

Northern State University SEO Action Plan

Overview

This action plan will serve as a roadmap and guide for addressing the opportunities identified in the SEO audit.

Key Audits Findings to Address:

- Academic catalog subdomain recommendation.
- Non-branded degree keyword rankings are poor
- Address URL structure /programs vs. /degrees
- Overall URL structure. Recommendations for URLs, especially for tuition, cost, aid
- On-page optimizations for Northern State vs. NSU
- SEO site errors to be addressed. Error workbook will be provided.
- Undergraduate or Bachelors. Which keywords should be used for optimization?
- Graduate or Masters. Which keywords should be used for optimization?

Additional Audit Action Items:

- Add a filter to Google Analytics to remove northern.edu as a referral source.
- Create a GA4 analytics profile to start tracking data. In July 2023 GA4 will be the only analytics available.
- Incorporate striking-distance keywords (keywords ranking positions 10-30) in content strategy and optimization.
- Add meta-descriptions to all pages that do not have one. This is for SEO optimization and to improve click through rates on organic listings.
- Verify and update Knowledge Panel information for Northern State University in Google Search

SEO Tasks Prioritized

EAB is recommending that Northern State University address the SEO items in the order listed below.

1. SEO cleanup

Review error workbook for full list of URLs to be fixed. The top errors found are:

- *Duplicate content from www vs. non-www URLs*
- *Duplicate Page Title Tags*
- *Broken Links*
- *Missing Meta Descriptions*
- *4XX Status Codes*
- *Redirect Chains & Loops*

Fixing the duplicate content issues for the www vs. non-www URLs will also correct the majority of the duplicate page title issues.

2. URL Structure and Optimization

Degree Page URL

It is best practice for the URL structure to offer a logical path for users to follow. It's similar to the breadcrumb navigation that many hierarchical websites use.

URL structure should follow site navigation. The example below of the elementary education page shows that when each folder in the URL string is removed, the user is taken to 404 error pages.

<https://www.northern.edu/programs/undergraduate/elementary-education> - Current URL
<https://www.northern.edu/programs/undergraduate/> - Page does not exist
<https://www.northern.edu/programs/> - Page does not exist
<https://www.northern.edu/>

Recommended Degree Page URL Structure:

<https://www.northern.edu/degrees/bachelors-elementary-education>

Our recommendation is to move degree pages up a level in the hierarchy under the Degrees subfolder (/degrees). This emphasizes the importance of these pages to Google.

Keeping your keywords closer to the root domain is going to significantly help your rankings. Simply, the fewer subfolders you use the better you will rank.

Each time you add another / into the URL it is actually a "subfolder". This is called URL depth. Shorter URL depths have been shown to help rankings.

<https://www.northern.edu/degrees/bachelors-elementary-education>

- ✓ Keywords in URL
- ✓ Use short URLs
- ✓ Use 1-2 folders per URL

- ✓ Use descriptive names
- ✓ Contain 3-4 words if possible

Admissions & Aid URLs

There is confusion across admissions URLs. The main navigation menu is /admissions, but then all the pages in the section are under /admission-aid.

Top level Admissions page: <https://northern.edu/admissions>

Admissions sub-page: <https://northern.edu/admission-aid/requirements>

Recommended new URL structure: <https://northern.edu/admissions/requirements>

This structure the best practices mentioned above and allows for a more organized structure.

Financial Aid URLs

Due to the above admissions URL recommendation, we also need to address how we organize the financial aid URLs.

Financial Aid Page: <https://northern.edu/admissions-aid/financial-aid>

Financial Aid Apply Page: <https://northern.edu/admissions-aid/apply-financial-aid>

Recommended New URL Structure: <https://northern.edu/financial-aid/>

<https://northern.edu/financial-aid/apply>

All pages featured on the Financial Aid page or related to financial aid should follow the URL structure above.

Tuition and Costs URLs

Northern State University should decide where the Tuition and Cost pages should “live” on the site. Does it make sense for them to “live” under the /admissions subfolder? Whichever subfolder is chosen, the tuition and cost pages URLs should reflect the appropriate subfolder.

Examples: <https://northern.edu/financial-aid/tuition-and-costs>

<https://northern.edu/admissions/tuition-and-costs>

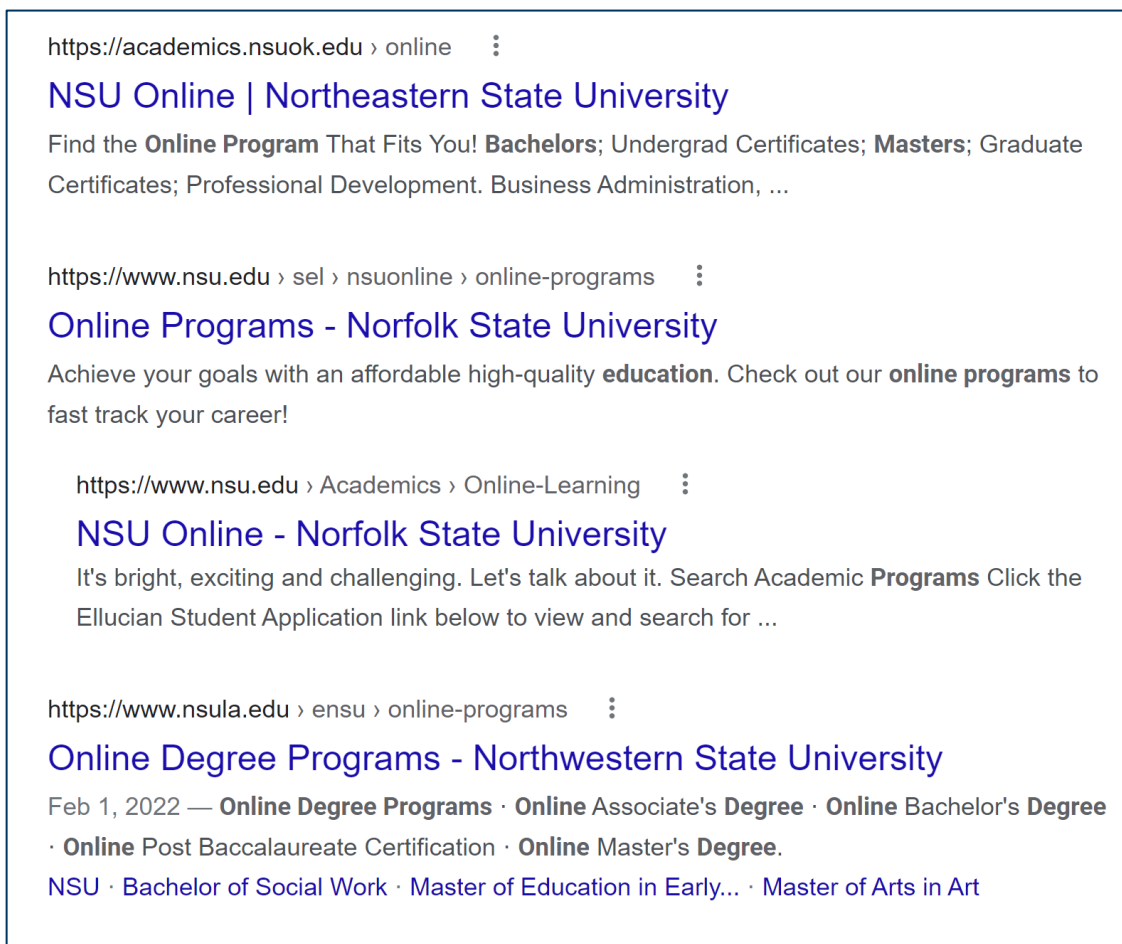
3. On-page Optimization

As part of the work EAB will provide, you will receive content strategy and copy for 10 pages. This includes SEO optimization and strategy. Below are the recommendations we will make to our internal creative team as they work on copy and content strategy. Northern State can also utilize these recommendations when working on other copy across the site.

Northern State University Vs. NSU

Due to the overlap with other NSU schools, it is important to optimize the site using the full Northern State University spelling or Northern State. There are other NSU schools ranking well for NSU keywords. Northern State will likely never out rank these schools so effort should be focused on the full spelling.

Below is a screen shot of a search using the keywords “NSU Online Degrees” from your local area. Notice Northern State is not in the top results. Google is showing other NSU schools that are in Oklahoma, Virginia, and Louisiana.



Keyword	Volume
Northern state university	9,900
Nsu	33,100

Undergraduate Vs. Bachelors

Based on the keyword research below, you can see that users looking for degree programs are more likely to use "bachelor" in their search over "undergraduate."

Recommendation: Use "bachelors" when optimizing degree pages. This is based on what your site is currently ranking for and the search volume around "bachelors".

Keyword	Volume
bachelor degree program	170
bachelor degree	50
bachelors degree in	320
bachelors program	140
bachelor's program	140
bachelor's programs	70
degree bachelor	880
degree bachelors	2900
undergrad degree	1300
undergraduate degree	320

Masters Vs Graduate

The use of master's Vs. graduate degrees should be based on current site data and search volume around each phrase.

Northern.edu ranks for 148 "masters" keywords on the top 2 pages of Google Search

This table below shows the top ranking "masters" keywords on page 1.

Keyword	Position	Search Volume
masters in banking	1	50
master in banking	2	40
master banking	5	50
nsu online masters	6	50
financial services master's degree	6	210
master sport performance	6	390
nsu masters	7	40
accounting analytics masters	8	40
nsu masters in education	9	40
nsu masters program	9	110

Northern.edu ranks for 81 "graduate" keywords on the top 2 pages of Google Search

This table below shows the top ranking "masters" keywords on page 1.

Keyword	Position	Search Volume
banking and finance postgraduate courses	3	50
banking graduate programs	5	40
nsu graduate	7	90
nsu online graduate programs	7	40

Top Searched Masters Keywords

We pulled the top “masters” degree related keywords with their estimated monthly search volume.

Keyword	Search Volume
masters degree	49500
masters degree or master's degree	8100
online masters degree	4400
how long does it take to get a masters degree	3600
how long is a masters degree	3600
masters degree or masters degree	3600

Top Searched Graduate Keywords

We pulled the top “graduate” degree related keywords with their estimated monthly search volume.

Keyword	Search Volume
graduate degree	6600
what is a graduate degree	4400
post graduate degree	880
what is graduate degree	880
graduates degree	720
graduate degree programs	590

Recommendation: Prioritize “masters” keywords when optimizing page content. These keywords are what the current site ranks better for and there is more search volume around “masters” vs. “graduate”.

Optimizing for non-brand degree keywords

Examples of how to optimize for non-brand degree keywords will be provided in copy EAB provides. The goal for optimizing for these keywords is to include non-branded variations within your copy. Many pages already have this within the body copy, but there is opportunity to optimize page titles, meta-descriptions, and headings.

Page title example: Accounting [Degree Program](#) (Online) | Northern State University

Meta-description example: Earn your [bachelor's in accounting degree](#) either online or on campus at Northern State University. Start the journey to your accounting career.

Headings: [Bachelor's in Accounting](#) (Online)

4. Catalog Subdomain Strategy

EAB will provide a separate stand-alone document that details recommendations for the Catalog subdomain strategy. Based on the SEO audit, there was concern that the subdomain may be cannibalizing keyword rankings for degree pages on the main northern.edu site.

The strategy document will include information on why this may be causing an issue and steps for Northern State to take.

5. Site Speed Optimization

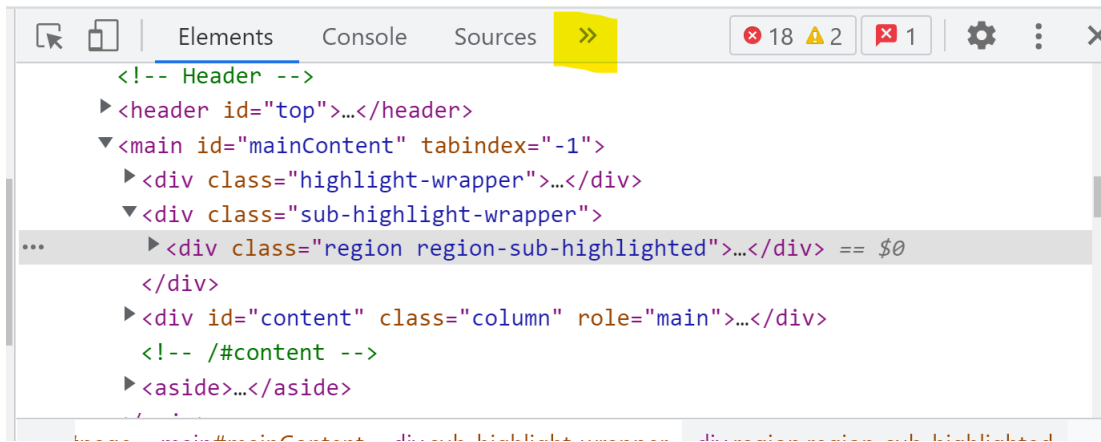
The audit indicated a potential need for site speed optimization, especially on mobile devices. We used the tools below to test speeds on pages across the site.

1. <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/feature/testmysite/>
2. Google Chrome Lighthouse Extension

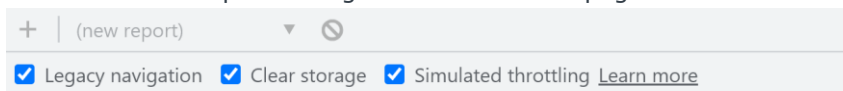
Utilizing the Lighthouse tool in Google Chrome is a great way to check on pages as you make updates.

To access the Lighthouse tool:

1. Right click on the page you want to evaluate
2. Select Inspect
3. Use the arrows to select the Lighthouse tool



4. Click Generate Report to begin the crawl of the page



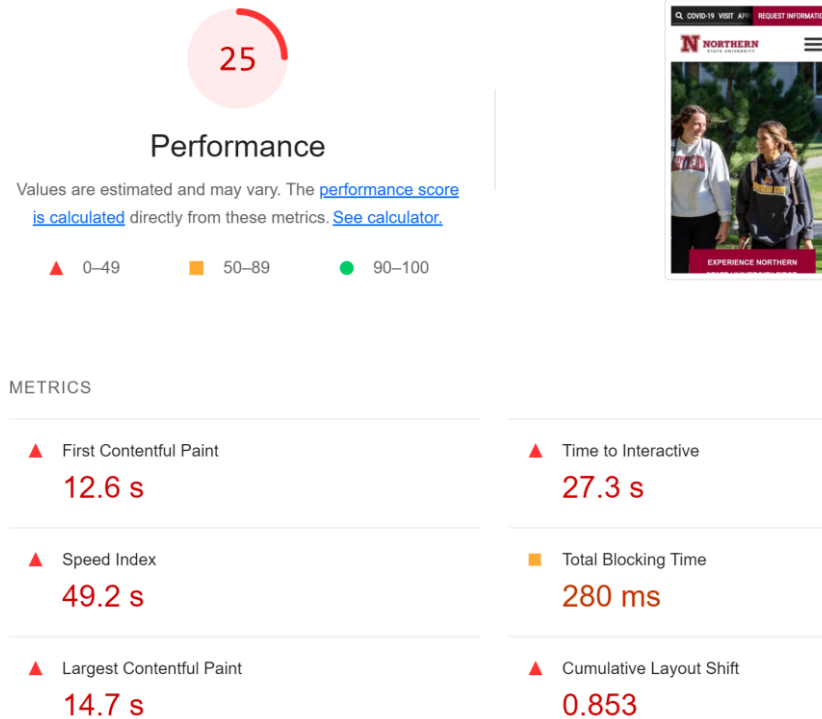
Generate report

Identify and fix common problems that affect your site's performance, accessibility, and user experience. [Learn more](#)

Categories

- Performance
- Progressive Web App
- Best practices
- Accessibility
- SEO

5. Select the Performance Report score to see detailed info for speed.



The report from Lighthouse will also provide fixes or optimizations that can be made to improve speed.

Here are a few best practices for improving site speed

- Redirect chains should not be longer than 3 redirects
- Redirects delay loading and can cause for slower load times
- If JavaScript isn't necessary for first render of content, then defer or make it asynchronous
- Browser reads top to bottom, and if JS is declared first before imagery or text asset, then those will load after entire JS
- Images account for large portion of downloaded bytes, compressing and optimizing images can significantly improve page load times