the central Maine area.
- Works full time and has a family.
- Is a mid-level professional with a desire to "get ahead" in life—through career advancement or increased salary.
- May be seeking a second career with a specific academic focus and preparation.
- Seeks out and values a private education over state or online programs, and is particularly attracted to the benefits of the smaller, face-to-face class size.

Goals and Tasks:
- Determine how a Thomas education can fit in with the other aspects of their life—from family to financials.
- Assess the return on investment of the degree.