ISAC
Illinois Student Assistance Commission

Breaking Down Silos in College Financial Aid

A unified platform solution that empowers business and IT to work hand in hand

Summary

The Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC), which helps students and colleges manage financial aid opportunities for postsecondary education, struggled with poor customer experiences and high maintenance costs. ISAC chose the Liferay platform to eliminate silos and aggregate student data for streamlined reporting and greater visibility of data for all business units.

studentportal.isac.org/web/guest/student/

In Brief

Industry:
Government (Local/State)

Country/Region:
United States

Use Case:
Employee Portal, Extranet, Student Portal

Key Features:
Single Sign On, Unified Data Management, Collaboration, Web Content Management

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> Instead of taking five steps to share student data, we're able to cut this down to the press of a button.
>
> *David Perry*
> *Assistant Director, Partner and Product Services*

Challenges

- Siloed data produced a poor user experience for students and partners
- A paper-based budget review process wasted time and resources
- Old technology made it difficult to modify programming within state-mandated timelines

Results

Uniting Sites
Single Sign On to unite multiple sites

Better Web Experience
Improved web experience for students and families

Empowering Business Users
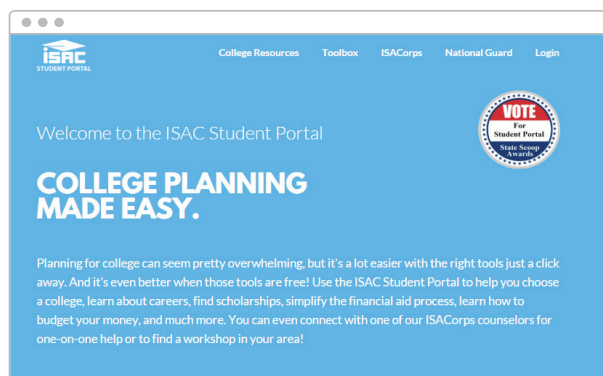Reduced reliance on IT by empowering business users to administer processes independently

Award-Winning Service
Won Honorable Mention 2013 Digital Educational Achievement Award (DEAA), Multi-Focus/Other Digital Application/Project Category

LIFERAY

Making College Affordable for Illinois Students

In 1957, state lawmakers created the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) to ensure that financial considerations did not prevent Illinois students from realizing their postsecondary educational goals. Today, ISAC has two main priorities: Make college accessible and affordable for Illinois students, and increase the proportion of adults with a postsecondary credential to 60% by 2025. User-centric services are key to ISAC's vision, whether they're designing processes for students and families, the 140 colleges and universities it partners with, or its own internal business users.

"We had an existing system, but it was very siloed," said Kalaiselvan Sambasivan, Application Development Manager.

Authentication, authorization and business logic were spread out and repeated across core applications. This resulted in increased complexity for the business process, a poor customer experience for ISAC's partners and a high maintenance cost.

ISAC decided to re-engineer the Gift Assistance Program (GAP) Access Portal so that its business users and partners could easily see data and track the status of financial aid processes. In order to move all processes off of the old technology in a cost-efficient way, it needed a solution that was robust, scalable and reliable, with tools to cater to multiple audiences, manage complicated data systems and reduce the dependency of business users on IT. It was imperative that the solution be flexible, as new regulatory mandates required ISAC's IT team to quickly modify programming within strict timelines.

Developing a Unified Solution to Aggregate Student Data and Streamline Reporting

Based on a Gartner report, ISAC chose Liferay as an open source solution that satisfied all functionality, scalability, reliability and total cost of ownership requirements. With Liferay, ISAC was able to consolidate all of its student and partner data in GAP Access so that its business

users could easily view or run reports in real time. The flexibility of the platform also meant that business users could request changes with the confidence that the IT team would be able to deliver within their timeframe 98% of the time. The new solution provides visibility into the data for all business units (where it was previously limited to program services and compliance), including accounting and the college outreach team. Now every department can see and run its own reports without going through the IT team.

In addition, ISAC manages an annual budget submission review from the 140 colleges and universities with which it partners. The agency used Liferay to digitize the process, changing it from a series of paper-based steps to a completely digital solution. Instead of tracking mailed applications and reviewing hand-written submissions, ISAC can now view the most current versions of budget submissions online through GAP Access. Partners are also free to change their information as needed, for instance if demographics change or a new campus needs to be added.

One unanticipated benefit that ISAC found after switching to Liferay was a simplified process for securely transmitting sensitive student data. Schools used to spend hours encrypting data and transmitting it across multiple systems in order to update student information. With all of the data integrated into GAP Access, schools can now view everything in one spot. They can also track students and filter them based on specific criteria. All of ISAC's programs are visible in one portal as well, available through a single sign in, whereas sites for each program used to be far flung and require users to log in multiple times.

When it expanded its use of Liferay to its student portal, ISAC made it possible to maintain consistent experiences for students. Once students make an account, they can pick up where they left off with filling out financial aid worksheets, comparing schools or other activities. The portal also features interactive games and a modern, mobile-friendly design to better appeal to students.

Building a Platform for Future Collaboration

Having a unified platform empowers ISAC's business users to administer processes without involving IT. They are able to confidently meet deadlines for new requirements, which they couldn't do easily with the previous system. This has freed IT to support other Illinois agencies and pursue a new collaborative effort with the Illinois Department of Employment Security, Illinois State University and the Illinois Board of Higher Education. ISAC is providing the data for the collaborative team to look at trends for graduation rates and job expectancy rates for its students. They want to answer questions such as, When a student goes into a particular program, what kind of growth can she expect to see? The hope is that, down the road, this project will provide even more benefits for Illinois students.

"GAP Access will give partners access to every program ISAC has to offer," said David Perry, Assistant Director of Partner and Product Services. Liferay has provided a platform for IT and business to work hand in hand as ISAC continues its digital transformation for the benefit of students across the state.

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