

## **IAI Website Visibility Study**

In the fall of 2001, IBHE staff members undertook an informal in-house study of the visibility of the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI) on the websites of the 12 public universities and 48 community colleges in the state. The focus of the study was to examine the websites from the perspective of a student who was considering transfer to another institution, and document the accessibility of the IAI/transfer information on these sites.

Several assumptions were behind doing this study:

- It should be easy for students to locate information about transferring credits.
- We want students to make a connection between IAI and transfer.
- The more “clicks” it took to find information about IAI and/or transfer, the less likely the student would be to find the information and/or continue with the search
- Secondly, the more “mouse clicks” attempted to reach a transfer topic, the student might perceive that less value was placed by the institution on the topic.

The search for IAI/transfer information began on the institution’s main page. Quick links that were presented on the page were examined first, if that avenue proved too difficult or no information was located, the search engine or pull-down menu was used. Lastly, the catalog was viewed for information.

### **How to interpret the table:**

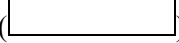
- Column one identifies the institutions and web addresses used to conduct the search for information.
- Column two examines the quick links that were available on the home page, and sought to answer the question, “Where does the student look for transfer information?” Initial links are recognized on the chart by the hyphen placed in front. Sub-categories are documented by an asterisk in front. If IAI information was available, this was shown in bold print.
- Column three determines if a search engine or pull-down menu was available. If a search engine was evident, the words “IAI” and “transfer” were searched. If IAI information could be found using either of these words, it was indicated with a “yes”. When pull-down menus were presented, the phrase that would most likely lead to IAI information was chosen. Phrases from the pull-down menu that led to IAI data were shown on the chart.
- Column four indicates whether or not a direct link to the iTransfer website was available for students.
- Column five specifies if an institution’s catalog was available online. Additionally, the catalog was searched for mention of IAI and the location of the information.
- Column six reveals the number of “mouse clicks” it took to find IAI information or the number of “clicks” it took in attempts to find the data.
- Column seven represents the ideal choice that presented the quickest access (least amount of “clicks”) to IAI information.

### **Findings.**

**Pathway analysis:** Trying to answer the question, “where does the student look for transfer information?” proved most challenging. Unless there was a direct link to IAI or transfer information on the main page, which was only true for three institutions, it was literally a gamble to determine where to start. IAI information was listed under numerous areas such as academics, prospective students, counseling and advising, student services and admissions. A variety of schools listed some or even all of these links as possibilities to choose from. There was no

common thread amongst institutions as to where the “student” could instantly locate IAI/transfer criteria. This resulted in the “student” searching for information using over five “clicks” for at least 23 of the 60 institutions researched.

**Search capabilities:** Assuming that a student was familiar with the acronym “IAI”, 20 of the 33 institutions that had search capabilities yielded results when the search engine or pull-down menu was used. Using the more familiar term “transfer”, 15 of the schools provided information on IAI when this method was used. The search engine and pull-down menu proved useful, but unless the student was familiar with IAI or a short description of IAI was provided in the search results, it would be easy for the student to bypass this method thinking the search did not generate any responses to the query.

**Links:** **Forty** institutions had direct links to the iTransfer website. Links to the site were displayed in several ways. For example, IAI, Illinois Articulation Initiative or the iTransfer icon (  ) were used. There was no continuity regarding where the links appeared among the institutions’ sites. The majority of the links were buried in text discussing transfer with little or no explanation as to what IAI is. A few sites displayed the actual icon on the main page, but a clarification regarding the significance of the icon was lacking. A few sites presented the link to IAI in the academic or transfer section of the site, but it was usually presented in the right or left column with several other links that were labeled “Additional Links”. Again, sites that only displayed one of the three variable links with hardly or no explanation were not effective given that most students are not acquainted with IAI or the icon.

**Catalog Access:** Nineteen institutions provided the catalog online. The majority of institutions that provided access to the catalog on the site used PDF format. This format is not very user-friendly and hard to navigate. Twelve of the 19 schools that offered the catalog on-line did mention IAI in some fashion. Albeit, the data was buried in the text and the explanation of IAI was only a few sentences or a short paragraph. A small number referred students to the iTransfer website for more information.

**Mouse Clicks:** Institutions required several (more than three) to many (up to twelve) “clicks” in the attempt to access IAI information. In most cases, IAI /transfer data was not “just a click away”. It required some effort on the student’s part. This suggests that if the student had to perform a significant amount of “clicking”, the student would end up not locating the desired information or abandon the search altogether.

**Ideal Pathways:** By clicking on the links displayed in this category, the student would be choosing the most direct route to IAI/transfer information. There were a variety of locations where the information was located. The most common links where IAI data was found were Transfer and Academics.

In summary, this study revealed that finding IAI information on the majority of the websites was a tedious task. In the event that the student would reach IAI information before abandoning his/her effort, the question remains as to whether or not the student has enough awareness to know what IAI is all about. Catalog access is beneficial to the student, but limited maneuverability is a big factor. A catalog is available to inform the student of the current and future options at a particular institution and this should be easy to access.

This study strongly suggests that IAI/transfer details could be located under a similar link for all universities and IAI awareness could be more effectively promoted. This study also revealed that several websites could be redesigned and presented in such a way that an inexperienced college

student could easily find and understand the facts that one is searching for. In an ideal situation, transfer information should be “just a click away”.

*This study was undertaken by Constance Cline-Harden, Nina Tangman, and Neala Schleuning*