

Summary and Conclusions

The COA accreditation review process has provided the School with an excellent and timely opportunity to measure its progress toward goals, examine its mission, and identify key challenges, accomplishments, and opportunities.

In reviewing the challenges and accomplishments, and in relating them to its core mission, the School finds that in most cases these are two sides of the same coin. Our mission and core themes have shaped what the School has excelled in, as well as what it can identify as areas for continuous improvement.

In this Program Presentation, each chapter addressing the ALA standards contains a concluding section summarizing how the School is addressing the standards. In the following section, the key themes from these summaries are presented.

Mission

The School's core mission is based on an integrated approach to the study, design and management of information systems, in particular bringing people, information, and technology together in more valuable ways. Teaching and learning at the School is both grounded in and informed by the real world. This mission guides the core for our research, scholarship, learning, teaching, and service and engagement activities.

SI is multidisciplinary in its array of faculty expertise, and the flexibility offered to students to mix and blend these disciplines. It provides a holistic, integrated approach to the study of information.

Spanning our research, curriculum, and social engagement is a theme of placing users at the center. With its human-centered focus, SI has been able to attract outstanding faculty and students from many disciplines whose interests are centered on information in a human context, and who are interested in how technologies can serve a human need, rather than an end in itself. Our Practical Engagement Program reflects this core value, and some of our most visible and valued research projects are based on rigorous science and scholarship applied to socially relevant problems.

The School emphasizes a team-based model which is reflected in the research projects, engagement activities, as well as in the use of team-based project work in instruction.

Research is a central component of our mission and is necessary for the School to be able to contribute new knowledge to inform fundamental change in the profession and institutions in which they practice. It enables SI, as a very small professional school in a premier research institution, to be highly valued in the university, as well as an intellectual magnet for thought-leaders.

Much of what the School does involves true leadership, breaking new ground and helping forge a new integrated discipline. Being at the leading edge presents its own set of challenges, but the School has made significant strides in articulating its mission to stakeholders including faculty, students, university, constituent professions, alumni, employers, and prospective students. We continue this iterative process of identifying and addressing challenges, recognizing that continuous improvement will be an ongoing goal.

The School's own educational objectives are derived from its mission statement and this in turn shapes the MSI curricular approach. The ALA standards are subsumed in our mission statement and educational objectives, the curriculum and research agendas, and external engagements the faculty pursue to achieve the School's mission.

The School's planning process is a synergy between strategy and tactics guided by our shared sense of mission and implemented through cycles of planning, design, implementation, and evaluation. The planning process includes ongoing planning and assessment activities, as well as activities resulting from strategic planning initiatives. All major constituencies are included in the planning process — students, faculty, alumni, and employers.

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Curriculum

As a result of its mission, the School takes a highly multidisciplinary and integrated approach to the study of information. The MSI curriculum spans a wide spectrum of information areas, and gives students the flexibility to select courses across the curriculum.

The single Master of Science in Information degree gives students the option to specialize in any of four areas, or to design their own curriculum. All students take a common set of Foundations courses intended to provide a common base of understanding of concepts and theory from the major areas of the curriculum.

The array of courses in the SI curriculum span all of the content areas encompassed in the ALA standards, with a focus on people, information and technology. Technology is one of the School's core strengths, and is grounded in human-centered problems and the study of how people and groups use information.

Given the number of curricular options available to students, the advising process takes on particular significance, and the School's advising program pays special attention to assisting students with constructing programs which are coherent to students and the information workplace. Upon graduation, our students go out into diverse settings, and practice a wide variety of skills in a wide variety of venues.

The School's strong commitment to practical engagement is a centerpiece of both its mission and its MSI program. The School requires all students to take a minimum of six practical engagement credits and provides an extensive set of options and opportunities, made possible in part by the faculty and staff support for this program. The Practical Engagement Program is cited by graduates and employers alike as one of the School's greatest strengths.

Faculty

The School's hallmark feature is its large complement of high achieving faculty from diverse discipline areas. In addition, SI faculty are boundary spanners, with work that creates an impact on their own fields as well as related information fields and communities.

The School's place in a premier research institution places a high priority of research strength, and the School invests substantially in extensive investment in research support for its faculty. This ties in with the goal of remaining a small school in size, but with a big impact. SI faculty are leaders in their fields, with national and international impact. The presence of engaged researchers and leaders provides a stimulating intellectual environment for students, as well as opportunities for students themselves to be engaged in the research.

A spirit of collaboration underlies much of SI faculty life, as faculty from diverse disciplines work hard to understand each other's culture and academic standards and traditions. Academic integration remains a continuing challenge and has been established as a primary activity for the School in its direction-setting for the future. A new associate dean for academic integration position has been created to help the faculty in this process.

The School's focus on engagement is emphasized in its mission statement and is reflected in teaching and service, as well as in research. The Practical Engagement Program, Community Information Corps, and Alliance for Community Technology provide opportunities for faculty to participate in service, research and teaching that is engaged with communities.

The SI approach to faculty hiring has been to attract the best possible candidates in very broadly defined areas. Once appointed, SI faculty members undergo systematic and rigorous review. Along with self-assessment and external peer review, student assessment of faculty effectiveness forms an important feature of evaluation.

Students

In accordance with its mission, SI draws a student body which is highly diversified and selective. SI's selective admission process seeks applicants with strong academic backgrounds and leadership qualities, consistent with the University of Michigan's standing as a leading institution. At the same time, the process is holistic, and takes into account a combination of indicators for academic and professional success. The process also reflects the multidisciplinary environment of SI by admitting students from diverse academic disciplines, and with diverse interests, work experiences, ethnic/racial backgrounds, and career goals.

SI invests significantly in student services staffing to support admission, financial aid advising, academic advising, practical engagement programs, and career and placement services. The School's substantial practical engagement program offers mentored field experiences and internships and opportunities for informal advising from practitioners.

SI offers numerous ways for students to become informed about the program and to engage in discussion with the staff, administration, and faculty. Surveys, focus groups, and access to the deans and staff provide additional means for student input. Students also serve on committees, and their input is sought on matters concerning curriculum, physical facilities, and other areas of instruction. There are currently nine active student organizations for students within the School which provide a means for professional participation in student life and socialization.

A strategic plan has been developed and implemented with the goal of recruiting increased numbers of under-represented minorities. Currently enrolled minority students have taken leadership in this area and have played a large role the School's success in recruitment in the past two years.

An extensive array of materials about the School is available in print and on the Web, with substantial input from students in terms of the types of material needed as well as in the format, design, and content. Input from students also shapes the process of continuous improvement in other areas of student services.

Administration and Financial Support

The School is led by an executive officer with vast administrative and academic experience and standing. He nurtures an intellectual environment that fosters and enhances the School's ability to achieve its mission. The School is well served by an extensive and highly trained staff that supports the deans, faculty, and students.

The School is one of the smallest schools at the University but is an integral part of its mission. The dramatic growth in level of funding is a clear indication of the important and central role that SI plays within the larger University.

The School's relationships with other academic units are broad and productive. The dean is actively engaged with other deans in several initiatives and these relationships help enhance the standing of the School and foster multidisciplinary interaction.

Physical Resources and Facilities

In many ways, the School's physical resources and facilities help accomplish its objectives. Students enjoy a functional learning environment including well-equipped classroom and office space, a strong network environment, and labs. The University Library is a premier resource. All facilities are accessible to the physically handicapped. The School has a full-time facilities manager who is fully engaged in optimizing current space and infrastructure.

At the same time, the School faces the severe challenge of being physically distributed in several facilities in disparate geographic locations on campus. Our growth requires us to continue to engage the central

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administration of the University in discussions about meeting our facility needs in the future. The School also takes this situation as a research opportunity to try out and learn from different technology-mediated approaches to maintaining a single community across multiple physical spaces.

Key Accomplishments and Challenges

The following section presents a summary of what the faculty identify as the key strengths and challenges of the School.

Academic Integration Challenges

Fundamental in the School's mission is an integrated approach to the study of information. The School's multidisciplinary approach results in a highly interdisciplinary curriculum, taught by faculty from diverse academic backgrounds, to students who represent over 70 academic disciplines. The School took a bold move in establishing a common curriculum for students representing such a diverse spectrum of academic interests and selecting from one of four specialization areas.

One of the School's key strengths, as recognized by its students and alumni, is diversity of faculty, curriculum, and students. At the same time, challenges arise:

- In developing a curriculum which is intellectually cohesive, especially in regards to the Foundations curriculum
- In teaching students with diverse academic backgrounds, and making the courses at once accessible to those with limited backgrounds in some areas and challenging to those with strong backgrounds in some areas
- In making Foundations curriculum relevant across students' chosen professions

Students in one specialization may not see the relevance of a particular aspect of Foundations content to their professional career. We are fully convinced of the relevance but need to make the case clearer. Systematic and sustained planning and evaluation of the Foundations courses have resulted in the evolution of this key part of the MSI curriculum. While much progress is made, this will be a continuous effort.

We are addressing these challenges through the continuous review of our curriculum, both in faculty work in committees and task forces as well as through listening to what our students and graduates have to say.

The School's multidisciplinary faculty is a fundamental strength. Students benefit from the different academic perspectives in their courses, and faculty themselves benefit from the exposure to different research, teaching, and service perspectives. At the same time, faculty sometimes struggle to fully understand the different cultures and values of their colleagues. These issues come into play in particular when evaluating future colleagues for appointment hires and current colleagues for promotion review. In evaluating candidates, faculty must consider academic cultures different from their own.

We are addressing these challenges on a number of fronts. The School provides an environment which is conducive to collaborative teaching and research, and many faculty team-teach with a colleague from another discipline or engage with them in a research or service project. The School has a tradition of encouraging collegiality.

Forging and Understanding a New Academic Discipline, and Preparing Students for New and Evolving Professions

The School has been a pioneer in many regards and has taken bold moves. In adopting its broad and bold new mission, name, and curriculum, and in adding to its faculty, the School has served as a model for a number of other information schools who have broadened their mission or adopted entirely new programs.

Over time this has sometimes resulted in some stakeholders, faculty, students, and alumni, in feeling that traditional values have been abandoned or marginalized. To some extent, this is reflected in the current discussion in the LIS field over the significance of the term Library and whether its presence or absence indicates a commitment to librarianship. As is the case with many other information schools in dropping the word Library from its name, the School has neither abandoned or diminished librarianship. The School's mission builds on its strong tradition of librarianship, and expands, and strengthens this base and keeps it current, but the School's broadening means that the School is now comprised of a number of information-related disciplines, no one of which is included in the School's name. The School's new name and new program reflect its mission to an integrated approach to the study of information

Building On and Strengthening the Heritage of LIS, Broadening Our Base, and Moving Forward into the Future

In 1996, the School, building further on its history and traditions, was formally renamed with an even broader focus on information and knowledge creation, management, and use based on a hybrid of traditional and digital technologies. Shortening the School's name to the School of Information and thus greatly expanding the potential domain of teaching, research, and societal engagement signified the further broadening of the mission. We did not abandon the "library" but rather situated it within an even broader context.

This move was not without its challenges. Voices of concern were raised by some alumni, students, and even faculty in the transition period. In the course of broadening its base, the School was viewed by some as neglecting its LIS heritage in its curriculum, and faculty hiring. Faculty new to SI and less familiar with LIS needed to gain a deeper understanding of the principles and culture of the LIS academic heritage, while LIS faculty at times felt that their academic heritage and contributions were valued less than those of their colleagues.

Creating and Defining a New Discipline

The School recognizes that not all will agree with its new mission, but needs to continue to make clear what its mission is, and needs to continue to work on communicating its mission and clarifying misconceptions.

Creating a new academic discipline, charting a new curriculum are challenges make for an information environment which is both stimulating and challenging. Equally challenging and intriguing is identifying new roles for our graduates in a highly volatile information world. One of the alumni focus group participants recalled a comment from a professor in one of her Foundations courses that SI hoped to prepare its graduates for a field which was unknown. She found that the frame of mind helped her to survive radical change and uncertainty in the workplace that she entered. Some of our graduates have talked themselves into positions which did not exist or which were created especially to take advantage of their talents. Others have landed lucrative and exciting positions which disappeared with the dot.com debacle. Others have seen their positions change or have gone from one position to another. Others are in positions which are still undefined or find that the work they do is not well understood by others.

In the prior accreditation external review report, one student was quoted as indicating that SI was a place that was chaotic, quirky, but well-intentioned. To some extent, the faculty suspect this is still true. While the School has stabilized a great deal, and established a firm footing for its curriculum and student services, it still prides itself as being a place which has a high level of energy and excitement where the unexpected can happen. Our admissions brochure states that the School seeks students who can deal with ambiguity and change. In talking with alumni in focus groups, in analyzing position descriptions for job announcements, and in talking with and reading views of information professionals, it is clear that information professionals must be able to deal with change.

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Part of the School's mission is to help transform the information institutions in which our graduates will be employed — libraries, archives, museums, community centers, etc. Such institutions are undergoing significant change and new types of technology-enabled organizations are now possible. A continuous challenge is how to develop, and keep current a curriculum for a profession that holds great promise but is highly volatile. And equally challenging, how to best provide career advice and identify career paths for some of the less well established career paths.

Remaining a Small School with a Big Impact

The School is the second smallest academic unit in the University, and while the plan is to grow and perhaps even double in size, the faculty wish to retain the character of a small school. At the same time, the faculty want to have an impact which is much greater than the School's size.

The School is a significant presence within the University and the information community. We have been successful in generating research revenues that place us seventh in the University. Research is a central component of our mission and is also necessary for the School to be able to contribute new knowledge to inform fundamental change in the profession and institutions in which they practice. It enables SI, as a very small professional school in a premier research institution, to be highly valued in the university, as well as an intellectual magnet for thought-leaders. The research focus defines expectations for hiring and promotion, and helps define the profile of SI faculty. As in most research-based institutions, faculty hires must be leaders in research, and this usually precludes a focus on practice. Yet as a professional school, SI values practice and practical engagement in instruction. Alternative methods, through adjunct instruction, and faculty involvement in practice through their research, teaching, and service help fill this gap.

To stay a small school, retain our current faculty size, and yet remain financially viable, the School must carefully consider which revenue options will afford us financial independence. The School has been successful in the past several years in increasing its enrollment in the MSI program and this has placed the School on a much firmer financial footing. At the same time, while increased enrollment in the MSI program and especially in undergraduate programs would generate much higher tuition revenues, an increase in the School's size would substantially change the character of the School.

An additional defining part of the School's character is its collegiality. Currently, the School faces challenges in retaining this element of its tradition as a result of the physical dispersion of its units across the central and North campuses. Several technology mediated approaches are currently deployed or are under development to address this problem, all meant to replicate as closely as possible the experience of people interacting within a single space. The School is challenged with obtaining the resources necessary to continue these initiatives and also to provide for other measures to help keep physical separation from leading to interpersonal and scholarly separation. The School is determined to achieve a high level of intellectual integration, and convergence among its many areas of interest and bringing down the barriers created by physical separation is a challenge the School faces in this regard. The School also faces space challenges that are directly related to its dramatic growth. While the acquisition of the SI North building is a large move in the right direction, it is not the final answer to the School's facilities needs. The long-term goal of building a new facility is real and represents the greatest challenge to the School at this time.

The School's ambitious agenda and its aspirations for impact also require substantial staff support and technical infrastructure. The energy and entrepreneurial spirit needed to launch the School on its initial founding venture required enormous mental and intellectual investment from all. Faculty and staff alike are spread thin. As the School continues its reformation, the SI community is again asked to marshal its energies and talents as it seeks new directions.

SI Response to Concerns Voiced in COA Correspondence

COA letter of December 5, 2001 in response to October 10, 2001 interim statistical report:

“The Committee acknowledges your efforts to collect information from students on curriculum development and revision. We note that you have studied the delivery of a school library media program and we look forward to receiving the results of this activity in the Program Presentation document for your spring 2003 comprehensive review. We also request that the Program Presentation address how the ‘...school’s mission and program goals are pursued, and its program objectives achieved, through implementation of a broad-based planning process that involves the constituency that a program seeks to serve.’ (Standards, p. 9).”

SI Response:

The School engaged in an examination and discussion of its school media program and conducted a search to hire a faculty member specifically in this area. The LIS faculty decided against hiring specifically in one area, and instead to conduct a broad-based search for LIS faculty, consistent with the procedure for hiring faculty in other areas of the curriculum. At the same time, the faculty decided to continue its commitment to school media and to keep the school media program and to continue offering the program leading to certification. The continuing program will build on the unique strengths of the School and special strengths that the School has to offer. This is described in the Curriculum Chapter.

The School has a planning process which is derived from its mission and involves all major constituencies: faculty, students, staff, alumni, and employers of our graduates. The planning process involves ongoing structures such as the Curriculum Committee, as well as special initiatives to address specific parts of the program, such as the Foundations Task Force. These processes are described in the Chapter on Mission, Goals and Objectives.

COA letter of November 27, 2000 in response to October 11, 2000 interim statistical report:

“At its fall meeting, the Committee on Accreditation read and discussed your statistical report. Based on our analysis of the materials you submitted, the Committee accepts the report.”

COA letter of November 17, 1999 in response to October 12, 1999 interim statistical and biennial narrative reports:

“The Committee on Accreditation looks forward to regular biennial reports on continued curricular and faculty changes in the School of Information.”

SI Response:

Curriculum changes are described in the Chapter on Curriculum. Faculty changes are described in the chapter on Faculty.

COA letter of November 20, 1998 in response to October 12, 1998 interim statistical report:

The Committee reminds you that the development of new programs and/or specializations within the Master of Science in Information need to be reported and discussed in your biennial narrative reports.”

SI Response:

The new specialization of Information Economics, Management and Policy within the Master of Science in Information is described along with other changes to the curriculum in the Curriculum chapter.

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COA Decision Document of June 29, 1998:

“Although the Committee concludes that the Program conforms in large part to the Standards, we have serious concerns about the incomplete evolution of your curriculum and the issue of information and communicating with students. Consequently, the Committee asks that you:

- Create a mechanism for evaluating the curriculum, assessing the extent to which the stated mission and goals of the Program are achieved through the new core and elective courses;
- Enhance communication with students both to incorporate their input in the reshaping of the Program and to remediate their understanding of the broader MSI degree as well as their ability to make schedule and course election decisions.

We ask that in your next biennial narrative report you clarify faculty coverage of the numerous specialties, in particular clarify your plans to continue a Program for certification of school library media specialists with appropriate faculty.

SI Response:

Methods for evaluating the curriculum and assessing how it meets the Program missions and goals are described in the Missions, Goals and Objectives and the Curriculum chapters.

SI has developed a broad range of communication vehicles to enhance communication with students. These are described in the chapter on Students. The School's efforts to help students' understanding of the curriculum are addressed in the Students and Curriculum chapters.