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# WKU graduate presents app to better museum design

By MICHAEL J. COLLINS michael.collins

@bgdailynews.com

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1 of 2



WKU User Experience graduate of 2023 Madison Whittle (second from left) presents her app to the Blues Museum at the Capitol Arts Center on Sept. 22, 2023. She is joined by Dearbone (from left), Evelyn Pollard-Gregory, Clint Waters and Justin H. MICHAEL J. COLLINS/Michael.Collins@bgdailynews.com

Madison Whittle was the first Western Kentucky University graduate whose degree read “user experience.”

Whittle graduated in May and, with some help from her “Civic Imagination Team,” used her skills to put together Muser – an app that tracks willing museum attendees to map how they move about exhibits.

The team was comprised of six multidisciplinary members who met regularly, each seeking guidance and feedback on a personal project of some kind. They met Friday at the Capitol Arts Center to present their projects and reflect on the last year together.

While most focused on storytelling, Whittle focused on improving how stories are told in museum settings.

“They all made me feel like a professional,” Whittle said. “Some of them were making apps, so they would ask me for my opinion, it’s fantastic. It was a great experience, which I’m so thankful for because I’m so sick of being treated the kid.”

Whittle got to see her work in action for the first time while studying abroad in London. They passed test phones out to other students as they wandered the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Tate Britain, just to see if it was a viable concept.

The result was a heatmap showing where students moved throughout the museum and how long they stopped to admire each piece. Whittle said it can help museums use

data to understand how their guests respond to exhibit design.

They later went to St. Louis and partnered with the National Blues Museum, Missouri History Museum and Soldiers Memorial Museum to run test booths with real guests.

“We probably spent five weeks total there, because first you have to go into the space and you have to measure accurately every single wall, every single nook and cranny,” Whittle said. “There are some places, bigger museums, that have the architectural plans still and the measurements, which is fantastic, but a lot of them smaller ones don’t.”

Whittle said her and several partners are now working on publishing the research from that trip. In the meantime, she works as a freelance website designer and as a user experience designer at Metals Innovation Initiative at WKU’s Innovation Campus.

Whittle said working on a project like Muser for so long has been a change of pace and a bit of adjustment. She hopes that with the concept proven, she can eventually find a buyer able to take the app to the next level.

“It’s like my baby, but at the same time, if I could sell it and let someone else have it, it wouldn’t hurt,” Whittle said.

Whittle said the field of “user experience” is a new one, and in many ways is rapidly evolving. It combines elements of art, data analysis, user engagement and digital design to better analyze how a product or service is used by the public.

It’s not cut and dry in practice, however. Whittle said “UX isn’t a career, it is a philosophy.”

“It is a way of thinking that you apply to a skill you already have. You have UX strategists, you have analysts, you have designers, like I am,” Whittle said. “It’s a way of thinking that makes people reevaluate something that they thought they knew from an expert point of view, [and start] thinking about the layperson – how they might see things.”

The Civic Imagination Team is a partnership between WKU’s Potter College of Arts & Letters, the Innovation Campus and the University of Southern California.

Freelance inquiries can be sent to Whittle at [madison.whittle314@gmail.com](mailto:madison.whittle314@gmail.com).

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## Michael Collins

Reporter