The Web User Experience Working Group:

one academic library's grassroots and outside-the-org-structure effort to create an inclusive culture of UX

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outline

Background

- What inspired the group
- How the group got started
- Pilot year and early years

Practice

- How the group is structured
- How the group operates
- What the group has accomplished

Lessons

- What works well
- What hasn’t [yet?] worked out
- Takeaways

Background:

Tell me if this sounds familiar....

Common models of web governance in libraries

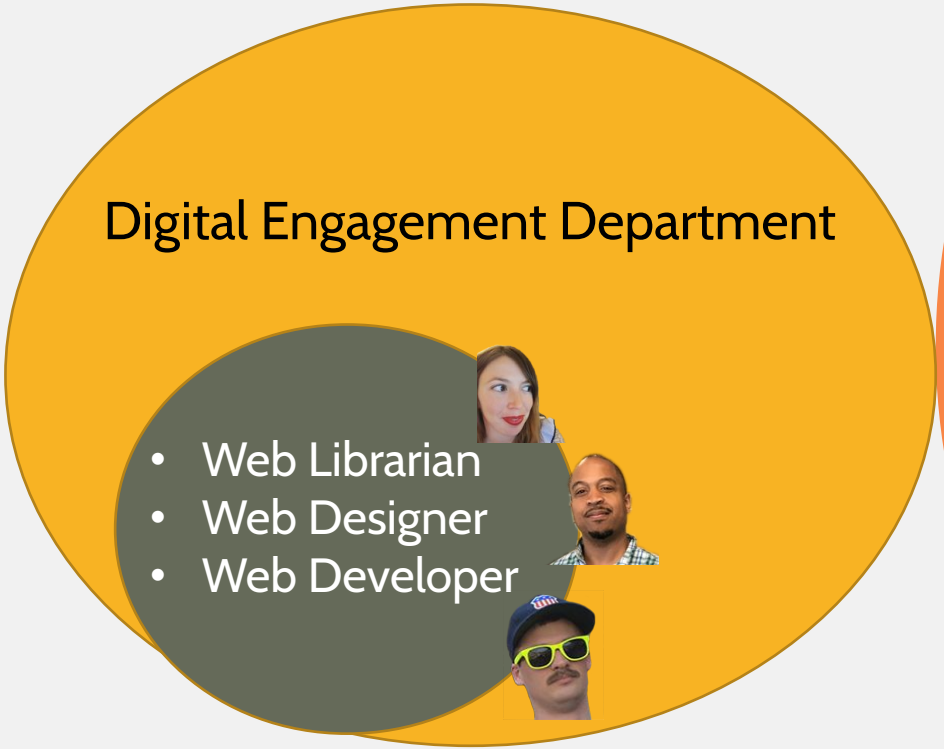
No or very little full-time web or UX staff

Web site is managed by a group of non-web professionals who form a committee to make design and content decisions, via a CMS

Full-time web team, but website is highly politicized

The organization has the benefit of web and UX expertise, but doesn't fully trust them; web decisions must be approved by governing body

The Web Team at VCU Libraries



What if a committee... but...not?

A [maybe?] new kind of model

“Web committees” v. WUXWG*

*Web User Experience Working Group

Web committees

Made up of admin-identified “stakeholders,” sometimes including managers or department heads; sometimes “voluntold” because of position

Web committees

All members might have editing rights or the ability to “pull rank,” leading to sometimes contentious and political discussions

Web committees

Members draw from their own professional context to speak for users, sometimes at odds with one another. Leads to “design by committee”

WUXWG

Group is intentionally diverse with staff and faculty from across divisions – NO Department Heads allowed (at least at first*)! All members voluntary

WUXWG

Committee has no actionable decision-making power; discussion is about interpreting data to inform recommendations

WUXWG

Members represent their areas as “liaisons” rather than advocates between their departments and the web decision-makers (in both directions)

Shared goals through shared work

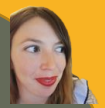
The explicit charge of WUXWG is to learn about and conduct UX research

The shared learning and action-oriented charge helps create a common language and understanding

Folks see their work through a new lens; how users truly engage with our services, via the website, and how their work connects to each other's work

Digital Engagement Department

- Web Librarian
- Web Designer
- Web Developer



WUXWG

(Web User Experience Working Group)

Pilot year, 2017/2018

July - Sep 2017

- Pilot proposed and approved (July)
- Soliciting of volunteers (Aug)
- Members selected (Sep)

Oct 2017-Feb 2018

- Twice monthly meetings
- “homework,” active learning, discussion of assignments and concepts

March - June 2018

- Usability testing plan & script for new Primo UI & recruitment for usability testing (March)
- Conducted usability testing (April - May)
- Discussed findings, made recommendations (June)

July - Sep 2018

- Web team implements recommendations (July/August)
- Report and recommendation on WUXWG submitted to management team (August)
- Management Council approves as newest standing committee (September)

Practice:

Structure, operations and accomplishments

Key aspects of WUXWG model

Wide representation

Membership from throughout the library helps ensure diversity of perspectives and greater buy-in

Shared learning

Professional development for interested folks, UX thinking and research skills spread through the library, creating a community of practice

Action-oriented

Focus on the work of UX research itself and learning how findings can/should inform web decision-making helps depoliticize the website...and serves as example for other areas

Logistics

- 6 members plus me as perma-chair
- Volunteer basis (so far…) with a mix of divisions and librarians and staff
- Staggered 2-year appointments so half the members always have 1 year of experience on the committee
- We meet twice a month
- Reading assignments related to UX methods and issues, discussion + identification of projects and problems to solve, plus planning and enacting UX research (and some design)

Philosophy

- Round-robin, “what’s happening in your world” to encourage the value that ideas and problems can come from anywhere

- Mix of projects that come from the web team and come through group sharing

- Emphasize some key principles:
  - Our users are not designers
  - Don’t help them during user sessions! Just watch and listen!
  - UX as inclusive practice
  - Our staff are also users

Methods and projects

- 2 rounds of usability testing on our discovery service (Students, faculty and researchers [2018/2022])
- Cardsorting with library staff (website navigation menu)
- Focus groups with students and faculty (hours redesign [2021], curated “start here” pages [2020], floor maps [2022], website redesign [2019])
- Focus groups with library staff (website redesign [2019], LibGuides policy update [2021])
- Semi-guerilla user interviews (high-level problem identification for library website redesign [2019], floor maps [2022])

So what?
Does it work?

n=¯_(ツ)_/¯

Original Goals of WUXWG

- Depoliticize the library website
- Resource UX work
- Move decision-making power down in the organizational hierarchy, empower staff
- Build an inclusive organizational culture of UX

Depoliticize the library website

- The 2019/2020 redesign of library website was cited as a model of shared governance
- Since the 2020 redesign, none of our library website changes have been reversed by management or subject to approval

- Still struggling to implement changes that involve wider participation and follow up
- Contentiousness still happens where UX is seen as challenge to expertise

Resource UX work

- Two title changes including one promotion for me
- A [privately funded] UX fellowship, including some Library money committed
- Money for user research consistently approved, now have a budget!

Move decision-making power down in the organizational hierarchy, empower staff

- Yes!
  ...for my team
- User data being increasingly cited in decision-making, and decisions made without administrative oversight, if user data can be cited*

*I don't think I can take credit for this

Build an inclusive organizational culture of UX

- Increasing chatter about user needs – and finding out what they are! – in decision making
- More folks who know about UX, with some familiarity with UX methods
- More awareness of me as a partner and resource
- WUXWG is a popular group!

- Not really a community of practice yet outside the group
- A lot of UX still happens in silos and vacuums
- My own bandwidth is a challenge to coordination

Opportunities
Concerns
New directions

Reflections after 5ish years of WUXWG

Opportunities
Concerns
New directions

Things I wish I'd done;
things I want to try next

- Need to start bringing in managers
- Continuing to push the boundaries of who our users are – think about folks who DON'T use the library
- Create a better way to collect and share data with the goal of empowerment
- Release "ownership of UX" → coordinating and strategizing

"God help and forgive me,
I wanna build something
that's gonna outlive me"
@HamiltonLyrics

Is this for you? ….maybe!

- “Service” is valued and/or mandated
- You already have a culture moderately permissive of pilots and experimentation
- You were impressed by anything I said today!

Thanks!