

# UC design research points the way so you won't get lost at the hospital

August 6 2009

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This is a health-care signage symbol to represent mental health services, created by UC's Paige Farwick. Credit: Paige Farwick

Help is on the way for anyone who has ever gotten lost at a hospital or other health-care setting.

That help is in the form of [health-care](#) signage symbols being developed by design students at the University of Cincinnati and three other U.S. universities.

These symbols will be tested this fall at four hospitals across the nation

and by means of surveys taken among the populations in three Midwestern cities, according to Yolanda Partida, director of Hablamos Juntos (We Speak Together), based at UCSF Fresno Center for [Medical Education](#) & Research. Hablamos Juntos and the Society for Environmental Graphic Design are overseeing the project that is funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

## **PROJECT BACKGROUND**

The project challenge for students is straightforward but substantial: Develop symbols that could serve to guide any population - speaking any language and representing any reading or education level - to specific points in a hospital or other health-care setting. So, for instance, develop a symbol that would communicate and guide users to specific service areas: hospital admission, dental care, genetics counseling, mental health services, ophthalmology, nutrition counseling, pathology, radiology and more.

Students in the University of Cincinnati's internationally ranked School of Design began working on signage proposals in January 2009, led by Oscar Fernández, UC associate professor of design. In the current summer quarter, 16 students are now finishing up their health-care symbols, getting ready for testing of those symbols this fall.

In addition, students from California Polytechnic State University, Iowa State University and Kent State University have also been developing symbols to be part of the fall 2009 test group.

According to Partida, each school was asked to create 15-20 symbols that would be added to a collection of 28 symbols, created by professionals, already in use nationally.

## TESTING BEGINS IN SEPTEMBER

A first round of testing on the student-created symbols will begin in September 2009. That's when students' final symbol designs will be reviewed in a series of recognition and comprehension tests.

The symbols judged to be the best performers in terms of comprehension and recognition will then be integrated into surveys administered in pockets of language groups (both English and non-English speakers) in Cincinnati, Ohio; Kent, Ohio; and Ames, Iowa.

Finally, the symbols that "make the grade" in terms of this community user survey/testing will be made available to actual health-care settings, pilot sites already working to implement health symbols as signage.

These are

- Grady Memorial Hospital, Atlanta, Ga. (the largest hospital in Georgia)
- International Community Health Services, Seattle, Wash.
- The Children's Mercy Hospital, Kansas City, Mo.
- Women and Infants Hospital of Rhode Island, Providence, R.I.

"These four facilities are currently designing wayfinding systems which will incorporate signage using symbols from our original set of 28 as well as those symbols, designed by the students, which successfully pass through the first test phases," said Partida.

UC graphic design senior Jesse Reed, 22, of Youngstown, Ohio, said that the testing of the students' work could be both "the most rewarding part

of the project or the biggest letdown. That's when it'll be seen if the users understand what we're trying to communicate. I know that I think my designs are effective but users' reactions will certainly be the real test."

This communication challenge has also added a lot of fun to the project, he added, stating, "We want to have the least amount of parts or elements possible to communicate a very specific message. We're always asking ourselves: Where can we start subtracting. Where can we continue taking it apart and simplifying?"

From beginning to end, the project is about the end users, agreed UC digital design student Paige Farwick, 22, of the Cincinnati suburb of Eastgate. She explained, "We began our project by going out and asking non-designers to do a quick, rough sketch of the specific terms we were looking at. For instance, I asked family members to sketch the first thing they thought of when I said the term 'in-patient.' They all sketched a rough outline of a [hospital](#) building. It's probably not what I would have first thought of as a designer, but it gave me great insight into how a public audience thinks of that term."

As designers, the UC students are taking their assignment further than the prescribed outlines of the project - which focuses on symbols for the physical health-care setting. However, they have also opted to look at how the symbols might translate to other platforms, like the Web, printed materials such as brochures or even a nurse's call button.

It's something that Partida, in the role of project administrator/sponsor, admitted she wouldn't have thought to do.

Said UC's Fernández, "In order for these symbols to be effective in the physical environment, it's important that users become familiar with them and see them used across platforms - in the physical realm, online

and in other settings. So, we made a point to look at the symbols in the totality of environments (physical and electronic) where they will likely be used."

## **NEXT STEPS**

It's expected that refinements will be necessary to the student-created symbols after testing is completed in December 2009. The ultimate goal is to have final symbols adopted both nationally and internationally. UC students debate health-care symbols.

"One of the reasons we're working with designers, design students and healthcare settings is to encourage universal adoption of these symbols in the long term," stated Partida. To encourage adoption, the project's administrators are working with the Institute for Diversity in Health Management as well as the Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations.

A new challenge that Partida would like to take on, also with the help of UC's School of Design, is the creation of symbols that could be used for prescription labels.

She said, "We submitted a proposal to the National Institutes of Health. We already know that the symbols currently in use on prescription labels are not effective. We would want to apply user-oriented design principles in a similar manner to our current project."

Source: University of Cincinnati ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: UC design research points the way so you won't get lost at the hospital (2009, August 6) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-08-uc-wont-lost-hospital.html>

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