

The Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC)

STUDENT PORTAL



studentportal.isac.org

CATEGORY

Digital Government: Government to Citizen (G to C)

STATE

Illinois

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Executive Summary

The goal of the Illinois Student Assistance Commission is to make college more accessible and affordable for Illinois students. To help achieve that goal, ISAC has developed a “one-stop-shop” web application that offers a host of free, best-in-class resources and tools to assist students and families with everything from selecting a college and finding scholarships, to learning how to budget and manage student loans, to searching for careers and jobs. In addition, the Portal is also designed to be a resource for students who are recipients of or interested in applying for ISAC gift assistance programs to view and manage their accounts. Students who receive Monetary Award Program (MAP) Grants can already log in to view their MAP paid credit hours, and as the Portal grows, it will provide a means for students to apply online for other ISAC-administered gift assistance programs.

For a decade, ISAC offered students, families and schools a third party-developed web application that sought to provide college planning tools, at significant monetary cost to the agency. Recognizing that other available third party tools and resources were exceeding both the functional and substantive capabilities of the application, ISAC was able to save over \$500,000 a year by developing its own Student Portal, which leverages the outstanding resources of a variety of third party vendors as well as includes popular and new tools developed within the agency.

The ISAC Student Portal is a mobile-responsive and easy-to-navigate web application that provides free tools and resources to give students and families the information they need to make informed decisions about college and financial aid. From partnerships with vetted, best-in-class third party vendors to ISAC’s internally developed resources, the Student Portal provides a central hub of innovative tools to make college possible for Illinois families.

Since it was launched, the portal has garnered an average of 2,000 unique visitors per month, and it is anticipated that monthly unique visitors will significantly increase as the agency implements a marketing plan to more actively promote the offering.

Concept

Illinois' Big Goal ("Goal 2025") is to increase the proportion of adults in the state with high-quality postsecondary credentials or degrees to 60% by the year 2025. Reaching that goal will require getting more students to school and closing the achievement gap.

For many students and families, and especially those who will be first generation college students, the sheer array of college planning information available is overwhelming, difficult to differentiate, and neither simple nor always accessible. Consistent with ISAC's mission to help make college accessible and affordable for *all* Illinois families, over 10 years ago it sought to provide a free tool that would provide free, objective and easily comprehensible information and resources.

After purchasing a service from a third-party vendor for over 10 years, ISAC recognized that the application had become somewhat stagnant. New functionality (including mobile-responsive functionality) and content from a variety of providers was surpassing the agency offering.

ISAC sought to meet three primary goals in developing the Student Portal:

- Building a cost-effective hub that provided both comprehensive content and updated functionality to make robust college and career planning resources widely available free of charge to students, families, and schools.
- Rather than reinvent the wheel, and recognizing that third parties with core competencies in the field had already created outstanding resources for students to use in financial literacy, college planning, and career exploration, ISAC sought to partner in order to leverage third-party functionality and content where possible and appropriate.
- Developing the Portal within the agency and using best practices in design, would allow the agency to continuously update both functionality and content.

In early 2015, ISAC decided that it was time for a new approach, creating its own central hub with reliable, engaging content that places the user front and center. The portal was designed from the ground up to be a mobile responsive application that will scale to accommodate the needs of its users over time. In taking the project in-house and developing partnerships, the state and the agency are saving over \$500,000 a year.

After considerable review of potential partners, ISAC developed partnerships with College Greenlight™, SALT™, and Illinois workNet to offer those services through the Portal. The agency added its own tools and resources to help provide tools and resources for college planning that are comprehensive, yet simple to access and understand. Covering the gamut from college and scholarship search, to financial literacy, to career guidance and internship opportunities, the Portal offers a free one-stop-shop for college planning that any student in

Illinois can access at any time. It also provides access to the ISACorps, ISAC’s team of more than 50 near-peer mentors who assist students and families across Illinois with the college going process and obtaining financial aid.

After the first iteration of the Portal, ISAC hired a Digital Product Manager who was given complete ownership for the Student Portal’s functionality and content. In collaboration with various ISAC business teams, the Digital Product Manager led the development of new design and functionality of the Portal, and he continues to prioritize new functionality as technology advances. Consistently updated functionality and dynamic content are expected to help attract new users as well as increase the stickiness of existing users.

In order to provide a comprehensive, user-friendly website, ISAC conducted usability testing at three area high schools. User interface design, which is a part of usability testing, was done internally among a small group of ISACorps members as well as at the three schools over a period of two months. Through substantial feedback from participants, ISAC was able to design an appealing, intelligible website with relevant content for students in all stages of college planning and beyond.

ISAC used Agile methodology to develop the Student Portal. Constant interaction between the Product Manager, Design team and the Development team helped ensure shortened development timeframe and adherence to design and functionality. ISAC spent approximately \$500,000 in development and \$150,000 in Product Management and Design for the portal in its first iteration. The number of unique users using the portal will reflect on the success of the portal. ISAC expects to have a significant increase in unique users per month by the end of the 2016.

The Illinois Student Assistance Commission has marketed the ISAC Student Portal through various channels, including press releases and earned media, social media, the school superintendents newsletter, and direct emails to Illinois state employees. Grass roots efforts through the ISACorps, who interact with students and families across the state every day, have played a significant role in marketing and promotion of the Portal. The ISACorps promote the portal during presentations about college and financial aid, and through printed information about the Portal provided at each of these presentations.

Through Google AdWords, Google’s paid advertising product, ISAC has set up daily advertisements within Google search results pages.

Additionally, ISAC used Search Engine Optimization (SEO) strategies to increase the amount of visitors to the Student Portal website. SEO is the process of getting traffic from the “free,” “organic,” “editorial” or “natural” search results on



search engines. The main tasks include on-site SEO (optimizing the code on your websites web pages) and performing off-site SEO tasks (acquiring backlinks, optimizing social media channels, acquiring local reviews, building up online reputation).

ISAC does not collect or store any sensitive personally identifiable information (PII) from high school students such as SSN. When high school student enter the portal they are asked for only minimal contact information to register. Collected information is not shared with third parties and is safely secured by employing industry best practices for data protection. The portal uses a site security certificate to ensure communication is encrypted between the client and the server. An Intrusion Detection System/Intrusion Prevention System (IDS/IPS) and firewall inspect network traffic to prevent misuse. By using a layered approach—segmenting Internet facing web servers and internal application and database servers, encrypting databases with personally identifiable information, using anti-virus and anti-malware software, providing only need-based access rights, and conducting periodic vulnerability scans—ISAC takes many steps to ensure our data is protected.

Significance

Since the ISAC Student Portal was designed from the outset to be mobile responsive and accessible across multiple devices, it has the ability to serve the vast majority of students and parents. The portal was field tested through several iterations with area high school students to ensure the design and end product met expectations not only in regards to content but also in ease of use and functionality. The initial feedback from this primary user audience was valuable in helping refine the design of the application. As part of ISAC's philosophy of continuous improvement, the Portal will have ongoing interaction with the end user community to make the site even more useful and usable.

To help reduce the achievement gap in Illinois and level the playing field for students with limited access to resources, the Student Portal provides 24/7 access to critical college planning and financial aid tools and resources. Among the tools and resources available on the Portal:

- Students can use **College Greenlight™** to explore colleges and search a database that includes billions of dollars in local, state and national scholarships.
- ISAC partner **SALT™ Money** offers students free financial literacy tools that include online money management lessons; simple interactive tools to learn about student loans and track debt, so students can borrow less and borrow smart; and a robust online community where students can get real world money advice from others who've been there.
- Students can also access the **Illinois workNet** tools to explore careers, develop a resume, and search for jobs.

- In addition to the job listings through Illinois workNet, ISAC has developed an **Internship/Summer Job Board** for Illinois students, with over 3000 job listings that are updated daily.
- The Portal also offers a variety of interactive and downloadable tools developed by ISAC to help simplify college planning:
 - An interactive **College Checklist** for freshman through seniors helps students stay on top of deadlines and provides a simple reminder of the steps needed to apply to college and get financial aid.
 - The **Monetary Award Program (MAP) Estimator** helps give students an idea of their eligibility for the MAP grant, the state's largest need-based grant program for college students.
 - With ISAC's online **Financial Aid Comparison Worksheet**, students can make more informed financial decisions by easily comparing financial aid awards from different colleges.
 - ISAC's interactive Jeopardy[®]-style **Financial Aid Game** offers a fun and engaging way for students to test their knowledge of financial aid.
- The Portal also provides a variety of ways for students to connect with the ISACorps, ISAC's team of near-peer mentors who are deployed across the state to assist students and families with the college going and financial aid process.
 - Through a simple zip code search, Illinois students and families can **contact the ISACorps** member in their area or find a nearby free **college or financial aid workshop**.
 - Students can sign up **for Illinois College Q&A**, a free service that allows students and families to text their college planning questions to ISAC counselors and get answers sent directly to their phones.

The tools and resources will continue to expand as technology grows and as students express a need for additional tools.

Impact

The ISAC Student Portal has pioneered functionality that uses technology to innovatively deliver content that is of utmost benefit to students and parents alike. Whether it be access to content delivered via our third-party resources, or innovative tools that are developed in-house, the ISAC Student Portal is designed to adapt to the needs of Illinois students and families by providing best-in-class college and career planning resources.

Students and school districts across the state have varying access to robust in person college-planning assistance. Typically, the school districts with the greatest need for help have the fewest resources. The ISAC Student Portal is an effort to help level the playing field for students across

the state by offering free, reliable resources that help families: make informed decisions about colleges and financial aid, find scholarships, learn how to manage their money and make smarter decisions about student loans, explore careers and find internships and summer jobs, and connect with one-on-one help. Students can come to one place to use all of these resources, and as the Portal develops, will also be able to apply to and/or track their usage of ISAC gift assistance programs. With mobile optimization, the Portal can now reach more students where they virtually—and actually—live.

The agency, too, has benefited from the Portal. By providing these tools on the web, it is able to more efficiently deploy its ISACorps and other staffing resources. Moreover, creating its own hub has saved the agency and the state over \$500,000 a year.

Since the newly redesigned ISAC Student Portal launched, it is gaining traction, with almost 12,000 web sessions and more than 8,000 unique users. As marketing efforts continue, ISAC expects to see usage of the Student Portal grow exponentially. A recent email campaign in April 2016 increased usage by 50% to more than 3500 users in April.

Illinois high schools graduate more than 140,000 students every year with more than 50% eligible for free or reduced lunch. ISAC’s goal is to use the Student Portal to help ensure that a majority of low income students (approximately 70,000 a year) have access to best-in-class free tools and information to make college accessible and affordable to them.

The mobile responsive Student Portal makes critical, comprehensive and objective college-going information widely accessible to students and families across Illinois, as well as provides access to local in-person assistance. It allows ISAC to provide consistently updated functionality and dynamic content, saves the agency and the state over \$500,000 per year, and improves the agency’s efficient use of resources to best serve the citizens of Illinois.

