MASTER OF
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STUDENT COUNCIL

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MI CONSULTATIVE MEETING REPORT

September 19, 2013 from 4-6pm in Bissell 507
Report prepared by the MISC Executive
(in consultation with meeting participants)
for the Master of Information Student Council

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About the external review

As part of a periodic external review commissioned by the University of Toronto, the Faculty of Information is conducting a self-study. Dean Seamus Ross announced this process in a letter to faculty, staff, students, and alumni on June 19th, 2013: "[t]hrough a consultative and broad-based process, we will reflect upon our collective achievements and evaluate the Faculty's research, teaching, and administrative performance. The Dean's Office will prepare the Self-Study document with input from our constituencies. Professor Emertius [sic] Joan Cherry and Professor Wendy Duff will co-ordinate the process." Dean Ross also distributed a copy of the Terms of Reference as outlined by the Office of the Vice-Provost, Academic Programs, and a draft of the self-study document for the faculty to review (marked "Discussion Draft, Sept 2013").

A draft of the self-study document will be finished by early November, followed by a three-day waiting period. Afterwards, the completed document will be sent to the School of Graduate Studies, then Simcoe Hall. The self-study document will also be sent to three external reviewers, who will visit the faculty on January 15th-17th, 2014, and prepare a report for the Office of the Provost:

- **France Bouthillier**, Director and Associate Professor, School of Information Studies, McGill University
- **Ronald Larsen**, Dean and Professor, School of Information Studies, University of Pittsburgh
- **Claire Warwick**, Professor, Digital Humanities, Head, Department of Information Studies, Vice-Dean for Research, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University College London

MI consultative meeting

Professors Wendy Duff and Kelly Lyons facilitated the consultative meeting for MI students on September 19th, 2013. They informed students that any feedback provided at this meeting would be summarized and included in the self-study document. They encouraged students to "tell us what you would like to tell us," about their thoughts and experiences at the iSchool. The meeting was recorded and notes were taken, so feedback from students could be accurately captured and represented. A total of 11 current Master of Information students attended the meeting. Many of the students in attendance felt that the meeting was not advertised very widely or clearly, and that more students would have attended had they been aware of the meeting and its importance.

This report summarizes the feedback provided by MI students at the meeting. Feedback has not been reported verbatim, but rather organized and summarized under major headings for the three major topics that were discussed, as well as three prominent themes that cut across all topics. Students provided a mixture of positive comments on the program and the faculty's strengths, concerns or critiques based on their personal observations and experiences, as well as some suggestions for future consideration. We obtained consent from all students who attended the meeting to include their comments anonymously in this report to the Master of Information Student Council, to be discussed at the next MISC meeting, and posted on the MISC website. Certain items discussed at the consultative meeting were quite sensitive, or their contributors too easily identifiable, so they have been excluded from this public report. Please note, this report only summarizes the feedback that was provided by those students who attended the meeting, and is not intended to represent the opinions of the Master of Information Student Council, nor all MI students.

One student asked the facilitators what is at stake for the faculty during the external review process. The facilitators clarified that the review is conducted primarily to ensure that standards are maintained. The self-study gives the faculty a chance to reflect on their strengths and future directions. The external reviewers may make suggestions after their visit, and this may influence the faculty's planning processes. Their final report to the Office of the Provost is not expected to be made public.

Feedback from MI students

1) Topic: Administrative requirements and restrictions

A. Several students expressed deep concern about the abrupt announcement and implementation of the new course load restrictions for part-time students introduced by the School of Graduate Studies. As the self-study draft includes statistics on the mean time for part-time students to complete the MI program, one student remarked that this new policy should be included in the document.

B. Another major concern discussed by students was the introduction of a new requirement by Student Services this year that students must take all their required courses in the first year of the program. Many second-year students feel this requirement is overly restrictive, and removes the valuable flexibility they enjoyed in their first year of the program. One student also noted that the Programs Committee has not yet approved this new policy, so they are troubled that Student Services is already advertising and potentially enforcing it as a requirement.

C. Some students noted that, despite advertising the option as a unique advantage of the program, not much administrative consideration is given to people pursuing multiple concentrations. The course offerings each semester, the scheduling of classes, as well as the new policy regarding required courses were all cited as examples of barriers for these students.

D. Multiple students described the difficulty of navigating the various offerings and restrictions of the program, noting that requirements frequently change and are not always communicated by the administration in a clear or timely fashion. The CIS concentration was noted as a particular example of a concentration where requirements have changed significantly. One student also added that they have observed a lot of confusion among students about when they are expected to have committed to a particular concentration, especially in light of the new policy regarding required courses.

E. Similarly, students expressed frustration specifically about how the course enrollment process is handled. Some students have experienced that expectations are often announced at the last minute, and sometimes even after enrollment occurs. The general lack of clarity involving these policies, along with last-minute e-mails explaining new or not well understood rules, can be distressing for students.

F. One student remarked that they were very pleased that the core courses (eliminated as a requirement beginning in 2012-2013) are no longer required, indicating this was a positive change for the faculty.

2) Topic: Program and course offerings

A. One of the features of the MI program that is strongly appreciated by many students is the diversity and flexibility it offers. Second-year students emphasized how invaluable this flexibility was for them during the first year of the program, as it allowed them the freedom to try something new and unexpected, stumble on something they did not anticipate, and discover what they wanted to pursue in the long-term. Nearly all students in attendance made comments to this effect. Several students also expressed concerns that the new policy

regarding required courses would restrict this flexibility, and would be detrimental to their academic and professional development.

B. However, some students also noted that the more breadth the iSchool offers, the more difficult it is to get depth. Because the concentrations are quite broad, there is not much room for specialization, for example in the KMIM concentration. While students noted that the LIS concentration is more privileged than others in this respect, one student commented that even in LIS it can be the "luck of the draw" in terms of what happens to be offered during the two years a student is enrolled in the program.

C. Another student suggested that the Faculty of Information look to other iSchools for ideas, such as the iSchool at Pittsburgh, which offers a degree in Information Science. The iSchool could also take advantage of the opportunities at the University of Toronto at large, for example by incorporating courses from the Computer Science department. This student also spoke positively about the introduction of Python into one of the required classes for the ISD concentration (INF1340).

D. One student also suggested that the faculty should develop a procedure for soliciting feedback from students early on and gauging their interest in certain special topics, in order to inform the course offerings for a given year. If several students in a cohort have a particular special interest, the faculty could try to make a course on that topic available while they are at the iSchool. This mechanism could also be used to inform practicum or co-op offerings.

E. Another student expressed appreciation for the INF1005/6 Information Workshops, reporting that they were a great way to dabble in something they would not have otherwise tried. Since the program is only two years, and the new policy regarding required courses would reduce the opportunities for electives, the Information Workshops are an effective, low-cost way to engage in short-term, elective learning.

F. Students also briefly discussed an item in the self-study draft involving the possible introduction of a Master of Communications degree in the future. One student commented that they did not imagine many students would be interested in a Master of Communications degree if tuition would cost as much as the MI degree (~$10,000/year), when they could pursue this degree anywhere else for significantly less. Another student observed that the "future directions" outlined in the self-study draft, the faculty's strategic plan, and other such documents are worth exploring, but feels the faculty is often trying to move in too many different directions at once. The faculty should work to strengthen the programs it already has before trying to implement all these new ideas.

3) Topic: Practical skills and professional experience

A. One major discussion was sparked by the possibility of introducing a co-op program at the iSchool, as mentioned in the self-study document (under "Future Directions," p.102). One student mentioned that when they were deciding which school to attend, the co-op program available at Western was a big draw. The majority of students in attendance expressed great interest in having a co-op program at the iSchool.

B. Another student mentioned that the practicums currently offered at the iSchool are not equivalent to a co-op. Many students pursuing an MI degree must work jobs in non-

related fields just to pay the bills, or have other outside commitments that make practicums not a viable option. One student mentioned that iSchool students appreciate the practicum option as a chance to get some hands-on experience, especially if they have never worked in the field before, but sometimes the practicums that are offered have minimum qualifications that none of the students can meet. Another student also mentioned that during the summer practicum class, many iSchool practicum students worked alongside co-op students from FIMS (Western) at their placements, getting vastly different experiences and receiving vastly different levels of supervision and training. In this respect, iSchool students are at a disadvantage both in terms of the experiences they can gain and the reputation of iSchool graduates that may develop among employers.

C. One student drew attention the section of the self-study document that indicates that one of the major priorities of the MI program is "educating graduates who are capable of leading innovation in the information and education economy" (p.9). The iSchool advertises itself as a professional program, which will foster the development of informational professionals who are innovators and leaders in the field, but it is not successfully fulfilling this promise. The student feels that while there is a lot of knowledge and expertise in the faculty, much of it is going into research. There is not enough of a link to the professional world, especially outside of the LIS concentration, and there is not enough consideration for professional needs.

D. Another student added that the iSchool is a great opportunity because it is located in Toronto which has a vast and vibrant community of information professionals, and opportunities for volunteering or employment, citing the UofT Libraries and the Toronto Public Library as two major examples for LIS students. This is one of the biggest factors that made the iSchool attractive for them. This student suggested that the iSchool should capitalize on these opportunities more and facilitate further connections with the professional community in Toronto.

E. One student commented that when students have expressed a desire for more practical skills in the MI program in the past, they have been told they can get these skills from Inforum workshops or at a college. This student feels that these responses largely misunderstand students' requests, which are not to replace a theoretical education with a practical one but to integrate the two more closely. Students at the iSchool came to the University of Toronto to pursue a Master's degree where they could get a solid grounding in the foundations, the theories and principles, of their professions. But learning how to implement these theories in practice is a critical part of a professional education. Students want the opportunity to engage in a more reflective practice.

F. A few students cited INF1320 (formerly Introduction to Bibliographic Control) as taught by Max Dionisio as an example of a course that provided a good balance between theory and practice. Cataloguing is a very specific technical skill, but one that is fundamentally driven by the underlying theories and principles of librarianship. However, students expressed concern because this course is now called Knowledge Organization, and they feel that less and less cataloguing is being taught each year. Some students see this move as a statement from the faculty that skills like cataloguing are not important, when their professional experience in the workplace contradicts that. Another course that was cited as an example of a good theory/practice balance was Chun Wei Choo's INF2176 Information Management in Organization: Models and

Platforms. This class provides a grounding in knowledge management theory, then allows students the opportunity to apply that theory by building a mock intranet for their final project.

G. One student mentioned that, while they appreciate the Inforum's workshop offerings, they only allow students the opportunity to pick up a few basic skills, but not how to apply it to what we're learning in the program as professionals. Because the Inforum offerings are isolated from the main curriculum, they are not designed to be holistic in their approach and cannot provide the students with the reflective, professional education they came to the iSchool for.

H. One student suggested that, specifically regarding the ISD concentration, if the iSchool is not going to teach the technical skills that are necessary to get employment in this particular field, they should increase the requirements for incoming students.

I. Another student conversely expressed that they felt there was a good balance between theory and discussion of skills at the faculty.

J. One student suggested that the problem is not that no practical skills are being taught at the iSchool, but that there is a lot of fear amongst students that the skills they are learning in their classes are not corresponding to the skills they are being asked for in job ads. This student mentioned a document produced by the Careers Officer Isidora Petrovic last year, where she looked through thousands of relevant job ads and listed the skills most commonly asked for in each career path, indicating whether they were "required," "preferred," or considered an "asset." They asked why this document had not been released or advertised by the faculty. Another student responded that a committee decided to dismiss the document as the research methodology was not deemed sufficiently rigorous. Several students expressed that a document like this would be very helpful.

4) Theme: Communication between Student Services and students

One common theme that was mentioned by many students across several topics was a lack of clear and timely communication from Student Services regarding important issues.

Students expressed confusion about program requirements, as well as frustration about the course enrollment process, noting that both administrative policies and program requirements at the iSchool change quite frequently, and the lack of clarity regarding these can be anxiety-inducing for students trying to ensure they can balance their priorities and complete their degrees. Receiving last-minute e-mails about course enrollment expectations and procedures can be especially distressing.

Several students also commented on the difficulty of finding information regarding policies and requirements on the iSchool website. One student said that critical information like this should be easy to find, "especially in an information faculty." Other students expressed particular concerns about when and how the new policy regarding course load restrictions for part-time students was announced. Although this policy was introduced by the School of Graduate studies, they wondered why Student Services did not make it more clear to iSchool students, especially those who started at the iSchool this fall and would be affected most by this policy.

One student said that, "Half the time we don't know what's happening and we don't feel informed." This leads to what many students in attendance described as a disconnect between students and Student Services. This disconnect is concerning as it can have a significant effect on students' overall experiences in and perceptions of the program.

5) Theme: Support for students, especially those in need

Another theme that was raised in multiple comments was the need for more guidance and support for students, especially those who experience acute struggles during their time at the iSchool. These comments were regarding primarily non-academic issues, though some were academic in nature as well, and all comments concerned issues that could affect a student's successful progression through the program.

One student pointed out that faculty advisors are not usually aware of all the policies and changes set forth by Student Services, so they are not equipped to help students with any questions they might have about navigating the requirements of their concentration. Another student stressed a severe lack of institutional support for students pursuing the thesis option.

Students who experienced particular difficulties navigating faculty policies and procedures felt they had nowhere to go for guidance, and no opportunity to pursue a formal grievance process. When facilitator Wendy Duff suggested that some of these issues could be discussed with the Graduate Coordinator, most students in attendance said they were not aware of this role. Those who were aware of the role mentioned that it is not very well advertised, nor are their duties clearly explained. They also added that in such a small faculty, the Graduate Coordinator in a given year may not always be an appropriate person to approach regarding a particular issue.

Several students also mentioned that students experiencing personal difficulties or mental health concerns feel there is no one at the iSchool they can speak to. Two students also emphasized that some individual faculty members have demonstrated incredible understanding, and gone above and beyond their job descriptions to be extremely accommodating to students in need. However, they also echoed the lack of administrative support for these students.

Lastly, one student mentioned that they had heard from a former student that there used to be a woman at the iSchool named Judy Dunn (formerly the Assistant Dean, Academic), whose job it was to listen to student concerns and advocate for them. The student suggested that this is a serious gap right now, as students greatly need someone like this in their corner, and such a position could improve the overall atmosphere in the faculty.

6) Theme: Juggling program demands with external commitments

One last theme that was apparent in many of the comments from students was regarding the demands of attempting to balance multiple priorities. The reality for many students in the MI program involves having to juggle classes with jobs to pay for their education, their livelihood, or their families.

For example, several students mentioned the difficulties of trying to navigate the program's offerings and frequently changing requirements, in order to map out a path that would meet their goals and interests.

In addition to work and school, however, multiple students also expressed the importance of pursuing extracurricular activities and professional development, especially in the information fields. In order to find employment in an information profession after graduation, many students feel they must pursue extracurricular opportunities to learn practical skills and gain experience in order to qualify for jobs and distinguish themselves from other applicants.

It is apparent that these concerns weigh on the minds of many students, and the faculty should be aware of this.

Closing comments

Although this consultative meeting was organized and hosted by the faculty as part of the external review process, MISC members feel that the meeting was a valuable opportunity to gauge student feedback about the MI program. As such, this report has been prepared to preserve these comments in detail for MISC and ensure they can be referred to beyond their inclusion in the faculty's self-study document.

It is also important to emphasize that the comments in this report only summarize what the 11 students in attendance said during the two-hour meeting. As one student cautioned during the meeting, these comments are not meant to represent the opinions of the entire student body.

Students who were unable to attend the consultative meeting but wish to provide their feedback can submit their comments to ischool.review@utoronto.ca until Tuesday October 15th, 2013.