

IA CRITIQUE: SIMS WEBSITE

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February 19, 2002

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Executive Summary	3
II. Conventions Used in this Report	4
III. Organizational Structure	4
IV. Organizational Scheme	4
V. Labeling	6

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An information architecture (IA) critique of the University of California, Berkeley School of Information Management and Systems (SIMS) website was conducted to identify areas for improvement in the website's organization and labeling. Improvements to organization and labeling are likely to enhance the navigational experience of new and returning users.

The analysis is divided into three sections:

- Organizational Structure: Topology used and breadth/depth of structure
- Organizational Scheme: Labeling approaches at each level of the website and ordering of links
- Labeling: Ambiguity and consistency of link labels

The website's organization and labeling are supportive of navigation. The broad and shallow hierarchy allows to faster and easier scan lots of links without going through extensive search process. However, there are some recommendations for additional improvements.

These recommendations include:

- Establishing a consistent link ordering approach across the website. Currently, there are various approaches used on the website.
- Re-labeling some links that appear ambiguous. Using descriptive and specific labels representative of content under them.
- Increasing consistency between link labels and page titles.
- Improving label groupings so that label links fit the content of the section they are under

CONVENTIONS USED IN THIS REPORT

Single quotation marks are placed around the labels for links, to separate them from other terms. Italics are used to indicate the labels for sections (both top-level and second-level) of the website. Double quotation marks signify a page title.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The organizational structure of SIMS website is hierarchical. The top-down approach allows the user to quickly get an idea of the scope of the website without going through extensive search process. The hierarchical structure is broad and shallow. There are three levels to the structure. The top level, consisting of the global navigation links, contains 6 pages. The second level contains 29 pages. This type of organizational structure allows for easier navigation and greater uniqueness in information.

ORGANIZATION SCHEME

The organizational scheme of the top level of SIMS website is hybrid, consisting primarily of topical labels and a single audience/role-based label *People*. The reason for including this section among the topical sections is to provide a quick reference and information about various audiences such as faculty, staff and students. It is especially helpful for visitors looking for an e-mail address of the person they want to contact.

The ordering of the top-level links is based on importance that is optimal for first-time visitors and students interested in SIMS. For first-time users the topic *About SIMS* could be the most important and this is why it is listed first. *Academics* section describes different programs available that is also important for students interested in SIMS. This link is followed by information on how to get in (*Admissions*). The other three options provide additional information about the school and oriented mostly toward other audiences rather than the first-time users or students interested in the programs.

The second level of SIMS website is hybrid as well with mostly topical labels. The second level organization scheme is more diverse than the top level. It has one activity-based label ('Learning at SIMS') and one question-based label ('How to Apply'), eleven audience-role-based labels, nine of which are under

People section, two under *Resources* ('For Employers', 'Administration') and one under *About SIMS* ('Visitor Information'). The inclusion of only one activity-based and one question-based labels at this level is understandable based on the limited scalability of these particular schemes. Including 'Administration' into the *Resources* section instead of *People* could be a little disorientating. Since page 'Administration' is designed by the same principle as 'Faculty' or 'Staff' pages (providing information on its members and their e-mail addresses) logically it should be included into *People* section. The inclusion of 'For Employers' section into *Resources* is justifiable based on the contents of this particular link.

Ordering of the second-level links is not alphabetical and based on various criteria. In the *People* section link ordering seems to be based on importance criteria. The faculty and staff information is listed first, followed by the student links. Academics links seemed to be also organized based on importance and frequency of use. This section is mostly used by students, whose primarily interest might be looking for classes and their descriptions. Other sections do not show any particular criteria for link ordering (e.g. *About SIMS* and *Resources*).

A hybrid organization scheme is also used for the third level labels. Most of the links used here are topical. However, a new organizational scheme appears at this level: question-based. There are 16 question-based labels under 'Learning at SIMS' section, one ("How to Apply") under 'How to Apply' section and one ("How much information") under 'Projects'. Two task-based labels ("Stay in Touch" and "Make a Gift to SIMS") are included in 'Alumni' section. There are also two activity-based label ("Recruiting SIMS students") under 'For Employers' section, and "Joining the Affiliates Program" under 'Affiliates Program'.

Alphabetical and chronological ordering of labels seemed to be prevalent in some sections. The links are organized alphabetically primarily under audience-based labels such as 'Faculty', 'Staff', 'Ph.D.', 'Masters', 'Visitors and Administration'. Ordering of some third-level links is also chronological in some areas ('News', 'Calendar of Events', and 'Conferences'). Some of the third-level links follow the importance ordering ('Affiliates Program' and 'Ph.D. Program'). Others, however, do not show a particular ordering pattern ('Life at SIMS').

LABELING

The goal of a label is to communicate information efficiently without taking too much page space and without overwhelming the user with unnecessary information. Ambiguity and consistency are two main issues that should be

addressed in labeling. Descriptive, specific labels lead the user in the right direction. Link labels should be also consistent with the names of the pages they point to avoid confusion and frustration of the users.

Most of the labels used on SIMS website are unambiguous. Top-level labels are descriptive and clear in their meanings (e.g. *Academics* lead to information on programs and courses offered at SIMS). Most second-level labels seem to unambiguous as well, except for 'About South Hall'. For users unfamiliar with the area and university itself, this label might appear to be not very clear. 'SIMS Location' would be a more descriptive label. The third-level links follow the same labeling pattern as the upper two levels. Most of label names are consistent with the information they provide. However, there are some links that require improvement. 'Experience SIMS' is not a very descriptive label for student lectures, seminars and events. It could be interpreted as a link to student activities besides the academics, such as student organizations, interest groups, or sport activities. Using a more descriptive label would be very helpful. Also, using different labels for similar sections (homogeneous) could be confusing for the user. For example, 'Masters' and 'Ph.D.' programs both have a section describing the degree tracks within each program, but they use different labels in each case. This can be very confusing for the user: is 'Suggested Degree Tracks' the same as 'Fields of Study'? Giving the same labels to these sections would probably be more appropriate based on homogeneous nature of the programs.

Most of SIMS upper-level labels are consistent with the names of pages they point to, however there are some discrepancies. Some page names are similar in content with labels, but not exactly the same. For example, 'How to Apply' link leads to the page named "Applying to SIMS", while 'For Employers' link leads to "Resources for Employers page". At the third-level, the inconsistency appears in 'Ph.D. Dissertation' label which points to the same page as 'Current and Past Dissertation Topics' label.

There are also several serious flaws in label organization. Some labels repeat each other at different levels. The 'Events' label can be found under 'Experience SIMS' and under 'About SIMS' (at different section and level). Not all the labels are grouped based on the best scent for the content they contain. Mentioned above 'Experience SIMS' label is not representative of content 'Applying to SIMS'. Based on its content it is not clear if "Summer Internship" page is intended for employers or students interested in internship information. The SIMS website will benefit from better labeling groupings and labeling consistency.