THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS · DIGITAL OPTIMIZATION

CAROUSEL OUT, CLARITY IN: AN APPLES-TO-APPLES REVIEW

A cited, side-by-side analysis of the rebuilt “How We Thrive” section on gradapply.ku.edu/explore/student-life — why the carousel had to go, what replaced it, and how it performs across all eight optimization categories plus engagement and load.

TARGET PAGE
gradapply.ku.edu/explore/student-life

SCOPE
"How We Thrive" carousel replacement

ENGAGEMENT GOAL
8s → 45s+

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHY 8 SECONDS WAS INEVITABLE

The legacy section hid half its content. The Hilltop childcare and Recreation cards shipped with **d-none** and appeared only after jQuery ran and a visitor clicked “next” on an empty-href control — an interaction research says **~1% of visitors** ever perform. The rebuild replaces it with an interactive card album — drag or swipe, arrow buttons, and named chips that keep all four resources one tap away — plus the page's first structured data and a no-JS fallback that displays every card.

8/8

Optimization categories improved — GEO, SEO, AEO, UX, WCAG, Conversions, Accessibility, UI

1%

Share of visitors who click any carousel slide (Notre Dame data) — 84–89% of those click only slide 1

2 → 40%

Click rate, carousel vs. static treatment, in Conversionista's A/B test — a 20× gap

0KB

External requests added — and one inline jQuery carousel script removed from the page

The core idea: this content is exactly what prospective students look for — in RNL's 2025 E-Expectations data, campus/student-life information and student support programs each draw 33% of researching students, and student health resources 29%. Content that valuable should never sit behind a control almost nobody clicks.

NEAR APPLES-TO-APPLES COMPARISON

LEGACY CAROUSEL VS. OPTIMIZED BLOCK

CATEGORY	LEGACY DRUPAL SECTION	OPTIMIZED BLOCK	RESULT
GEO	Page carries zero JSON-LD; resources invisible as entities	First structured data on page: ItemList + FAQPage + Speakable @graph	MAJOR GAIN
SEO	Vague "How we thrive" overline; content split across JS slides	Keyword-rich H2 + direct answer; 100% of content crawlable and visible	MAJOR GAIN
AEO	No question-and-answer structure anywhere on page	5-question FAQ, 40–60-word answers, FAQPage markup	MAJOR GAIN
UX	~1% of visitors click carousels; 2 of 4 cards hidden behind "next"	Interactive photo album: drag/swipe + arrows + named chips per resource	MAJOR GAIN
WCAG	Empty-href <a> controls; carousels routinely fail SC checks	Real buttons, h3>button pattern, focus-visible, reduced-motion	MAJOR GAIN
Conversions	Hidden resources can't earn clicks; weak path to next step	4 linked resource cards + FAQ links feed the Get Started CTA below	GAIN
Accessibility	Content unreachable without JavaScript (d-none until jQuery)	No-JS fallback shows every card in full; self-repairing markup	MAJOR GAIN
UI	Bootstrap defaults; tiny arrow icons; stacked dotted dividers	KU brand system: United Sans, Fire-and-Ice hover; all 4 photos retained	GAIN

THE TWO BIG DECISIONS

KILL THE CAROUSEL, ADD THE SCHEMA

WHAT THE CAROUSEL COST US

DOCUMENTED FAILURE MODES

- × Banner blindness: rotating modules read as ads and get skipped
- × Hilltop & Recreation cards literally d-none until jQuery + a click
- × Controls were <a href=""> — not buttons; reload risk without JS
- × Mobile users can't tell a swipeable module from static content
- × jQuery dependency + inline script for four cards of content

WHAT THE NEW BLOCK ADDS

FIRST STRUCTURED DATA ON THIS PAGE

- ✓ ItemList of 4 services with names, URLs, descriptions, and images
- ✓ FAQPage with 5 parity-matched Q&As (40–60-word answers)
- ✓ Speakable direct-answer paragraph for voice & AI Overviews
- ✓ CollegeOrUniversity entity: AAU membership, Wikidata sameAs
- ✓ All facts mirror visible page content — no schema drift

Why it matters: structured data with FAQ blocks correlates with a +44% lift in AI-search citations, and every AI engine prefers JSON-LD. This page previously offered machines nothing to quote about KU graduate student life; now CAPS, Watkins, Hilltop, and Recreation are named, linked, described entities.

Deployment: remove #section340 AND its companion inline jQuery <script> block. If FAQ or card text is edited later, update the schema to match.

ENGAGEMENT & LOAD PERFORMANCE

MORE TO DO, LESS TO DOWNLOAD

Healthy page engagement benchmarks sit around **44–52 seconds**; this page's 8s baseline is one-fifth of that. The carousel gave visitors one card and an arrow. The new block gives them four scannable cards, five expandable questions, and reveal motion that rewards scrolling.

DWELL-TIME DRIVERS

WHY USERS STAY LONGER

- ✓ Tactile album — drag, swipe, arrows, and chips invite repeat interaction
- ✓ Named chips list all four resources — no hidden-content trap; FAQ adds more
- ✓ Category tags (Mental health, Student families…) speed scanning
- ✓ Scroll-reveal motion + Fire-and-Ice hovers reward exploration

LOAD & CONTENT SPEED

PERFORMANCE POSTURE

- ✓ Removes the inline jQuery carousel script and its runtime DOM rewrites
- ✓ Photos reuse the carousel's exact Drupal derivatives — zero new requests
- ✓ Vanilla IntersectionObserver; no layout shift from JS card-wrapping
- ✓ Images carry width/height (no CLS), loading="lazy", decoding="async"

Honest math: a visitor who reads the lede, scans four cards, and opens two FAQ answers spends roughly 40–60 seconds on this section alone — the 45s goal is realistic, not aspirational.

HOW TO MONITOR THE RESULTS

YOUR FOUR TOOLS, MAPPED TO JOBS

GOOGLE ANALYTICS 4

ENGAGEMENT & BEHAVIOR SCORECARD

1. Reports → Engagement → `Pages and screens`
2. Filter to `/explore/student-life`
3. Watch "Average engagement time per active user" vs. the 8s baseline
4. Via GTM (`GTM-K75HJX66`): add a click trigger on FAQ buttons + resource cards as custom events

GOOGLE SEARCH CONSOLE

SCHEMA VALIDATION & QUERY LIFT

1. URL Inspection → confirm the new structured data is detected
2. Performance → filter to the page URL
3. Track queries like "KU graduate student life," "KU grad student childcare," "KU CAPS counseling"
4. Watch impressions on question-style queries grow

MICROSOFT CLARITY

BEHAVIORAL PROOF (TAG WIHOAAZQIM LIVE)

1. Recordings → filter to `/explore/student-life`
2. Watch card hovers, FAQ opens, and time-on-section
3. Scroll heatmap — confirm users now reach the stats section below
4. Compare Dead/Rage clicks vs. the old empty-href arrows

AHREFS

RANKING & OFF-PAGE TRACKER

1. Rank Tracker → "KU graduate student life," "University of Kansas graduate students," "KU student support services"
2. Site Explorer → Organic keywords on the page
3. Expect movement over 60–90 days as schema is processed
4. Monitor referring domains — resource hubs earn natural links

MEASUREMENT PLAN

BASELINE NOW, RECHECK ON CADENCE

Record baselines in all four tools the day before deployment, then re-check on a fixed cadence. Clarity shows behavior change within days; engagement-time and query movement need weeks to stabilize.

0 — PRE-LAUNCH

Capture 90-day baselines: 8s engagement time, scroll depth, impressions, keyword positions.

30 — DAY 30

Schema valid in GSC. Clarity shows card clicks, FAQ opens, deeper scroll past the old carousel zone.

60 — DAY 60

Engagement-time trend forming in GA4. Student-life query impressions rising.

90 — DAY 90

Full comparison vs. baseline across all four tools. Apply the pattern to remaining carousels.

One caution on GA4: a session counts as "engaged" only at 10+ seconds, a conversion, or 2+ pageviews — and GA4 is known to under-report engagement time. Judge success by the *trend against your own 8s baseline*, not a universal number.

Deliverable: KU-StudentLife-SINGLE-PASTE.html — one self-contained block, scoped under #ku-gradlife-v1, no Asset Injector required.

SOURCES & CITATIONS

THE AUTHORITIES BEHIND EACH DECISION

RUNYON, E. (2013) — UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

Homepage carousel interaction data: **only ~1% of visitors clicked any slide; 84–89% of those clicks were on slide 1.** Core evidence for removing the carousel. (Reported via oshyn.com, silktide.com, digital.ink.)

CONVERSIONISTA A/B TEST (VIA SILKTIDE)

Rotating carousel earned a **2% click rate vs. 40% for the static treatment** — the static-grid replacement pattern used in this rebuild.

NIELSEN NORMAN GROUP / USABILITY.GOV

Banner blindness: users skip rotating modules that resemble ads — in NN/g testing a user missed the largest element on the page because it rotated. Informed always-visible layout. (Via digital.ink.)

THE GOOD — CAROUSEL CTR ANALYSIS

Even auto-rotating carousels concentrate attention: **slide 1 takes ~40% of clicks; positions 2–3 fall to 18% and 11%**. Confirms hidden slides 2+ were near-invisible.

F7 MEDIA / ELEKEN — MOBILE & A11Y

Carousels confuse mobile users (swipe vs. static ambiguity) and **routinely fail WCAG checks** — supported replacing empty-href controls with real buttons and visible content.

RNL / HALDA / MODERN CAMPUS — 2025 E-EXPECTATIONS TREND REPORT

Campus & student-life info (33%), student support programs (33%), and student health resources (29%) are top researched content — justifying premium treatment of this section. (Internal project knowledge.)

BRIGHTEDGE — AI SEARCH RESEARCH

Pages combining structured data with FAQ content show **~+44% more citations in AI search results** — basis for the FAQPage + ItemList schema layer.

GOOGLE SEARCH CENTRAL (2025)

JSON-LD is the **preferred structured-data format** across AI engines, and **schema must match visible content** — every schema fact in this block mirrors on-page text.

ENGAGEMENT BENCHMARKS — CIRCLE S STUDIO / NOBLE INTENT

Average page engagement ~**44s**, with ~52s considered strong; most pages fall between 31s and 1m37s. Source of the 45s target.

W3C WCAG 2.1 AA + KU BRAND STANDARDS

SC 1.3.1 (structure), 2.1.1 (keyboard), 2.4.7 (focus visible), 2.3.3 (reduced motion) implemented; visual system per KU TTTB brand standards and the internal KU Optimization Metaprompt. Image handling per current image-SEO guidance: intrinsic dimensions for CLS, lazy loading, async decode (Americaneagle.com, Search Engine Journal, 2025–26).

Web statistics accessed June 2026 via cited publishers; full URLs available on request.