Conversations with the Dean: Report by the Master of Information Student Council (MISC)

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This report is generated from minutes recorded at the 7 & 8 March 2012 meetings in 205 Bissell regarding student feedback over the 1001/1002/1003 core courses. Additionally, this report draws on emailed comments concerning the core directed to MISC President, Victoria Baranow. Anonymized meeting minutes are available to students upon request; please email the MISC directly at misc.ischool@utoronto.ca.

Structure alternatives

Students suggested a number of alternative structures to the current core courses. These alternatives are outlined below, in no particular order. Some of the alternatives are mutually exclusive, while others complement one another.

1) At both meetings, students suggested that 1002 might be incorporated into 1001, thereby reducing the number of core courses by one.

2) Alternatively, the core courses might be modeled around the 1005/1006 workshops (or the Inforum workshops). This 'core' model could allow students to select workshops that they would like to complete (for example, introduce a program requirement to complete 3/5 workshops).

3) Another student suggested that students might choose either a professional or academic curriculum when entering the iSchool, and core courses could be built for each designation.

4) One student felt that lectures were too long given the ~200 student class size. Lectures might be reduced to 1h with a corresponding 2h seminar for more classroom discussion.

5) Core courses might be organized in line with professional core competencies. The iSchool should investigate how other schools (such as, but not limited to, the UWO) model their core courses in this way.

6) Some students suggested that the core course approach of "teaching to the middle" may be fundamentally misguided. In 1002/1003, there may be two distinct populations of students: those with a philosophy/technology background, and those without. It may be

inappropriate to average these populations; either students will have difficulty sustaining interest, or they will have already learned the material. Therefore, core courses should offer high/low streams for these distinct populations.

7) Finally, some students suggested that the paths should be empowered to determine their own required courses; there should be no core for everyone.

General core feedback

Several students suggested that the core course teaching styles need more finesse. Furthermore, the ~200 size classroom is disheartening and sets a bad impression of the iSchool in your first semester. Students would like to see smaller classes with more seminar and/or workshop style learning. The core courses may be so general that their content is necessarily diluted; by the principles of information architecture, when you design for everyone, you will please no one.

Students also expressed the need for more correspondence between curricula and information professional practice. Indeed, some students do not understand *what* they're meant to learn from core course curricula. Similarly, some students find that self-directed learning is currently discouraged by assignment structures in the core. Assignments are often narrowly defined and directed, appropriate in 1st or 2nd year undergraduate courses—but not in graduate studies. There are too many fixed requirements in assignments, and the requirements are often disproportionate to the assignment page counts. Finally, students suggested that 1001/1002/1003 operate at an undergraduate level; students can rise to the challenge of more sophisticated assignments and engagement with readings.

Other key feedback includes:

- Core course readings are not always discussed in lecture or tutorial—why are they assigned, then?

- There must be a better way to explain courses and paths on the website.

- Evening lectures/classes are bad for commuters and discourage attendance.

- Professors, not administration, should determine whether to admit students into a class if they have not completed core course prerequisites.

- LIS students are unhappy with their low number of electives; reducing the number of core courses may alleviate some of this concern.

1001

This core course covers a broad span of knowledge. Several students suggested that this broad approach is unsuccessful, and therefore students complete the course unsatisfied with their learning outcomes. Assignments may be too prescriptive (see *General core feedback*), and some feel that the readings are redundant. 1001 could be an opportunity for students to explore the convergence between paths (LIS, KM, ISD, etc.), but currently some students misunderstand the paths even after completion of this core course. The core courses, and 1001 in particular, might be an opportunity to provide a background and introduction into the various paths at the iSchool. Students noted that they would like to learn about research outside their own intended path. One student suggested that 1001 might be organized about faculty research.

1002

Some students feel that 1002 is not relevant to information professionals. The philosophical approach may be too broad, and some students do not see the connection between ontology and the workplace. Therefore, readings should be selected for an audience of aspiring information professionals, and the entire course needs to shift its approach to become more practice-relevant. By the end of term, students generally stop attending classes. This absenteeism disadvantages students who want to engage in lively classroom debate, and all students might benefit from a requirement to engage in class. Finally, several students suggested that 1002 could be easily condensed into a few lectures and amalgamated into 1001.

1003

This core course seems to have more general popularity than 1001/1002. Nevertheless, students strongly criticized this course. Firstly, students with an IT background found 1003 dull. Conversely, students without an IT background found the course impractical for the purposes of promoting oneself as technologically proficient to employers. One student suggested that KM students are not the target audience of the course. Another student found it ridiculous that students with no IT background were subject to the same curriculum as tech support workers. To partially address this concern, one student suggested that tech savvy students should have an option to complete alternative assignments, i.e. to build a website.

Students very strongly emphasized their desire to learn XML, HTML, CSS, etc.: not Yahoo Pipes. Some students feel that instructors do not have confidence in their students' ability to learn a markup language—yet students have been able to manage XML in the 1005/1006 workshops. 1003 does not bring students to an adequate level of computer literacy. Many students emphasized their desire for coursework that could be integrated into a professional IT portfolio.

Computer education

The iSchool needs a better approach to computer education. One student suggested that it is bizarre that one can graduate from an MI program without the skills to build a website. Another suggested that courses have been tech watered down, with Yahoo Pipes in 1003 as a case example. Students almost unanimously demanded that the iSchool provide more computer education. One student suggested that it is poor planning to put the onus of teaching technology on the Inforum and the Tech Fund; this teaching needs to happen at the faculty level, and it must be central to the iSchool curriculum. However, given that the faculty does not support this education, students requested that Inforum workshops appear on their transcripts.

TA grading

Students expressed that they want:
1) to be informed of *who* their TAs are, including academic biography,
2) TAs to attend lectures,
3) TAs to complete class readings.

Some students suggested that TAs seem to scan papers without great consideration. Another suggested that TAs grade against a strict rubric that does not consider qualitative aspects, like whether students bring a unique perspective to the assignment. Finally, some students asserted that PhD students should not grade Masters work, under any circumstances.

Workshops

One student suggested that the workshops might be extended across an entire semester, as opposed to the current split. Another student asked for a workshop with a KM focus.

Conclusion

Although students have different opinions about how the core courses might best be altered for the future, there is a general consensus within the student body that radical change is necessary. Difference in precise opinion should not mask the general discontent common between students. As students who attended the "Conversation(s)" have completed their core requirements (with 1002 and 1005/1006 in progress, for first year students), their participation in the event will benefit future generations of iSchool students, without personal reward. Therefore, on behalf of future students, the Master of Information Student Council (MISC) would like to sincerely thank all students who participated in these events.