

Web and User Experience Program Review Weber State University Committee Report

Reviewers

Dr. Blaine Robertson – Brigham Young University – Idaho, Rexburg, Idaho

Dr. Greg Anderson – Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah

Dr. Sheree Josephson – Weber State University, Ogden, Utah

Introduction

The Web & User Experience (WUX) program review was conducted March 22, 2019 on the main campus of Weber State University in Ogden, Utah.

Unfortunately, Dr. Josephson became ill and had to be excused following the interview with Dean David Ferro early that morning. The remainder of the visit was done by the other two members of the review team and it is their observations that comprise this program review; however, Dr. Josephson has reviewed this final report.

Standards

A. Mission Statement

The stated mission of the program is to “deliver students the highest quality undergraduate experience that will prepare students for employment in the areas of web development and user experience design...”. While we applaud the intent of this statement, the reality is that the program appears able to only deliver half of the equation. The program faculty are prepared and experienced in web development, but not in User Experience design. During interviews with faculty and students, this was mentioned repeatedly as a glaring weakness of the program. While we acknowledge that steps have been taken to hire a faculty member to address this issue, the low wages of the university, the inability to compete with industry in this high demand field and the resistance to create a skewed salary allowance for this position that is not balanced with salaries of others in the department has thus far yielded no results.

While well intentioned, the mission statement cannot be achieved by the program as it currently exists.

Standard Rating: Weakness

B. Curriculum

A close review of the WUX curriculum shows that all but four content-focused courses are focused primarily on web development or a capstone-type of experience. The four exceptions are Web 1400, Web 2500, Web 3500 and Web 3650. The last course, Web 3650, is elective. Only these courses have ties to User Experience and two are Freshman and Sophomore level. Yet, the Department of Visual Art & Design offer a minor in Design for Digital Media which has several courses that could fit within the User Experience (e.g. Design for the Internet, Interaction Design) and could be utilized to strengthen the Web and User Experience curriculum.

A sentiment that was expressed during interviews was the question of why the College of Engineering, Applied Science & Technology was offering this program instead of offering a Web Development degree and recommending to students who are interested in a design or user experience emphasis to pursue the Design for Digital Media minor. By playing to the strengths of the two programs the students would be served well and meet the goals as expressed in the afore mentioned mission statement and avoid the difficulty being experienced while trying to hire a position that already exists in another department.

Another curricular concern is the fact that the internship is elective and the only required portfolio is a sophomore level client-side portfolio. Nothing here demands advanced or upper-division experience which seems necessary to meet the stated outcome of preparing students for employment in the areas of web development and user experience. In fact, the prerequisite courses for the client-side portfolio do not include any user experience related courses. What is interesting is that the Server-side portfolio course (Web 4890) does – it requires Web 3500 as a prerequisite. But, again, Web 4890 is elective.

The current web development curriculum is strong and diverse in a variety of web development skills, although courses that will serve to give students hands-on, work experience are elective. User experience courses are lacking within the program itself and those few that do exist are not prerequisites to required portfolio courses.

Standard Rating: Concern

C. Student Learning Outcomes and Assessment

In the self-study document, page 7, it states, “One decision made by faculty was to require all graduating students to create a portfolio”. Additionally, it states, “As we

move forward with the revised Web and User Experience program student portfolios will be evaluated at both the AAS and BS level.” However, the portfolio requirement is not listed as a program requirement in the 2019-2020 catalog except for the Client-side Portfolio (Web 2890). In the curriculum map, page 4 of the self-study, The Web Development capstone (Web 4350) indicates that it is used for comprehensive assessment and artifact collection in all learning outcome areas except one. It appears to be the only course that does so. Is this the Portfolio course mentioned or is it the Web 2890 course or is it an unstated requirement that is not attached to a course?

The lack of the portfolio being a clearly stated requirement of the program leaves the ability to clearly understand the assessment of the outcomes difficult to ascertain. If it is the 2890 course, then the question to be answered is how is this AAS course requirement, assumed to be completed during the Sophomore year or at the end of the AAS degree, an accurate measure of upper-division skills and BS learning outcomes?

Another concern, expressed by students, was that the requirements of the portfolio creation process are dictated by the professor with not enough latitude for students to express their own creativity and skills in the portfolio creation process. They also indicated that some of the skill requirements of the portfolio seem outdated.

It is understood that the program is in a major development mode and many of the students are transitioning from an old degree program to a new program. Because of this the ability to assess outcomes is difficult. However, basing the primary means of assessing the program on a Sophomore level portfolio course seems counter-intuitive. If the development of a portfolio is the assessment method of choice, then it seems that the portfolio should either be a stated program outcome, independent of a particular course, or it should be attached to a course that is repeatable on an annual basis, starting at the lower-division level and being required each year thereafter until assessed prior to graduation when students are using it to actively seek internship or employment opportunities.

This appears as a stated goal on page 7 of the self-study – “... student portfolios will be evaluated at both the AAS and BS level”. But, it doesn’t appear to have made it into the current catalog. It needs to become a priority so that students are informed and are actively engaged in the development process with clear expectations of the types and level of work that should be included while allowing for individuality of work to be included.

Standard Rating: Concern

D. Academic Advising

The self-study indicates that there are three advisors working with the Web & User Experience degree, however, one of the three is focused primarily on “advising students who are finishing the Network Technology Multimedia (NTM) program” which has been phased out (only 14 students remain in the NTM degree pipeline as of Spring 2019).

Mr. Cody Squadroni appears to take the lion’s share of the advising responsibilities for the Web and User Experience degree (104 students are declared for this degree as of Spring 2019). Students sing his praises and were unanimous in their agreement that Mr. Squadroni is the “go to” man. According to them, he is available, approachable and without his assistance and support they would not have finished the program.

The third advisor has responsibility for numerous programs across the School of Computing and so the load falls to the other two advisors. It is obvious that the advising loads of these two individuals are not equal.

However, Cody is not a tenure-track faculty member. Beyond his advising duties he serves as the program coordinator for the Web & User Experience degree, teaches classes, works part-time for another department on campus and is involved in overload projects. In short, he is being worked to exhaustion and has no long-term stability in the department or at the university. This, in the opinion of the review committee, is **THE** glaring weakness in the Web & User Experience program. See more in section E below.

Standard Rating: Concern

E. Faculty

Of the faculty within the Web and User Experience program, one was reassigned from the now defunct NTM program. This faculty member appears to struggle with the new curriculum and skills; although she is attempting to retool. A second faculty member is listed as an instructor in the computer science department, but his training is in Political Science and much of his teaching load is in general education courses. The review team is confused why he is involved in the WUX program. The remaining faculty are well prepared and passionate about web development but admit that they are not knowledgeable of or prepared to develop a User Experience curriculum. These faculty also indicate that many have three or four preparations each semester.

Two separate unsuccessful attempts have been made to hire a faculty member with user experience expertise to meet this need. The difficulty is that salaries at the university are unable to compete with industry. While funds can be made available to hire an individual, to do so would create a dramatic imbalance in salaries within the program and department. Rightly so, the Dean and Chair have been reluctant to create such an imbalance.

The faculty appear to be underpaid. Many indicated that they must work overload just to make ends meet. It does appear to be having an affect on retention with experienced faculty leaving the university. This issue needs to be addressed at the University or Regent's level, not at the program level.

The majority of faculty appear to be diligent in engaging with the program, curriculum and students – they should be commended. However, low pay appears to be a distraction with many working additional jobs as independent contractors or taking on other responsibilities within the university for additional pay. This sentiment was observed by Dean Ferro as, “keeping one foot out” of their full-time teaching responsibilities.

This assumption of many roles and responsibilities is particularly true of the program coordinator, Cody Squadroni, who was widely praised by his peers, the department chair, dean and students alike for his work and efforts to build, expand and see that the program is a success. However, Mr. Squadroni is not a tenure-track faculty member, and as noted in section D, is severely over worked, under-paid and has no long-term stability at the university. It is the recommendation of the review committee that despite Mr. Squadroni's lack of an advanced degree, that if the university desires to keep this valuable man, he be placed into a tenure track position and paid accordingly. Not only will this provide stability for him, but for the program as well. In the web development field, a Bachelor's degree or professional certifications is the norm. He could (should) be supported by the university and the college to obtain a Master's degree in a related field if required for the tenure track.

Should Mr. Squadroni leave, it is our opinion that the integrity of the program would be severely compromised and perhaps even prove fatal to it.

Standard Rating: Faculty as a whole – Good; Mr. Squadroni's situation - Weakness

F. Support (Staff, Administration, Facilities, Equipment, and Library)

Without exception the faculty expressed satisfaction with the support provided by

Dean David Ferro and Spencer Hilton, the chair of the School of Computing and support staff – these individuals are to be commended.

Courses for the program are taught in several different buildings on the main campus: Elizabeth Hall and the Technical Education (TE) building. The TE building is slated for demolition and replacement within the next year. Based on a tour of the facility the upgrade is needed as classrooms are old with inadequate power, poor ventilation, lighting and sewer problems. During construction WUX courses will hopefully be moved solely to Elizabeth Hall.

As mentioned earlier, the primary concern in the support area is in funding. Faculty are under-paid, must work additional jobs or assume more responsibilities to make ends meet. There are no teaching assistants or tutors for upper-division classes (presumably due to lack of funds). No support from the university in obtaining internships for students is a glaring omission for a program whose stated purpose is to prepare employment ready graduates.

The construction of new physical facilities from state funds is wonderful, but without adequate funding for salaries and operations, those buildings cannot appropriately serve their purpose.

A separate funding issue raised by faculty was travel for professional development. They indicated that travel funds must be requested on an individual basis. It was suggested by nearly all faculty interviewed, that an allocated amount to each faculty or to each program could be made available and eliminate the need for individual applications made to the college for funds.

Standard Rating: Administrative support – Good; Funding support - Weakness

G. Relationships with the External Communities

The Web & User Experience program works with a large number (over 50) of companies and groups who recruit graduates. A nine-member advisory committee from industry meets with faculty and administrators twice per year to review the program and make recommendations. At the October 2018 meeting the committee recommended three areas of focus for the program: interaction, information architecture and research.

At this same meeting with the advisory board a discussion was held about the name of the program. Apparently, a suggestion was made to drop “Web” from the name and leave it as “User Experience”.

The review team was puzzled by this suggestion as web appears to be the strength and expertise of the faculty, where as “User Experience” is a weakness of the program with no faculty member prepared and able to lead out in this area and few courses to support student preparation. Faculty and students both indicated during interviews that user experience preparation is lacking in the program.

Standard Rating: Strength

H. Results of Previous Program Reviews

Two issues were identified by the 2012 program review [Note: this review was of the NTM program]

1. Too few faculty for the program
2. Reevaluate faculty responsibilities, student advising and faculty preps

Reported results:

1. Hired one additional tenure-track faculty member, dissolved the NTM program and introduced the WUX program and integrated the new program into the School of Computing to share faculty with the Computer Science program.
2. Graduation maps updated to assist with student planning. Advising responsibilities separated across multiple advisors, integrated teaching loads with computer science faculty to reduce preps.

Observations:

The integration of the Web & User Experience program into the School of Computing with shared teaching loads with computer science faculty is partially working.

Most of faculty teaching in the WUX program are primarily assigned to the computer science program. Dr. MacLeod, who is primarily assigned to the WUX program was reassigned after the dissolving of the NTM program. She is not prepared to teach web or user experience courses but is taking a sabbatical to retool. During the campus visit we were told that there are several computer science faculty who will not teach WUX courses. Reasons for this refusal are unclear, but the integration of the faculty appears to be encountering some resistance.

Faculty load does not appear to be a concern, but the number of preparations per semester per faculty remains a concern. Most faculty reported three or more preps per semester. While the preps are generally consistent, it appears as if a new prep

could be added each year, which is not unexpected given the fast-paced changes involved in the web field.

Generally, it appears that efforts have been made to address the areas of concern that were reported in the 2012 program review. These efforts are to be commended, but additional work to have the right faculty to facilitate the program and reduce load on faculty is needed.

Summary

The Web & User Experience program is new and undergoing the pains of development and growth. The efforts to facilitate this into a meaningful and vibrant program are clear. However, it appears that the instigation of the program was a top – down decision without the faculty to support the program. Due to the high demand for the specialized skill set and low salaries available at the university the ability to hire the faculty to fill the user experience need has been unfruitful.

The administrative leadership has been supportive, but the decision to place the responsibility to oversee and guide the program on an annual contract, non-tenure track faculty member, who is overworked and underpaid and who could leave at any time places the program in jeopardy.

Commendations

- Being only a few years old, the program has developed quickly and has a solid offering in web development.
- Administrative support from the college and School of Computing for the program and the faculty is uniformly acknowledged.
- The majority of faculty who teach in the program are prepared, dedicated and endeavor to help students to be successful, despite low pay, working overloads and having many preps each semester.
- Mr. Cody Squadroni is to be individually commended for his leadership in the program, diligence in advising students, teaching courses and endeavoring to establish and grow the program while not being a tenure-track professor. His dedication is exemplary and acknowledged by his colleagues, students and the members of the review team.

Recommendations

1. Transfer Mr. Cody Squadroni to a tenure-track position with commensurate pay to reduce work load while providing stability to him and to the program.

2. Increase faculty salaries. If faculty must work several jobs to make ends meet, they cannot, will not, dedicate themselves whole-heartedly to educating students.
3. Hire a faculty member with expertise to provide the User Experience curriculum needed or drop “User Experience” from the degree name and create a new minor in conjunction with the Department of Visual Arts & Design. The new minor could integrate applicable courses from the Design for Digital Media and User Experience Design minors to capitalize on the strengths from both programs and better meet the needs of students in the field of User Experience.
4. Elevate the portfolio requirement from the AAS level to the BS level to provide a complete program level assessment tool.
5. Assist students finding and acquiring internships to fulfill the purpose of the program to provide employment-ready graduates.
6. Provide for teaching assistants / tutors to assist students in upper-division courses. This would also serve to reduce load on faculty.

Respectfully submitted by the review committee, all of whom have reviewed and concur with the final report.

Dr. Blaine Robertson
Dr. Greg Anderson
Dr. Sheree Josephson