

A TRADITION OF INNOVATION: THE SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

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To transform the information field through leadership in research, development, and education.

—Mission of the School of Information Studies, Syracuse University

"In recent years, there has been a growing interest in providing graduate distance learning programs in library and information science. . . . Exciting new opportunities are increasingly available to students separated by time and space from gaining professional library and information science credentials."¹ The School of Information Studies at Syracuse University has a long and rich history of leadership for innovation and change in the information fields. This chapter describes the school's history, the development of its interdisciplinary structure, and the emergence and evolution of its innovative distance learning programs, which have provided a model for other schools throughout the country.

HISTORY OF THE SCHOOL

Syracuse University, founded in 1870 in Syracuse, New York, has an undergraduate student body of approximately 12,000 and a graduate enrollment of close to 5,000 students. Syracuse University's ALA-accredited and nationally ranked School of Information Studies (IST) is one of thirteen schools and colleges located on the university's sprawling 200-acre campus. As a result of the university's encouragement of cross-disciplinary study and collaboration and its vision as a "student-centered research university," IST participates in programs and projects with such other nationally ranked schools

on campus as the S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communications and the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.

The IST was founded as a library science program in 1896. Currently, the school is housed in the university's Center for Science and Technology, a high-tech facility that fosters interaction and cooperation among faculty and students in information studies, computer engineering, computer science, and chemistry. IST cultivates an innovative academic environment, priding itself on its interdisciplinary faculty, programs, and courses.

The background and expertise of IST's faculty represent the fields of management, communications, computer science, education, cognitive psychology, economics, and library and information science, thereby offering an intellectual diversity that enriches both teaching and research at IST. IST faculty and doctoral students have won numerous awards for teaching (e.g., Syracuse University's Professor of the Year, ASIS Outstanding Faculty) and research (e.g., ALA's Carroll Preston Baber Research Award, AASL/Highsmith Award for Innovative Research, and ASIS Outstanding Dissertation Award).

In addition to intellectual diversity, the faculty and administration have identified five other common values, including:

- dedication to exploration and innovation, promoted through discovery, development, application, integration, and active learning.
- commitment to and respect for the individual, valuing individual differences.
- an adaptive environment that promotes risk-taking and entrepreneurship.
- a "faculty of one" philosophy.
- enduring contributions to our field.²

In the spirit of these values, the school has an innovative structure that reflects its philosophy. Unlike other schools of its kind (and other schools within Syracuse University), IST has chosen to have *programs* rather than *departments*, thus eliminating competing entities and the partitioning of loyalties. IST has an undergraduate program in information management and technology, three master's programs (library science, information resources management, and telecommunications and network management), and a doctoral program in information transfer. Faculty teach across all programs, functioning as a whole, not as individuals or groups who represent any one specific program. Students representing all five academic programs may be found studying side by side in many of the school's elective courses.

IST's tradition of innovation makes it a school of many firsts. In 1974, it became the first school with an MLS degree program to use the word *information* in its name. In 1980, it was the first to offer a master's degree program in information resources management, a program that prepares sophisticated information systems managers, able to respond to four basic challenges confronting organizations today: (1) increasing the productivity

and creativity of managers and executives who work with information resources, (2) planning the effective use of information and communication technologies within organizations, (3) developing corporate and government policies to maximize the benefits resulting from the widespread use of these technologies, and (4) improving the strategic use and management of information resources in business, government, and nonprofit organizations.³

In 1987, IST became the first school to offer an undergraduate program in information management and technology, which prepares students to understand the value of information to society, organizations, and individual professionals. Last but not least, it was the first school to offer Internet-based, limited-residency distance learning programs in library science (1993), information resources management (1996), and telecommunications and network management (1998).

DEVELOPMENT OF NONTRADITIONAL PROGRAMS

IST has a long tradition of offering programs to meet the needs of working adults and part-time students. Prior to 1987, the school was solely a graduate school and more than half of the graduate students attended classes part-time. In conjunction with the university's division of continuing education, IST established evening, weekend, and short, intensive summer classes to enable students to complete their degree programs while maintaining full-time jobs.

DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMS

Though IST had always been sensitive to the needs of part-time students, it wasn't until the 1980s that the school began to experiment with distance learning programs. At first, IST developed some regional extension site programs to extend its reach into other sections of New York. Later, IST recognized a larger issue—a need for quality distance learning programs that addressed the needs of (1) students living in remote areas of the country where no information studies programs existed and (2) students with jobs or other responsibilities that precluded them from traditional part-time study, requiring commuting to and from a specific site at a specified time.

EXTENSION SITE PROGRAMS

Despite offering campus-based alternatives for part-time study, it soon became clear that some students could not easily travel back and forth to Syracuse for classes. In 1985, a group of prospective MLS students based in Ithaca, New York (about fifty miles from Syracuse), approached the school to consider offering extension classes there. The school soon began to offer one course a semester, and about ten to twenty students took classes taught

mostly by adjunct faculty. Library access and classroom facilities were cooperatively arranged with the help of Cornell University librarians, many of whom were IST alumni. Students enrolled in the extension program were still required to complete a component of their degree on the main campus. They were also expected to come to campus for faculty advising, career counseling, and all other administrative business. In 1988, extension classes for students in the information resources management (IRM) master's degree program were offered in Endicott, New York, where Syracuse University already had established continuing education engineering and computer science classes for IBM employees.

Although the extension classes were certainly convenient for these regional populations of students, the educational experience proved less than satisfactory. Students were isolated from other students in the on-campus program; it was difficult to keep them informed of events and activities in the school; and the schedule of extension classes was too limiting. Competition for students from other MLS programs led to declining demand in Ithaca. In Endicott, changes in the workforce at IBM led to decreased demand. Both programs were short-lived.

THE WASHINGTON PROGRAM

Despite the eventual demise of these two extension site programs, today IST maintains a successful extension program in Washington, D.C. The Washington, D.C. program offers both a thirty-credit master's degree in IRM with a Specialization in Government and, for those unsure (or unable) about pursuing a full master's program, a certificate in strategic information resources management (SIRM) in the federal government. The master's program builds on Syracuse University's eighteen-credit graduate certificate. The certificate can later be applied toward the master's degree or used as a post-master's degree credential.

The SIRM program takes advantage of Syracuse University's Greenberg House, a facility containing meeting and reception rooms, located in the heart of Washington. Typically, courses are taught in Washington over several weekends by IST faculty (both full-time and adjunct) at the Greenberg House. This allows the school to draw from the rich resources (both human and technical) in the Washington area. Often, SIRM courses incorporate officials in strategic government positions as instructors and guest lecturers, providing the richest and most relevant teaching and learning environment.

Students in the Washington program are encouraged to take some of IST's Internet-based distance courses, described later. In addition to taking classes tailored to their special needs and interests in Washington and some of the more general Internet-based courses, these students also have the option of traveling to Syracuse to participate in IST's Summer Institute courses.

SUMMER INSTITUTE

The school created its Summer Institute on Leadership and Change in an Information Society in 1991. Originally designed to target the school media community, the institute's enrollments quickly soared, quadrupling in the first two years. This caused both students and faculty to demand a broadened scope of institute offerings. By 1993, IST's Summer Institute offered a wide variety of two-day workshops and five- or seven-day intensive courses over a three-week period. The institute allowed the school to be able to offer a mix of traditional courses and "hot topics," such as data mining, information security, and Webcasting, appealing to both current IST students and practitioners in the field who want or need to update their knowledge and skills. The increased importance and relevance of some of these Summer Institute courses have motivated the school to transform them into regularly offered courses.

Most Summer Institute courses have integrated enrollments from IST's three master's degree programs. This integration creates an enriched learning environment for both faculty and students. Dean Ray von Dran, who teaches regularly in the Summer Institute, describes his first class: "Part of the thrill of this class was the great intellectual and philosophical diversity present, and how it played out in discussion. Students learned from one another at every level and the class came away transformed! Nowhere else do I know this happening in the information field."⁴

By 1999, the Summer Institute had grown to twenty-nine separate courses to appeal to a wide audience, representing topics as diverse as Business Information for Strategic Intelligence and Marketing Your Library, Wireless Industry Global Economics, and Storytelling. With the creation of the Summer Institute, the school established a vital and necessary cornerstone for the establishment of its innovative Internet-based limited residency distance learning program that emerged two years later.

LIMITED RESIDENCY DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMS

Encouraged by the success of its extension programs and the potential of its Summer Institute, the school began discussions in 1992 to develop an integrated distance learning program that would give students living in remote or distant locations access to IST's curriculum and faculty. In July 1993, the school launched a "student-centered," one-on-one, many-to-many model of distance education for LIS using mainly distributed networked communications (Internet, Web) to deliver instruction.⁵

The program was originally designed to generally follow the format of Syracuse University's Independent Study Degree Program (ISDP). ISDP, offered through the university's continuing education division, is one of the

three oldest such programs in the United States. Begun in 1966, ISDP sought to meet the needs of nontraditional students who could not attend traditional classes on campus. ISDP programs have combined two elements: a short on-campus residence and self-paced study that students complete at home. The first Syracuse ISDP students were enrolled in a bachelor of arts in Liberal Studies. These fifteen students completed a three-week residency on campus each summer, taught by an interdisciplinary team of full-time faculty. The rest of the year the students completed their courses at home, working independently with periodic communication with faculty via phone and mail. Since 1966, ISDP has changed considerably in size and format. Today, over 1,000 students are enrolled in the undergraduate program in Liberal Studies and the eight master's degree programs in schools and colleges across the campus.

But from the very beginning, IST made a conscious decision to develop an innovative distance learning program, incorporating the most current information technologies. Thus the first Internet-based limited residency distance learning program at Syracuse University and the first such program in LIS in the United States was born.

The Syracuse MLS distance learning program, like its campus-based counterpart, offers a thirty-six-credit, ALA-accredited program for part-time students. Its curriculum parallels that offered to local resident students. Only students matriculated into the distance program could enroll in distance format courses.

The MLS distance program has entailed shorter campus residencies (i.e., two days in length) than other distance programs at Syracuse University. Residencies are usually held at the beginning of each semester. Residencies allow students to receive necessary technology training, hands-on labs, and some group activities while facilitating bonding of cohort groups, face-to-face networking with faculty and staff, and becoming familiar with the school and university. IST's Dean von Dran believes the residencies are "the critical element for this program because the students already have a social bond when they get online together."⁶

Following the limited residency, courses continue via the Internet once students return home. As von Dran states, "What is unique in the Syracuse model is the combination of residency and non-residential interaction throughout the academic year. In some ways, students in IST's distance program receive nearly the full classroom interaction of a traditional residential program *and* fifteen weeks of academic interaction after the residency."⁷

In 1993, e-mail was the primary medium of communication for instructor-student and student-student interactions, and online discussion groups served as the main method of group communications. Students could also communicate via postal mail, telephone, or fax.

That first summer in 1993, thirty-seven students arrived on campus as the first MLS distance learning cohort group, lived in a university residence hall,

and took a one-week introductory course that introduced them to the faculty, campus, and curriculum as well as the issues and literature of the field. The intensity of that first week caused the students to dub the experience "library boot camp," and that nickname has stuck to this day. During the week, social events such as picnics and ice cream socials were sponsored by the school to help relieve some of the inevitable stress students felt (caused by being in a new place, among strangers, returning to higher education, living in a dorm, etc.) and to encourage bonding and personal interactions. On the last day of boot camp, students were introduced to the instructor of the fall semester course and provided information and materials they would need to begin work on that course before they returned to Syracuse in September.

Following completion of the introductory course, students had the option of remaining on campus for one or more brief, intensive elective courses offered in the Summer Institute. These students then returned to their homes, where they soon received additional course material for their fall semester core course. When they returned to campus in the early fall they had already completed independent assignments and interacted online with the instructor and other students. They repeated this process for the spring semester. The first cohort group proceeded through the program together for two years, taking core curriculum courses in distance mode (Internet-based, with a brief on-campus residency) in the fall and spring semesters and completing electives through the Summer Institute, independent studies, and internships in their local communities.

IST faculty and staff learned a lot in that first year. They learned to provide a list of necessities to bring to campus in the summer (such as fans and comfortable walking shoes) and in the winter (such as boots and thermal underwear). They learned about the importance of providing mini-fridges and Internet connections in dorm rooms. They learned to communicate regularly with students about their learning progress so they don't feel they have been left hanging in cyberspace. Over the past years, many changes have been made to IST's distance learning programs; the most dramatic changes have occurred in the use of distance learning technologies.

DISTANCE LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

As technologies evolve, so has distance learning at Syracuse, inspiring several research studies and dissertations. A study conducted in 1995, comparing the experiences of distance and resident students at IST, revealed that less than one-half of all respondents had computers at home. A 1999 follow-up study found that over 80 percent of all students now have home access and a greater number have access at work than they did in 1995.⁸

Sensing this shift in access and recognizing the emergence of more powerful distance learning technologies, IST's faculty began to experiment with text-based, asynchronous group communications software packages (e.g.,

Lotus Notes, HyperNews) to deliver instruction to distance students. In 1996, some faculty developed a graphic interface to group communications using Palace, "a unique virtual world chat software program that allows people to communicate interactively via the Internet, with the added value of pictures and sounds."⁹ This graphical environment included classrooms, discussion, and other special purpose rooms, and personal avatars, simulating the face-to-face traditional classroom. Although students found this software easy and satisfying to use during the residencies, the synchronous nature of this software presented some limitations for distance use.

In 1998, IST's faculty adopted a standard yet versatile Web-based learning environment called WebCT, changing the way much of the instruction is delivered at IST. Over the past two years, WebCT, originally developed at the University of British Columbia, has been incorporated into many distance and on-campus courses for everything from posting assignments and syllabi to incorporating group work, interactive lectures, synchronous discussions, and self-paced learning modules.

WebCT is described as "an easy-to-use environment for creating sophisticated WWW-based courses."¹⁰ It offers a wide variety of tools and features, such as online chat, student progress tracking, group project organization, grade maintenance and distribution, e-mail, course calendar, and auto-marked quizzes. With WebCT, courses can now be delivered in distance mode to *all* students. Faculty could teach and students could learn from anywhere in the world—for example, one student completed his IRM degree while serving aboard a U.S. Navy submarine in the Pacific.

CURRENT STATUS

Distance learning at Syracuse University's School of Information Studies continues to grow and evolve. To date, IST's distance learners are diverse, representing more than thirty states and ten foreign countries in four continents. "This diversity," von Dran comments, "makes all the difference!"¹¹

The following statements describe the current status of distance learning at IST.

- There are currently approximately 250 students pursuing one of the three Internet-based distance learning programs at IST.
- The MLS distance learning program has grown to over sixty students in two cohort groups each year.
- Distance learners range in age from their twenties through their sixties.
- The name "independent study" is no longer used by our programs because it conveys the notion that students are studying in isolation and without formal structure.
- The school has hired a full-time director of distance learning, who oversees all of the programs and the Summer Institute.

- Faculty regularly build distance learning-type experiences into the structure of both distance and on-campus courses.
- The school has hired a full-time coordinator for instructional resources who builds and maintains all course sites on WebCT and offers a training program for students and full-time and adjunct faculty on a regular basis.
- Ongoing technical support is provided by the school's director of IT services and coordinator of instructional resources.
- Opportunities have been provided for faculty who have used WebCT creatively in their teaching to share their techniques and ideas with their colleagues.
- Many courses still follow the format of the original courses, combining brief residencies with Internet-based communications; however, residencies are now limited to two days.
- All distance students begin their programs on campus in July with an introductory course.
- Some courses are offered completely over the Internet using WebCT and can be taken from home or office without ever traveling to the main campus or one of the extension sites.
- Most of the Internet communication for distance courses is asynchronous and does not require students to be connected at a particular time.
- Some courses are offered to both distance and resident students in distance format only.
- Students can take elective courses in a variety of formats including brief, intensive on-campus summer courses, online courses, independent studies, and internships.
- Distance students may complete internships in their local communities.

THE FUTURE

Distance learning at Syracuse continues its tradition of innovation into the future. The school is exploring the possibility of holding residencies in locations other than Syracuse. One possibility is working with its international programs to hold residencies in Europe and Asia. Von Dran explains, "I see the potential to have a multitude of sites for our residencies to further enrich the learning experience. At this time we have a site in Washington, D.C. Our University also has facilities in New York, London, Madrid, Florence, Strasbourg, and Hong Kong. In the future we may wish to take advantage of these venues as well."¹²

A new program for a cohort of school media students from New York City will combine a variety of distance formats. These formats include courses with residencies in Syracuse and New York City; brief, intensive courses; courses held over a series of weekends in New York City; and totally Web-based courses.

Experimentation with new and emerging technologies continues. For example, one professor is experimenting with the use of instant messaging

technology to simulate the common physical spaces in learning environments that facilitate social connections and informal communications.¹³ Another professor is creating an experimental, multimedia "virtual" residency where students will log onto their computers at the same time and proceed through a sequence of activities together over a two-day period. Those activities include independent reading, synchronous activities (e.g., role plays), asynchronous discussions, CD-ROM-based video vignettes, and live Webcast sessions.

Through campus organizations such as IST's Information Institute of Syracuse and the Center for Digital Literacy, faculty, undergraduates, and graduate students work together to design creative learning environments and apply information technologies to instruction in new and different ways. This experimentation will help IST expand its values to include "a student body of one."

The school is very careful to connect its distance education students to life on campus and is committed to turning out superior librarians.

—Susan Winch, 1993 MLS-ISDP student

NOTES

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2. "Graduate Study Syracuse University: Master of Library Science." Graduate catalog. School of Information Studies. 1998-99, p. 1.
3. School of Information Studies Web site, <http://istweb.syr.edu>.
4. Online interview with Ray von Dran, dean of the School of Information Studies, Syracuse University, August 26, 1999.
5. Small, 1999.
6. Von Dran interview.
7. Ibid.
8. Small, Ruth V., and Stephen Paling. "The Evolution of a Distance Learning Program in Library and Information Science: A Follow-Up Study." *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 43, no. 1 (winter 2002), pp. 47-61.
9. Gibbons, W. J. "From Dungeons to Degrees." In *Trends and Issues in Online Instruction*, Proceedings of an on-line conference sponsored by Kapiolani Community College, Honolulu, Hawaii, March 1997. Available online at www.kcc.hawaii.edu/org/tcc_conf97/pres/gibbons.html.
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11. Von Dran interview.
12. Nelson, Corinne O. "Susan Winch: Librarian on the Cusp." *Library Journal*, October 15, 1996, p. 31.
13. Nicholson, Scott. "Socialization in the 'Virtual Hallway': Instant Messaging in the Asynchronous Web-based Distance Classroom." Unpublished manuscript, 2002.

SUGGESTED READINGS

A number of publications have been written about the Syracuse University program. They include the following.

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