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Research Guides: Getting Past the Home Page

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Introduction

VCU Librarians have long noticed that students tend to use only the homepages of our LibGuides. For the '12-'13 academic year, homepage views accounted for 66% of total page views, despite homepages accounting for only 19% of all pages. On over 90 multipage guides, 70% of all views were to the homepage.

Distribution of Pages
- Home Pages 19%
- Secondary Pages 81%

Distribution of Views
- Home Page Views 66%
- Secondary Page Views 34%
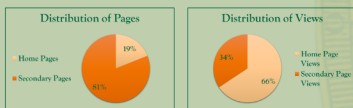
Previous research shows that users often fail to notice navigation tabs,[1-6] and Springshare notes that users don't often get past the homepage.[7] Alternative navigation is recommend by many,[1,2,4-6,8] and one study by Pittsley shows that a duplicate menu improves user navigation of LibGuides.[4]

However, Pittsley only investigated page visits, not whether the resources found on secondary pages were being used.[4] This presented a dilemma for librarians at VCU. Putting what is most important on the homepage[3,5,7,8] and avoiding clutter[2,5-7,9,10] are two recommended best practices. Would adding a menu lead students to content they wanted, or would the menu clutter the home page and make useful information harder to access?

The goal of this study was to determine if a menu on the homepage increased the number of resources guide users found and the number of resources they used.

Analytics

I experimented with six of my LibGuides for science departments that were in need of updating. LibGuides internal statistics were used to track usage of the guides from Sept. 1st, 2013 through April 30th, 2014.

- Page Views were tracked to determine discovery of resources.
- Links, books and documents clicked were tracked to determine usage of resources. From here on, I'll refer to these as 'links'.
- Menu item clicks were tracked to determine use of the menu and use of the tabbed navigation.

Design

The six guides used in the study were split into two groups, three would have a traditional homepage, three would have a menu. With the exception of the homepages, the design of the six guides was as similar as possible. All had the same six secondary pages, and where possible the same boxes were used and the same organization scheme followed. Links were different between the guides, as they needed to be useful to the six different disciplines. Changes to the guides during the year were kept to a minimum. Links affected by the few changes that occured on only one (or a few) of the guides were excluded from the results.

All guides were initially designed with a traditional homepage. Then the traditional homepages were hidden on three of the guides and a homepage featuring a large menu was designed. As seen below, many features are similar between the two styles. The features that differed are as follows...

Traditional Homepage
- Top Article Databases box including three links.
- Books & Reference box including two links.
- more... links leading to the Articles and Books secondary pages.

Menu Homepage
- Large menu with titles and descriptions of the six secondary pages.
- Except for the featured book, no links to resources included.
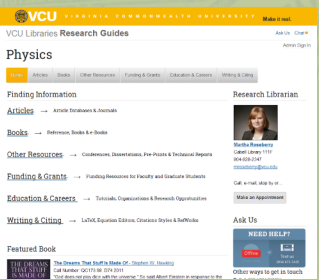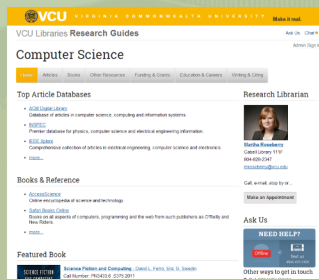
Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is that it used only six guides, which is not a large enough sample to get statistically significant results. In addition, using statistics such as page views and clicked links gives only an approximation of research guide use; a more in-depth user study would be needed to more fully determine how users interact with the guides. Further, these guides were not used equally in instruction and consultations. The guide most heavily used in instruction and consultations was one of the guides with a menu, which may have inflated the averages for guides with menus.

Lastly, VCU Libraries uses a custom style for research guides, in which the tabs are larger and more visible than is usual in the standard LibGuide style. This may allow VCU students to notice the tabs more readily, making this study less relevant for institutions using guides with less visible tabs.
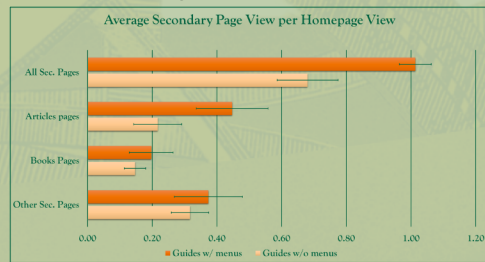
Results: Discovery

Use of the Menu to Discover Content
- On average, menu item clicks accounted for only 27% of the total secondary page views.
- The highest use of a menu item still only accounted for 57% of that secondary page's views.

Dicovery of the Secondary Pages
To account for differences in overall guide use, the secondary page views were divided by the number of homepage views. Average secondary page views per homepage view are shown in the chart below. The error bars represent one standard deviation.

Average Secondary Page View per Homepage View
(Guides w/ menus; Guides w/o menus)
- All Sec. Pages
- Articles pages
- Books Pages
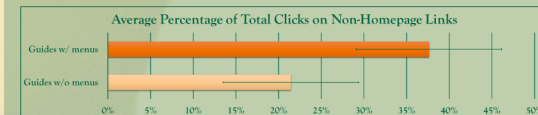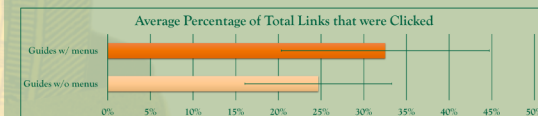- Other Sec. Pages

Results: Use

Unique Link Clicks
The percentage of total links on each guide that were clicked at least once was calculated.

Non-Homepage Clicks
The percentage of total clicks on non-homepage links was calculated. Non-homepage links are defined as links that do not appear on the homepage or, in the case of the guides with menus, links that would not have appeared on the homepage, as determined from the originally created traditional homepages.

Averages are shown below with error bars representing one standard deviation.

Average Percentage of Total Links that were Clicked
- Guides w/ menus
- Guides w/o menus

Average Percentage of Total Clicks on Non-Homepage Links
- Guides w/ menus
- Guides w/o menus

Discussion

Although the menus were used, the tabs (or alternative methods) were used more often to view the secondary pages. This suggests that the tabs were noticed and were the preferred method of navigation.

On guides with menus, secondary pages were viewed more often. This was expected and necessary, as there were no resources on the homepages of these guides. However, the only secondary page to have an increase in views greater than one standard deviation was the Articles page. This suggests that although a menu may slightly improve resource discovery, a menu will do little to broaden discovery of new and different resources.

There was no significant difference in the number of links clicked. Although more difficult to determine from the standard deviation, for the non-homepage clicks p=0.19, meaning this difference is also not statistically significant. This suggests that the menus did little to increase the use of resources and users are unlikely to use more than the first several links, even if they are led to more extensive lists.

In this study, view and use averages for guides with menus were consistently higher than those for the guides without. The secondary page views increased slightly, as did the percentage of total links clicked. Non-homepage links were also clicked more heavily on the guides with menus. However, only six guides were studied and these results are not statistically significant. Even if they were, the difference between the guides with menus and the guides without is so small that it does not indicate that a menu will do much to broaden the resources used. If a menu cannot be added without also increasing clutter, a guide is likely better off without it.

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