

SI Website Academic Section – Comparative Evaluation

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[Executive Summary:](#)

One of the best ways to evaluate a business' website is to compare it with competitor websites. Although the U-M School of Information is not a business, but an educational institution, we can still compare the SI website with websites of direct, indirect, partial, and analogous competitors, ranging from websites of other i-Schools to business websites. From the websites we identified as comparable to SI's website, we selected several features (e.g. aesthetics, how easy it was to navigate the site) which were comparable across all sites. We selected several sites which successfully implemented our comparative features in order to generate our findings. Based on those findings, we have generated several recommendations for the SI website which we believe will help improve the degree to which students are satisfied with the services it offers. The recommendations are listed as follows:

- Develop a system which allows users to more easily navigate the site.
- Add tools which allow students to filter courses.
- Design separate channels tailored to the needs of current and prospective students.

Introduction:

The Academics section of the SI website (<http://si.umich.edu/academics>) is where the school stores several pieces of information for current students, such as the course catalog, lists of degree requirements, and links to internal and external scholarship opportunities. In addition, this section of the SI website contains information for prospective students, such as information about degree programs offered at SI as well as a link to a section of the site where a student can apply for admission to the school. As of last year, the site was redesigned and this is the first year that prospective students will use it to apply to the school. By comparing this site with other similar sites, we endeavored to evaluate what the SI Academics website is doing well, what comparable sites are doing better, and what is generally expected of academic websites. The findings from the comparative analysis can be used to ensure that the website is meeting the expected standards and to guide decisions about future efforts to improve the site. (Kuniavsky, 2003, pp. 419-434)

Methods

Step #1: Locating possible competitor websites.

Individually, we found and examined websites that served as direct, indirect, analogous, and partial competitors to the SI website. We classified each according to the following definitions:

- **Direct:** A system that offers the same functions as the system under consideration. Both have the same goals and target audience.
- **Indirect:** A system that offers similar functions but in different ways in comparison

with the relevant system.

- **Partial:** A system which offers some of the same functions but has several additional functions which the system of interest does not possess.
- **Analogous:** A system which is not a competitor, but which covers some but not all of the functions offered by the system of interest.

Given the above definitions, we selected five sites as competitors to which the SI website could be compared:

- Direct:
 - University of Toronto iSchool (<http://www.ischool.utoronto.ca/>)
 - Information School at the University of Washington (<http://ischool.uw.edu/>)
- Indirect:
 - University of Michigan College of Literature, Science & the Arts (<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/>)
- Partial:
 - University of Michigan School of Art & Design (<http://www.art-design.umich.edu/>)
- Analogous:
 - Orbitz (<http://www.orbitz.com/>)

Direct competition comes from several different i-Schools, which offer programs which are similar in large part to the program offered by the school of information. Given that it is hard to find an information school which offers all of the exact specializations as the U-M School of Information (for example, since U-M is one of only a few schools to offer Social Computing), we settled on a compromise of selecting schools that offer a fairly similar range of specializations as the U-M School of Information. The reason for doing so is that as students are interested in a number of different of specializations within the field of information science, even if a student was considering U-M's School of Information, they would likely still apply to other schools. The schools that we choose represent two examples of the types of schools that we might choose. Both the University of Toronto and the University of Texas offer several of the same specializations as SI such as Archives and Records Management and Library & Information Science. In addition, both offer several different specializations that, although they don't perfectly overlap with SI specializations, have similar focus to the types of things studied in the University of Michigan School of Information¹.

As an indirect comparison, we selected the U-M College of Literature, Science, and Arts (henceforth referred to as the LS&A). We classified it as an indirect comparison because although the LS&A's website has a course catalog like the SI website, it is tailored to the needs of undergraduate students rather than graduate students. Thus, although the Course Guide does offer students the option of searching for courses in SI, it only shows courses

¹ If interested, see <http://www.ischool.utoronto.ca/degrees/mi/isd> and <http://www.ischool.utexas.edu/programs/specializations/> for a complete list of programs offered at these schools.

which count towards degrees offered by the LS&A rather than courses which count towards SI specializations.

For a partial comparison, we choose the U-M school of Art & Design (Henceforth referred to as the school of A&D). The school of A&D contains several similar functions to the SI website, such as offering information to prospective students interested in a masters program. Finally, for an analogous comparison, we chose orbitz.com, as we believe that the SI website would benefit from imitating several strategies that the Orbitz site uses to organize a large amount content

Step #2: Generate criteria for comparison

Next, from the sites that we selected, we generated criteria for comparison. We chose features that we thought would most strongly affect the user experience of prospective and current students. From this, we constructed a comparison matrix (See Appendix 3). The criteria are listed as follows:

- Organization - Does the way the content on the site is organized make sense.
- Navigability - The ease of navigating the overall site, but in particular, the course catalog and the admissions page.
- Marketing - The techniques used to appeal to prospective students
- Processes/Documents - Whether or not the way the information on the site is organized makes it apparent how to complete a process (e.g. applying, getting PEP credits). Also, whether or not the process includes links to the relevant documents/forms/sub-pages.

Many of these features are related to sentiments expressed by several of our interviewees. We had several different rationales for why we choose these particular criteria. We recalled that in our interviews with current students, several emphasized that it was important for them to be able to navigate quickly through the site in order to find whatever information they were looking for, such as finding which courses counted for which specialization. In addition, having a site that is fairly easy to navigate would be useful to prospective students who are looking to apply to SI. Finally, we found that several sites had organized their content when outlining processes so as to make it easy for students to locate information and know how to complete the process. We recalled that several of our interviewees mentioned being frustrated when attempting to locate the TAPS sheets or find PEP forms, so we explored how several of the competitor sites organized documentation that either had to be filled out online or printed out and handed in.

Step #3: Analyze each of the competitor sites for comparison

Finally, as a group, we held an interpretation session. Beforehand, each of us went through the sites and individually rated them on a scale of 1-5 (1 being the lowest) for how well each site did with respect to each feature. At the interpretation session, we reconciled our ratings and discussed several features of each competitor site that we liked or did not like. The purpose of this was to generate recommendations for areas in which the SI website could use some improvement relative to the competition as well as to highlight areas in which the SI website excelled. These are all presented in the findings and recommendations

Key Findings:

Finding 1: Usage of text and multimedia format to market to prospective students

Several sites that we reviewed used several different techniques on their 'prospective student' pages in order to appeal to prospective students. The site that we found best engaged prospective students was the University of Michigan School of Art & Design's website. On this site, prospective students can view a video of various individuals associated with the program discussing the benefits of getting a degree in the School of Art & Design. In addition, there are several videos which profile current students.

We also found that in addition to engaging prospective student with video presentations, the admissions page provides relevant information in order to give students an idea of how competitive their statistics are, the process of applying, as well as degree programs and open house events which might interest prospective students. In addition, there are several links in the FAQ section which take prospective students to pages which address concerns about applying, provide more information about degree programs, and give prospective students a taste of what it is like to be a student.

Recommendation #1: Use multimedia presentations to market SI to prospective students

The strength of this design is that it engages students who are unsure whether they should apply to the program. We recommend that the SI website redesign its prospective student page so that it prominently displays eye-catching features like interactive media and short FAQs about the process of applying as well as short descriptions of what the program is like. On the current SI prospective student page, the first thing that a student sees is a list of links, which require a user to navigate through multiple pages in order to find out more about SI. Expert designer Jakob Nielsen notes that as people normally scan web pages to look for interesting words rather than reading each page word-for-word. He recommends that sites include short intros on each page which explain the content's purpose and that they include more directly actionable content (such as videos, which a user can interact with)². We believe that the current page makes it more fairly difficult for prospective students to apply to SI and would recommend this redesign.

² From Jakob Nielson's website: <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/intro-text.html>. Accessed 2/17/12

Finding #2: Search options for Filtering Information

We found that the problem of having an easily navigable course catalog is one that is faced by several colleges. Each deals with it differently depending on their own needs. In particular, we found the way that the LS&A allowed students to search the course catalog to be admirable. Given that that LS&A houses over 100 different departments, such as Physics, American Culture, and Middle Eastern Studies, the course catalog will be large. In addition, many underclassmen in LSA have not selected a particular concentration and typically want to consider several options before declaring. In order to support these needs, the online version of the LS&A course catalog offers students several different options that they can select to narrow their search (see Figures 3a and 3b). For example, students can filter courses by department, credits term offered, and which requirement each course fulfills. A search box titled "keyword/phrase" allows them to perform a custom search for a particular course or teacher. In general, this mechanism affords students the chance to select options that are best fitted to their educational needs.

Another example of a filtering mechanism is Orbitz.com's faceted search. From a menu on the left, Orbitz allows users to narrow down their search for flights by several facets including price, total flight time, airline company, and number of stops. This faceted search allows users to easily modify their search without having to return to a previous search page.

Recommendation #2: Include filtering options which support student needs.

In particular, we recommend including a filtering mechanism with several options similar to those of the LS&A Course Guide, but tailored to the needs and specializations of MSI students. For one, the LSA offers several more options than the MSI program. So while some similar filters can be applied to the MSI specialization (like "Subjects"), other filters can be omitted (like "Distribution Requirements"). In addition, it is our experience that several MSI students decide fairly early in their careers which specialization they wish to pursue. Thus, many students would benefit from a mechanism which filters courses by specialization. In addition, being able to search for courses which fulfill program-wide requirements, such as the management requirement, would be helpful. Finally, as a point to consider, the list of courses which students have used as cognates in the past could also be listed here. Finally, students could have the option to handle several logistical options by searching for courses by time, semester offered, and number of credits.

Finding #3: Systems of global navigation

One aspect we noticed while evaluating the web pages of several competitors was that many of them have systems in place to provide easy access to other pages in the same level of

the hierarchy as well as to show users what section of the website they are currently browsing. To allow users to navigate between various items without having to navigate to several different sub-pages, several competitor websites employ drop down menus on the main page. For example on the University of Toronto's homepage, hovering one's cursor over the "Admissions" tab produces a drop-down menu (see Figure 4), which offers the user the choice of navigating over to several sub-pages relevant to prospective students. Another feature of Toronto's site is that these menus are consistent from page-to-page (see Figure 5), which allows users easily navigate to other topics and sub pages without having to go through several intermediary pages. Finally, on each sub-page, there is a breadcrumb trail which lists how many levels down from the main page you are and how you got to the current page. For example, on the "admissions" sub-page, at the very top, there is a breadcrumb trail titled "Home>>Admissions", which lets you know that you are 1 level down from the home page and that you got to the admissions sub-page by going through the home page (see Figure 5).

Recommendation 3.1: Employ drop-down menus for easier navigation

Currently on the SI site, there are several pages which require a user to click through a series of intermediary pages in order to reach his target. In order to locate information for applying to SI (under "admissions") or selecting courses from the course catalog (under "courses"), a user must click on the "academics" section first in order to be taken to an intermediary page (shown in Figure 6). This intermediary page could be eliminated all together and replaced by a drop down menu in the main page which allows users to navigate over to several sub-sections of the academics section no matter. This would cut down on the amount of time that it takes a user to navigate from section-to-section and is important if for example a user is selecting courses and wants to learn more about what career options that course will open up for him (located in "Home" >> "Careers" >> "Students and Alumni").

Recommendation 3.2: Have a breadcrumb trail for each page

In order to make navigating the SI Academics section (and rest of the website) easier, we recommend having a breadcrumb trail at the top of each page which shows users how they got to each page as well as how many levels down from the main page they are. Currently, there is a mechanism for doing this on the SI website in that the link which you are in is displayed in red in the sidebar. Notice that in Figure 6, the "academics" section is in red. However, this can be rather non-obvious to many students. In addition, the breadcrumb trail employed by Toronto and other sites has the advantage of allowing users the ability to click each of the layers in order to navigate back to the page they last visited. So for example, if you were on the admissions page (or a deeper page) and you wanted to return home, you could click "Home" in the breadcrumb trail: "Home>>Admissions."

Finding #4: Competitors have separate channels for prospective and current students.

We found that some of the other iSchools' websites provide sections tailored to meet the needs of a particular subgroup of users. For example, the University of Washington School of Information's Webpage has exclusive channels for prospective students and current students (See Figures 7a and 7b). As shown in Figure 7a, the menu for prospective students includes links for applying to the program, locating financial aid, as well as several other options. This is different from the channel for current students which offers options to locate classes, internships, or research opportunities (see Figure 7b).

Recommendation #4: Create separate channels prospective and current students.

Currently, the only channel found on the SI website devoted to prospective students is located on the main page rather under the "Quick Links." At the moment, the SI website academics section doesn't provide exclusive sections for different user groups (See Figure 6). Designing separate channels of each user group will allow the SI web design team to better implement the recommendation to better market the school of information to prospective students. In addition, it will also allow current students to more quickly locate information that is relevant to them as opposed to having to "step over" all the information on the current SI Academics page which is targeted to prospective students.

Finding #5: Presentation of Information in a concise, list format

The i-Schools we examined used various methods to convey information about their application processes and which documents to submit. While some simply wrote detailed instructions, others represented the application process as a sequence, showing which documents users had to submit in order to apply to the school as well as provided students with links they could visit if they had any questions/concerns about one of the particular steps. For example, the University of Toronto's School of Information lists out the application process as a step-by-step method, includes links which users can visit if they have any questions about a step, and also lists all the relevant documents that students are required to submit in order to apply (See Figure 8). Some sites we visited even had links where users could upload some of the documents required in the application process. For example, the U-M School of A&D's admissions website includes a link to a site where students can upload the required portfolio of their work in order to apply to the Art School (see Figure 10).

Recommendation #5: Whenever users need to use the site to complete a multi-step process, present the required steps in a list format, including links to pages designed to clarify different steps of the process.

Having a readily apparent list of requirements will give users more confidence, will cut down on errors arising from overlooking information, and will reduce the need for users to turn to other sources to confirm they did everything required. There are several examples where this could be implemented on the SI website. For example, information about applying to the SI program is located across several different pages on the SI academics section. We recommend that the information be located on a single page. Another area of the site that could be redesigned is the PEP page³. Although most of the information about taking PEP courses and completing PEP internships is located on this page, we recommend that the page be re-formatted so that the information is represented as a sequence showing students how to begin and complete the process.

Discussion

In this study we analyzed direct competitors, partial competitors, and an analogous competitor, but we didn't analyze any indirect competitors. It would have been difficult to conduct a study of non-web resources within the scopes of this study. We also would have had difficulty evaluating them with our comparison matrix. We also think that most current and prospective users will turn to websites to meet their information needs. However, for a more complete picture of our users, a future study could possibly investigate indirect competitors like school catalogs or school visitation events.

Another limitation to our methods was how we rated the websites in the comparison matrix. The rating was very subjective. We did do some averaging of each member's ratings to get a composite score. However, we only have three evaluators, which is clearly not enough. If we could invite more evaluators to participate this process, our ratings would be more likely to be representative of the actual user population.

Due to our time limitation, we only chose two direct competitors, two partial competitors and one analogous competitor. Conducting comparative analysis on more competitors would be necessary to provide stronger evidence for our findings and recommendations.

Conclusion

For this study, we adapted Kuniavsky's (2003) competitive research method, to investigate the School of Information's academic website and comparable website. We wanted to identify features which enhance competitor websites so that we could recommend that the SI web development team adapt these features. While further comparisons of other websites and using more people to rate them would make our findings more certain, from our comparative analysis, we found that there were several features the School of Information's website could adapt in order to help its users accomplish their tasks quicker.

³ <http://www.si.umich.edu/careers/pep-courses>

References

Kuniavsky, M. 2003. *Observing the user experience: A practitioner's guide to user research*. San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann.

Appendices

Appendix 1:

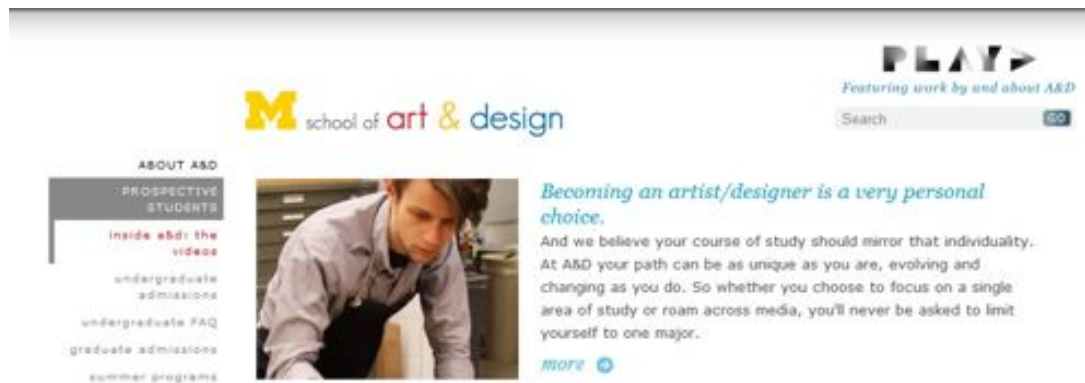


Figure 1. The U of M School of Art & Design's Prospective Students landing page includes pictures of people and phrases to which the students can relate, building a quick connection. (<http://art-design.umich.edu/prospective/videos>)

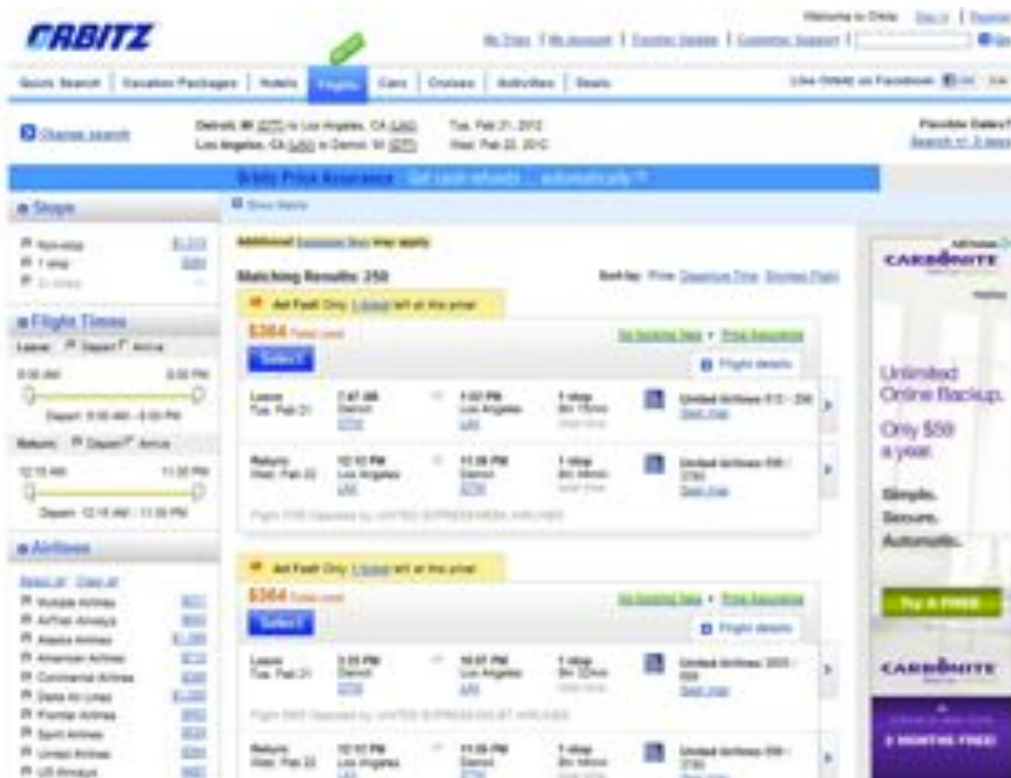


Figure 2: The faceted search feature on Orbitz.com (notice the left menu).



show 20 results 100s 200s 300s 400s 500+

Keyword/Phrase Instructor Last Name or Uniqname

Subjects Credit Hours

ART: Art and Design
 ART: University Arts
 AUP: Architecture
 AUP: Urban Planning
 BA: Business Administration
 BA: Business Econ & Public Policy

search by catalog number range, keyword (i.e., title, description, topic, keywords or long subject description), instructor, subject, credit hours, requirements, and/or other course groupings.
 Hold down ctrl to select/deselect multiples.

Distribution Requirements
 Creative Expression (CE)
 Humanities (HL)
 Interdisciplinary Course (ID)
 Math and Symbolic Analysis (MSA)
 Natural Sciences (NS)
 Social Sciences (SS)

Other Requirements/Groupings
 Bachelor of Science Eligibility
 First-Year Seminar
 First-Year Writing
 Honors
 Language Requirement
 Minicourse

Match Any All selections from this list

Figures 3a and 3b: The UofM College of Literature, Science & the Arts's Advanced Course Search page makes it easy for students from many different degree paths to find relevant classes. (http://www.lsa.umich.edu/cg/cg_advsearch.aspx)



Figure 4. An illustration of the University of Toronto's system of drop down menus.



Figure 5. The University of Toronto's breadcrumb trail illustrated

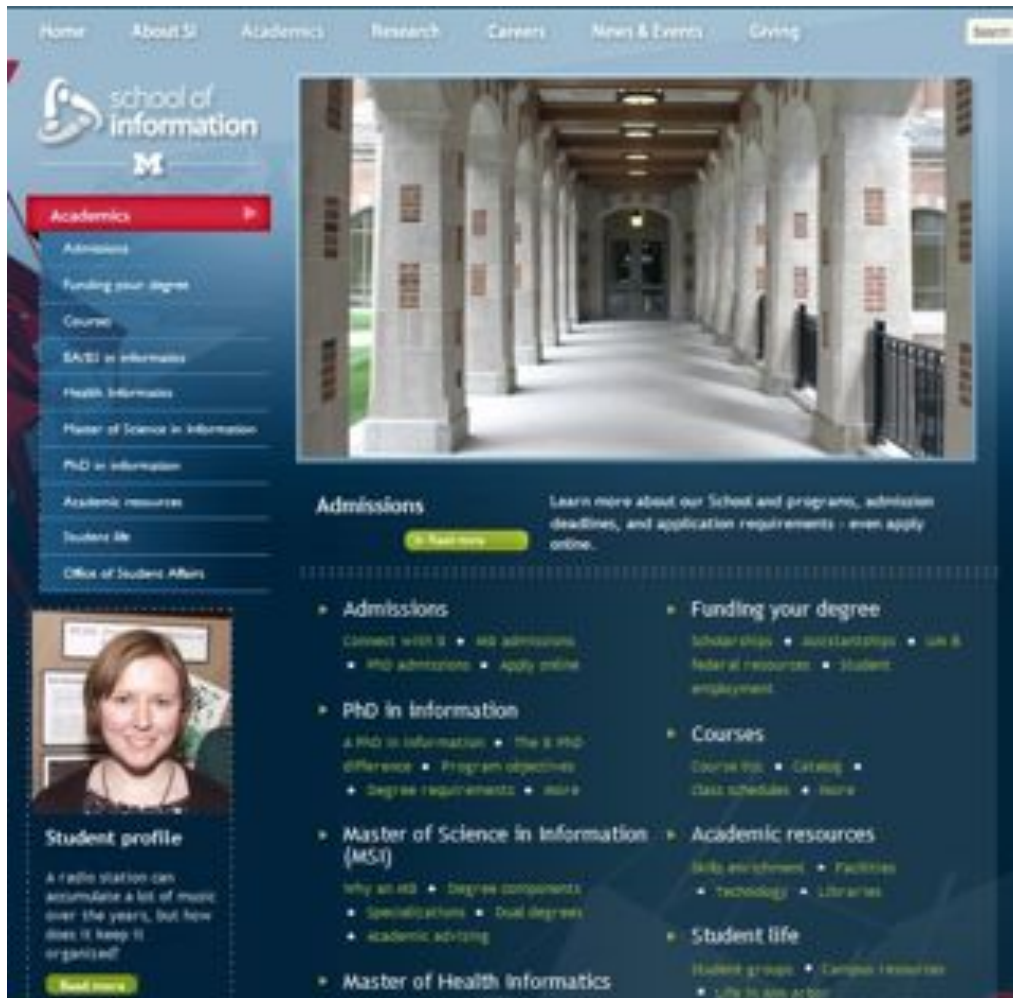


Figure 6. The SI Academics main landing page has some inconsistency. The navigation in the main text box uses different labels and is in a different order than the navigation it is meant to duplicate. This leads to an extra moment of confusion for the user. (<http://si.umich.edu/academics>)



Prospective Students	Current Students	Community
Academics Classes Internships Research Registration	Policies & Procedures Student Guide Degree Planning Graduation	Placement Employer Connections Networking Career Resources Capstone
		Student Life Association of Information Management Students Leadership Opportunities Student Communities Health & Housing Tuition

Figures 7a and 7b: The main page of the University of Washington School of Information separates prospective and current students (<http://ischool.uw.edu/msim>)

Admissions process: Overview

About the admissions process

- Applications are made through the School of Graduate Studies (SGS), University of Toronto.
- This is done through the SGS online Graduate Admissions Application process.
- The iSchool has one intake in the fall of each year.
- The application fee is \$125 CAN.
- Applications for the 2012/2013 academic year are being accepted from October 1, 2011 on.
- Details about the documents required for iSchool applications can be found on the [Admissions Documentation](#) page.
- For any admissions-related questions, contact: admissions.ischool@utoronto.ca

The following steps explain the iSchool admissions process.

Step 1: Inform yourself

- Review the [requirements](#) under your degree program of interest
- Note that each program has its own application deadline
- Read U of T Writing Centre [tips](#) on how to write effective admissions letters.

Step 2: Apply online

- Go to the SGS Graduate Admissions Application [page](#) and follow the instructions
- Detailed [instructions](#) and an [FAQ](#) are available from SGS
- The process takes 45-60 minutes to complete and involves:
 - Creating your profile

Figure 8. The University of Toronto's iSchool uses bulleted lists to make possible to easily and confidently fulfill the steps of its application process. (<http://www.ischool.utoronto.ca/admissions/process/>)



Figure 9: The SI Academics section main page does not create separate areas for prospective and current students. (<http://si.umich.edu/academics>)

1. Submit the [Backham Graduate Admission Application Form](#).

The Application Form will require the following:

- Creative Work Statement
- Personal Statement
- Résumé
- Three Letters of Recommendation
- Evidence of English proficiency (for students whose first language is not English)
- Nonrefundable application fee

2. Mail an official transcript from ALL post-secondary schools you have attended, whether or not you received a degree from that school. The official transcript should provide proof of a Bachelors Degree or equivalent and list completed coursework. Transcripts should be sent in sealed envelopes directly from the post-secondary school to the following address and must arrive by the admissions deadline:

Graduate Selection Committee
School of Art & Design
University of Michigan
2000 Bonisteel Blvd
Ann Arbor MI 48109-2069

3. Upload a portfolio of work online at <http://um.slideroom.com>.

Applicants should upload a total of 20 images (.jpg), videos (.mov, .wmv, .flv), music (.mp3) or PDF documents. For detailed recommendations, see [Preparing Your Portfolio](#). Slideroom charges an additional \$10.00 fee for this service.

Figure 10: The U-M School of A&D's application checklist for its graduate program

Appendix 2:

Group ideas for criteria for comparison.

Possible comparable websites

Other schools with programs similar to ours

Another school with several programs/degrees

Other sites with a lot of information on lots of topics, at least some of which will be used by different user groups

Features and attributes of our product and comparable websites

Prospective students may be seeking:

Lots of detail, they want to thoroughly investigate what the school can offer them

They are looking for the answer to, Why this school and not another?

- What kind of degrees

- Accreditation

- What kind of programs

- Rankings

- Requirements to get a degree

- Requirements to get into the program

- Financial aid/affordability

- Professors (national/international status)

- Student life

- How likely they are to get a job that they want when finished

Career development—will time and money investment make you able to get a better job?

They will want to apply (ease, clarity (more on line the better))

- Clear deadlines

- Clear fees

- Easy to find, fill in and submit applications and financial aid forms

- Financial aid applications

- Clarity of what which documents are required to submit for application

- like test scores/transcripts

- Ability to check status of application

Admitted/current students may be seeking:

- Ease of picking and applying for classes

- To review MSI degree requirements

- Review requirements for specialization

- Talk to current students (emails/blogs/ambassadors, students resumes)

- Read course descriptions

- Pick courses of interest

- Figure out schedule

- Plan both for semester and entire time at SI

- Student and staff profiles

- Graduation requirements

Other attributes:

- Ability to market the school

- Ease of charting course of study for the full 2 years.

- Appearance of the site (Professional, pleasing, welcoming)

Appendix 3: Comparison Matrix

	University of Washington iSchool	University of Toronto iSchool	LSA Course Guide	School of Art	Ortiz	SI Academics site	Rate 1-5, 1 = poor, 5 = great
Organization of site							
Navigation	3	4	4	4		5	3
Low redundancy	3	5	4	4		4	2
Information is well categorized	5	5	4	5		5	2.5
Breadcrumbs	5	5	2	3		1	2
Marketing							
Professional appearance	5	4	4	5		5	4
School strengths emphasized	4	3	4	5		NA	2
Emphasize why best choice for the students' goals	4	3	3	5		NA	1
Tout rankings/accreditation	2	3	5	5		NA	2
Navigating the Admissions page							
Easy to find "Apply Online"	5	3	5	5		NA	3
Clarity of application requirement (scores, GPA, etc.)	5	5	5	5		NA	3
Clarity of documents requirement (transcripts, etc.)	5	5	5	5		NA	3
Details on how to apply scholarships	5	5	NA	3		NA	5
Details on how to apply financial aid	2	1	NA	3		NA	3
Navigating the course catalog							
Clarity of requirements for degree	5	4	1	4		NA	4
Ease of finding class descriptions	5	5	5	4		NA	5
Ease of comparing classes	1	2	4	2		5(comparing choices)	1
Ease of comparing class schedules	1	1	3	2		5(comparing schedules)	2
Class availability given for all semesters	5	1	5	3		NA	3
Ability to personalize (select or filter)	1	1	5	2		5(filtering search results)	2
Documents							
Availability online	2	5	2	5		NA	2
Ease of finding	1	4	1	5		NA	1
Can be filled out and submitted online	1	3	1	5		NA	1
Aesthetics							
Colors	4	4	3	4		4	2
Fonts	4	5	4	5		5	4
Constant format and styling across pages of the site	5	3	3.5	4		4	2