



Communicating Our Identity Part I: Departmental Distinctiveness and Excellence at Illinois State University

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of “Communicating Our Identity” is to help your department do the most effective job possible in 1) creating or enhancing its own unique identity by identifying specific programmatic strengths; and 2) communicating that identity as effectively as possible via departmental Web sites, brochures, newsletters, etc. These strategies can be used to enhance your department’s recruitment efforts.

“Communicating Our Identity” is based on *Educating Illinois: An Action Plan for Distinctiveness & Excellence at Illinois State University. Educating Illinois 2003-2010* builds on the values-based commitments and existing strengths and traditions of Illinois State University to suggest a vision for the future defined and endorsed by the campus community. The foundations of institutional prestige, academic rigor, and pride result from high-achieving, motivated students and accomplished faculty and staff at Illinois’ first public university.

The action plan rests on five core institutional values:

Individualized Attention: Providing the supportive environment characteristic of a small college through an innovative General Education program, strong student-faculty-staff connections, superior student services, and a focus on each student as an individual, with unique educational needs and potential. Illinois State is a campus dedicated to placing the learner at the center of teaching and scholarship.

Public Opportunity: Assuring students access to the educational, research, and service opportunities characteristic of a large university, including a wide range of high-quality programs, faculty mentors who are scholars and creative artists of repute in their disciplines, and the support of outstanding facilities, technologies, and library resources.

Active Pursuit of Learning and Scholarship: Working with students as partners in their educational development inside and outside of the classroom, so that students come to appreciate learning as an active and lifelong process; contributing new knowledge through research, creative artistry, and other forms of individual scholarship in which all students, faculty, and staff are encouraged to participate.

Diversity: Encouraging community and an informed respect for differences among students, faculty, and staff by fostering an inclusive environment characterized by ethical behavior and social justice that prepares students to be fully engaged participants in a global society; a diverse faculty and staff mentoring a diverse student population, enhancing pedagogical, research, and service functions.

Innovation: Supporting disciplinary excellence and personal growth of students, faculty, and staff through knowledge development and innovative applications in undergraduate and graduate study, pedagogy, research, creative activities, and public service.

Educating Illinois is a university-wide document that seeks to define and communicate Illinois State’s identity. It will position the institution to attract a diverse, high-achieving student body. Similarly, this departmental distinctiveness exercise will help your department define and communicate its unique strengths.

PART I: CONDUCTING IDENTITY AND COMMUNICATIONS AUDITS.

Identity audit. The purpose of this portion of the exercise is to help you formulate a set of “best bet” actions for enhancing departmental distinctiveness. The steps in this process will be to 1) identify standards of excellence for the discipline(s) represented in your department; 2) identify needs of prospective employers of your graduates; 3) identify external funding sources that can enhance the department’s effectiveness in teaching and outreach; 4) analyze the strengths and weakness of comparator/competitor institutions; 5) identify your own programmatic strengths; 6) inventory the student organizations and special events and their impact on students; 7) identify your “best bets”: areas of departmental excellence that will be the themes or broad “selling points” to be used in communicating your identity and recruiting prospective students; and departmental initiatives that can help to enhance your department’s distinctiveness—its reputation and/or its capacity to meet critical state or regional needs—and its attractiveness to prospective students.

1. Disciplinary benchmarks of quality.

What makes a department in your field exceptional? Identify disciplinary standards of excellence for each concentration in your department.

2. Employers’ needs.

- What do employers want from graduates entering the workforce in your field? (Answer for each degree/major/concentration your department offers.)
- Where are the employment growth areas in your field? (Answer for each degree/major/concentration your department offers.)

3. External funding sources.

Grant Students/Dept.	Purpose	Benefit to

4. Peer institutions.

Resource: Yield analysis data on ACT scores from the Office of Institutional Research can help some departments identify competitors (depending on whether the major is specifically identified in ACT questionnaire to prospective students).

- Which institutions do you compete with for the students you need most?
- Which institutions do you compete with for resources (i.e., new facilities, equipment)?

Competitor Facts in Brief

Feature	Illinois State			
Program size in state, nation				
Facilities				
Resources				
Significant recent changes				
Marketing strategy				
How competes with you				

5. Programmatic strengths.

- Your Program
- Benefits Offered

Peer Universities' Programmatic Strengths

Program:

At:

Benefits Offered

Program:

At:

Benefits Offered

Program:

At:

Benefits Offered

6. Student organizations and special events inventory.

List the student organizations and their most common activities, plus the most prominent special events that your department sponsors on an ongoing basis, identifying in both cases the impact on students.

Student organization Most common activities Student impact

Student organization	Most common activities	Student impact

Event Target audience Student impact

Event	Target audience	Student impact

7. "Best Bets" for enhancing distinctiveness.

1. After analyzing your peer universities, what are the most unique features of your program?

2. What actions could you take to make these features more visible? (While highlighting a unique feature such as field internships abroad in a departmental newsletter is a good way to increase visibility, also think about new initiatives that would help create a clear, consistent, and distinctive identity for the department. Using the previous example, consider ways to make significant field experience available to all majors.)

3. Have you identified any unmet or anticipated programmatic needs? Which are most consistent with your departmental mission and goals? Which would be most difficult for your peer universities to undertake?

Communications audit.

Your department’s Web site and other promotional materials are essential marketing tools that can be used to highlight and promote your department’s qualities to the outside world and to the University community. Instead of just mentioning or burying your Web site’s address in print publications, feature the site’s address prominently (i.e., cover page). The purpose of this portion of the exercise is to help you formulate communications strategies derived from and tied to your department’s distinctive identity. The steps in this process will be to 1) assess the content and persuasiveness of your department’s recruiting materials (Web site, brochures, etc.); 2) analyze your peer universities’ Web sites and any other available promotional materials for content and persuasiveness; 3) conduct a student focus group (or other marketing survey) to gauge what successful students want from your major(s); and 4) do a survey of alumni to gather information on successful graduates from your program(s).

1. Assessing departmental communication.

- How persuasive is your Web site? Ask students and alumni to rate the Web site on a scale of 1 to 5, where “1” is very informational in tone (i.e., “just the facts”) and “5” is very persuasive in tone.

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1 2 3 4 5

- Analyze your department’s other recruiting materials (i.e., brochures, handouts, information in the Viewbook and University Catalog).

From a prospective student’s perspective, what do the materials communicate about what it’s like to major in _____ at Illinois State?

How persuasive are the materials? Rate them on a scale of 1 to 5, where “1” is very informational in tone (i.e., “just the facts”) and “5” is very persuasive in tone.

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1 2 3 4 5

- Do the materials give a complete picture of the major? Identify any additional benefits of majoring in _____ at Illinois State.

- Overall, what themes (or broad selling points) emerge from your assessment of the department’s communications efforts? (For example, some departments might emphasize access to technology, while others might focus on career paths of graduates) What future directions are suggested for the development of materials? What assistance is needed in creating these materials?

2. Communications audit of peer universities.

Analyze your competitors’ Web sites and any other available promotional materials.

3. Student focus group.

What do successful students want from the major?

Successful Student Seeks:

Which programs in your department attract the most students? Which attract the most high-achieving students (i.e., Presidential Scholars, high ACT scores, students with specific talents)?

Resource: The University Assessment Office can do a comparative analysis of your majors versus the full population of students who completed the freshman, sophomore, and senior surveys.

4. Alumni survey.

Survey your alumni (or analyze existing alumni surveys) to generate useful quotes that provide supporting evidence for your quality claims.