

Timothy Marotta
Christine McKinnie

Down the Rabbit Hole: An Analytical Approach to ithaca.edu

When research for the new iteration of the Ithaca College website began, the goal was to give users a better aesthetic and functional experience, while still maintaining all of the necessary content required to serve its target audience. By the time that the website was released to the public in May of 2018, more than two years of research and planning had been put in. During this period of research, the web strategy team had determined a minimum viable product that was “essential” to the release of the new site. Because the site had between 28,000 - 31,000 pages, the team chose to use an Agile project management strategy ensure the vital pieces of the new site were functional before the launch. This project intends to determine the current user satisfaction with the site and suggest data-based solutions to improve the user experience.

The analysis being put forth is grounded in key principles of the human-computer interaction field. The study of human-computer interaction has given designers and developers laws, rules, and best practices to follow to achieve high-quality, highly usable interfaces. These guidelines can be applied to the new implementation of ithaca.edu to judge its effectiveness. An analysis of changes in cognitive interference, performance load, and affordances of new web features can give a greater qualitative understanding of how users perceive the specific elements of the new site. On the more quantitative side, mathematical predictions can be made regarding the time complexity of user actions, specifically manual site searching. For example, the average number of clicks to get to a destination from the landing page can be determined because the pages can be represented as a tree-type structure. The older version of ithaca.edu had more menu options per level of navigation (primary, secondary, tertiary) than its newer counterpart. A similar analysis can be performed given user data and structural elements of the website to draw conclusions on the effectiveness of the overhaul.

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A survey was performed before the new website launched (in February 2017) and again afterward (in June 2018). Results showed that at that point, those surveyed were less satisfied afterward (average grade of 62.8) versus before the new site went live (average grade of 64.9). The second round of survey testing had a data pool three times larger than the previous round. Despite the growth in sample size, the decrease in approval rating can also be attributed to initial resistance to change. However, these results could also start to pinpoint the far-reaching nature of what is still left to be done on the Ithaca College website to reach a point of complete migration. The presented analysis of the changes to the Ithaca College website is important because such data-driven conclusions can be used to guide changes to the future design and updates to the website. This process of data-driven decision making is referred to as conscious evolution. Conscious evolution will allow future website development to more accurately fit the needs of target demographics based on real response and real behavior.