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A Student Perspective on the Future of Community Informatics at the School of Information

In the following discussion, the CiC student group presents four main ideas regarding our vision of the Community Informatics focus area at the School of Information (SI). In general, we feel that the study of Community Informatics / Community Information (CI) should be one of SI's greatest areas of focus, characterized by a solid curriculum, committed faculty, passionate students, and a connection with CiC alumni and other iSchools.

Much of the infrastructure to enable SI to strengthen its CI focus is already in place and more is in development. Nonetheless, we feel that there is no better time than now to embrace the excitement of interested students and faculty and begin to create an intellectual, viable and sustainable Community Informatics focus at SI.

Thoughts on Sustainability

One of the greatest challenges facing CI at SI is sustainability. We feel that those who have a long-term connection in SI could most effectively sustain CI: Ph. D. students, post-docs, and faculty members. There is also the need for a strong curriculum that would lead to an actual CI cluster. Realizing that SI could not possibly take on the full burden of teaching all the relevant courses related to CI, it might be worthwhile to construct a curriculum around classes offered in other University of Michigan departments and schools. Additionally, co-taught courses with faculty in Public Policy, Urban Planning, Business, Education, Social Work, or Law might also be effective strategies.

One main source of CI sustainability at SI is through the support of the CiC Alumni Network. These individuals act as mentors and repositories of knowledge, assisting CI-interested students with project ideas, real-world experience-sharing, and continuation of public interest work beyond SI.

Addressing Sustainability

SI as CI: A Focus on Recruiting

SI is a frontrunner in the field of community information studies and practice. To ensure continued success and encourage growth, SI needs to find more effective ways to recruit students with a strong desire for public interest work to attend SI. A thriving CiC student group and rich CI-related courses may be the key to recruiting these types of interested students.

Collaboration: The iSchool Network

While the network of interested parties within the field of CI incorporates everything from corporations and government agencies to non-profit

organizations and foundations, we feel a strong need for SI to develop solid partnerships with other universities. These partnerships might include “field trips” where students visit other universities to engage in service projects or discussions related to CI. These relationships might be even further strengthened by projects, conferences, student and faculty visits, and a co-published website.

Curriculum: The CI Cluster

What follows is an initial curriculum exploratory; it represents our vision of a sustainable CI curriculum at SI.

Year One

- Fall Seminar: Introduction to CI (ideally but not exclusively for first year students)
 - The fall seminar class will introduce incoming students to the fundamental concepts defining community informatics (e.g Public Goods, Social Capital, Inequality, Identity and Power, Citizenship and Democracy, Non-Profit Sector and Philanthropy). Using various seminal or relevant scholarly readings, the seminar will explore specific focus areas within CI (e.g. ICT4D, e-governance). Working in groups, students will conduct research about organizations and individuals in the local community and create DFE proposals that address public interest work.
- Spring Seminar: Practical Engagement (ideally but not exclusively for first year students)
 - In addition to more in-depth discussion about specific focus areas within CI, the spring seminar will serve as a forum for students to actualize the DFEs generated during the fall seminar. Much like a typical DFE, students will engage in the project and capture detailed notes about the project via a blog and weekly reports. Another significant part of the course will be the discussion of the ways in which industries and academic disciplines and departments address CI. These links will serve as potential connectors to projects outside of SI and also create valuable points of departure for summer internships, etc.

Year Two

- Fall Seminar: Project Analysis and Knowledge Sharing (Introduction to CI seminar is a pre-requisite or can be taken concurrently with this course – a previously completed public interest DFE is required for participation)
 - This course engages in a thorough analysis of the spring semester DFE project. Students will begin the semester by participating in an

open discussion, connecting CI principles from focused readings to their DFE experiences from the previous spring. During the last portion of the course, students will generate a long paper applying CI concepts and analysis to their DFE findings, with the possibility of publication in the spring. The paper may also be presented to the DFE organization as a recommendation report. As a note, students might instead use the seminar to reflect on and analyze a summer DFE with a public interest organization.

- Spring Seminar: Publication, Processing, Projecting (Project Analysis and Knowledge Sharing seminar is a pre-requisite)
 - This class will serve as a continuation of the fall seminar, allowing students to work closely with faculty and peers to review, edit and publish the fall semester long paper. Additionally, this seminar will be a forum for reflection and projection on CI. Students will discuss their CI experiences with peers and alumni (through teleconferencing and site visits), focusing on the future development and role of CI in the public sector. Alumni will play an especially crucial role in this seminar, providing necessary guidance to students for taking CI projects and interests beyond graduate school at SI.

CiC: Role of the Student Group

The SI CiC student group will continue to play a pivotal role in informing students, faculty and staff about CI. It will work to involve all interested individuals by organizing activities, such as bringing in CI speakers, participating in community projects, and planning fieldtrips and other visits. Furthermore, the student group will maintain the CiC Drupal website through student blogs and updates. The group will also be charged with maintaining iSchool network connections through collaborative projects like the co-published website previously mentioned.

Concluding Thoughts

CI is about partnership, community building, and extending connections beyond students, beyond faculty, beyond courses, beyond SI, and beyond academia. CI is bound only by its ability to establish and maintain these interdisciplinary connections. At its core, CI is about community. The larger our community network and the more ownership individual community members embrace, the greater the magnitude and length of the impact of CI on our communities. As a passionate and committed student group, we have demonstrated that we are willing and ready to develop meaningful connections. We realize that CI is in a state of progression and growth and we look forward to being a part of the development process.