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ArtsCrew Laidlaw App Development Project

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Laidlaw Summer Reflection: ArtsCrew App Development Project

I. Introduction

This summer, I had the unique opportunity to contribute to the development of the ArtsCrew app as part of my Laidlaw Scholar research. The project was aimed at enhancing the arts community at Brown University by streamlining administrative processes, promoting collaboration, and connecting members with arts-related job opportunities both within and beyond the university. As one of the UI/UX designers on this project, I worked closely with a dedicated team of individuals, including Racheal Arewa, who focused on the visual design of the app, and Risheetha Bhagawatula, who led the backend development. Our project lead, Lawren Epstein, provided invaluable feedback that helped us stay on track and keep the user experience at the forefront of our development process.

Over the course of the summer, we conducted extensive user research, tested multiple iterations of the app, and gathered feedback from various members of the Brown Arts Initiative (BAI) and ArtsCrew. The goal was to create a user-friendly app that could simplify scheduling, facilitate communication, and provide ArtsCrew members with access to resources and professional opportunities in the arts. This reflection aims to explore my role in the project, the challenges we encountered, and the lessons I learned throughout the development process.

II. My Role in the Project

As a UI/UX designer, I was primarily responsible for the visual design and user experience of the ArtsCrew app. My main focus was on creating wireframes for key components, such as the Profile, Opportunities, and Home pages. Working closely with Racheal, I helped design intuitive and visually appealing interfaces that would make it easy for users to access the tools and resources they needed.

In addition to design work, I was heavily involved in user research. I conducted over 20 interviews with ArtsCrew members and BAI administrators to gather feedback on the app's prototype. These interviews provided critical insights into what users needed and expected from the app. For instance, many members, such as Kaitlyn Guintu, mentioned that they often found it difficult to discover job opportunities in the arts, as these opportunities were shared through informal channels like email or word-of-mouth. By listening to feedback like this, we were able to make informed decisions about how to structure and refine the app's functionality.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my role was seeing how our design evolved based on the input we received. Initially, we had included a "Community News" section on the home feed, but as we gathered feedback, it became clear that users were more interested in features related to scheduling and opportunities. As a result, we shifted the focus in subsequent iterations of the app, a process that reinforced the importance of flexibility and iteration in design.

III. First Iteration: Laying the Foundation

The first iteration of the ArtsCrew app was an exciting challenge. We started with a home feed that included a "Community News" section, a work calendar similar to Google Calendar, an

upcoming tasks list, and a suggested opportunities section. Our goal was to provide users with a comprehensive overview of everything they needed for their day-to-day responsibilities. The work calendar allowed users to see tasks and shifts with a simple visual indicator, and the suggested opportunities section highlighted job openings and other opportunities posted by BAI administration.

We also created a separate "Opportunities" tab that allowed users to search for job postings using filters. In this iteration, the filtering options were fairly basic, but they laid the groundwork for the more advanced features we would develop later. Additionally, we included a hamburger menu with options like "About ArtsCrew," "Account," "Settings," and "Benefits," as well as a profile icon that led to a simple profile layout where users could manage their personal information.

While this iteration provided a solid foundation for the app's functionality, we quickly realized through user feedback that it needed improvement. During our interviews, administrative participants like Art Kopischke and Kelly Egan expressed concerns about the home feed being too cluttered. As Art pointed out, "There's a lot going on in the feed, and it's not always clear what's most important." This feedback highlighted the need to streamline the user experience and prioritize the features that users found most valuable.

IV. Refining the App Through Feedback

Our user research played a crucial role in helping us refine the app. We conducted interviews with ArtsCrew members and administrators, such as Jamil Jorge and Maggie Bauer, to gather insights on how they used the app and what improvements they wanted to see. One recurring theme was the need for better control over how users viewed and filtered opportunities. While

the suggested opportunities section was helpful, users like Henry Merges emphasized the importance of being able to filter opportunities based on specific criteria such as skill level, discipline, and location.

Through these interviews, we also learned that users wanted a simpler layout that focused more on job opportunities and scheduling. As a result, we decided to shift our focus in the second iteration of the app, placing more emphasis on opportunities and professional development while simplifying the overall design.

V. Second Iteration: Streamlining the User Experience

The second iteration of the ArtsCrew app marked a significant shift in our approach. Based on the feedback we had received, we removed the home feed altogether and refocused the app on its most valuable features: opportunities and professional development. Now, when users log in, they are taken directly to the "Opportunities" tab, which includes two main sections: "Upcoming Events" and "Opportunities Beyond ArtsCrew." This new layout was designed to be simpler and more focused on providing users with the information they needed most.

One of the key changes we made in this iteration was the removal of the work calendar and upcoming tasks sections. These features, while useful in theory, were seen as redundant by many users, especially since the ArtsCrew team already planned to use Humanity, an employee scheduling software, for shift planning. By leaving scheduling and task management to Humanity, we were able to simplify the ArtsCrew app and focus more on professional development and opportunities, which were the primary interests of our users.

The "Opportunities Beyond ArtsCrew" section became the central feature of this iteration. This section included all job postings and opportunities in the arts, both within and outside of ArtsCrew. We also introduced fully functional filters, allowing users to search for opportunities based on opportunity type, field or discipline, experience level, location, and eligibility criteria. This improvement was particularly well-received by users like Henry, who brought this issue to our attention.

Another important addition in the second iteration was the "Resources & Perks" tab. This section provided users with access to valuable resources, such as free Adobe Creative Cloud subscriptions for ArtsCrew members and free classes at AS220 and the Trinity Repertory Company for all Brown students. During our interviews, users like Maggie expressed a desire for more transparency around the resources available to them. "I had no idea we had access to some of these perks," Maggie said, highlighting the importance of making these resources more visible and accessible.

VI. Overcoming Challenges

One of the biggest challenges we faced during the second iteration was ensuring that the app met the needs of all our users. While ArtsCrew members were primarily interested in job opportunities and professional development, administrators like Jamil and Kate Kraczon were focused on task management and scheduling. Balancing these needs was not easy, but through continuous testing and feedback, we were able to find a middle ground.

For example, during an interview with Jamil, he mentioned that while he appreciated the opportunities section, he still needed a way to manage staff schedules effectively. "We need a platform that can do it all," he said. However, after discussions with Lawren and further

exploration of the app's scope, we reinforced the idea that it would be more efficient to leave the scheduling functionalities to the Humanity software.

During an interview with Kelly Egan, an administrator at BAI, he expressed concerns that the "Community News" section on the home feed wasn't relevant to the day-to-day tasks of ArtsCrew members. He remarked, "I thought the news section was helpful for updates, but I really expected something more job-related when I first logged in." This feedback, along with similar comments from other users, led us to shift the focus of the second iteration to job opportunities and professional development, which users prioritized over general news.

Another challenge we encountered was the integration of third-party tools like Humanity. Although we had initially planned to integrate scheduling directly into the app this summer, we ran into technical issues related to Brown's IT infrastructure. Risheetha worked tirelessly to explore possible solutions, but ultimately, we had to delay the full integration of Humanity until it was approved by Brown's IT team. So, unfortunately, we were unable to fully understand what Humanity was capable of streamlining. Despite this setback, we learned the importance of flexibility and being able to adapt to the realities of institutional processes.

VII. Collaboration and Growth

Throughout the project, one of the most rewarding aspects was the collaboration among our team members. Racheal, Risheetha, and I each brought unique skills to the table, and working together allowed us to learn from one another. Racheal's eye for design detail complimented my focus on user experience, while Risheetha's backend expertise ensured that our ideas were technically feasible. Lawren played a key role in guiding our work, always encouraging us to focus on the user's needs and providing thoughtful feedback on our design choices.

This experience has been an incredible opportunity for personal and professional growth. I've gained valuable skills in UI/UX design, user research, and project management, and I've become more confident in my ability to lead design initiatives. The challenges we faced, from balancing user needs to overcoming technical hurdles, have taught me the importance of flexibility, collaboration, and persistence.

Our project lead, Lawren Epstein, was another crucial part of our success. Lawren provided thoughtful feedback at every stage of development, challenging us to think critically about the app's purpose and functionality. She helped us stay focused on the user experience, constantly reminding us to put ourselves in the shoes of the ArtsCrew members who would be using the app. During one team meeting, she emphasized, "The app needs to be more than just functional—it needs to provide real value to users. Every feature should have a purpose." Her guidance helped us refine our approach and ensure that the app was not just a tool but a meaningful resource for the Brown arts community.

VIII. Final Thoughts and Looking Forward

Looking back on the summer, I am proud of the progress we made with the ArtsCrew app. While there were certainly challenges along the way, each obstacle taught us something new about design, development, and collaboration. One of the biggest takeaways for me was the importance of user feedback in shaping a product. Through our interviews and usability tests, we learned that even the most well-intentioned design ideas could fall flat if they didn't align with user needs. As a result, I became more open to iteration and the idea that design is a continuous process of refinement.

Working on the ArtsCrew app also deepened my appreciation for the collaborative nature of app development. No single person on our team could have built this app on their own. It required the combined efforts of designers, developers, and project managers, each contributing their expertise to create something greater than the sum of its parts. I feel incredibly fortunate to have worked alongside such talented individuals, and I've gained valuable insights into how to effectively communicate and collaborate within a multidisciplinary team.

From a technical perspective, I've gained a deeper understanding of UI/UX design principles and the importance of creating intuitive, user-friendly interfaces. I've also honed my skills in wireframing and prototyping, learning how to take abstract ideas and turn them into concrete designs. More importantly, I've learned how to balance creativity with practicality—how to design interfaces that are not only visually appealing but also functional and easy to use.

As I reflect on my experiences, I'm struck by how much I've grown both professionally and personally. This project pushed me outside my comfort zone and challenged me to think critically about the role of technology in the arts. It also reinforced my passion for creating tools that support and uplift creative communities, something I hope to continue doing in the future.

Although our work on the ArtsCrew app is far from over, the progress we made this summer has laid a strong foundation for future development. The next steps will involve integrating the Humanity software, continuing to refine the opportunities page, and exploring new ways to support professional development for ArtsCrew members. As we move forward, I am excited to see how the app evolves and how it will ultimately serve the Brown arts community.

One of the most exciting possibilities for the future of the ArtsCrew app is expanding its reach beyond Brown University. During our user interviews, several participants, such as Maggie and

Kaitlyn, mentioned the value of connecting with the greater Providence arts community. By incorporating more opportunities from outside Brown, we can create an app that not only serves ArtsCrew members but also fosters collaboration and networking across the local arts ecosystem.

This summer's work on the ArtsCrew app has been an incredibly rewarding experience, one that has shaped my understanding of both design and teamwork. I am grateful for the opportunity to have contributed to a project that has the potential to make a lasting impact on the arts community at Brown, and I look forward to continuing this journey in the months to come.