Dean Steagall's Response to Information Systems & Technologies (IS&T) Program Review, 2017

June 6, 2017

Introduction

I commend the Information Systems & Technologies (IS&T) faculty for putting together a strong program review team that included three subject area experts from outside WSU. The team's report is thoughtful and thorough, commending the program faculty on quite a few successes, while also identifying opportunities for improvement.

I also commend the faculty for its openness to the committee's constructive criticism. I am particularly pleased with the faculty's proposed timeline for addressing most of the suggestion, although I would like to see the advisory board constituted much more quickly than the faculty response proposes.

Before a concluding section, the remainder of this response addresses five areas:

- Curriculum evolution
- Assurance of Learning
- Resources, administrative re-organization and open communication
- Program identity
- Other issues

Curriculum Evolution

The review team and the faculty response have identified several areas for commendation. First, the curriculum was recently overhauled and modernized. This included a reduction in total hours required that has made the IS&T degree more attractive to undergraduate students. Second, the close cooperation with our professional advisors has likely helped shape the curriculum changes. It has certainly helped to get the word out to students about changes.

Several suggestions in the reports are intriguing. Careful consideration of integrating parts or all of various external professional certifications is definitely appropriate. Faculty should consider both the benefits to students of graduating with such credentials, as well as the cost of obtaining the credentials. If the program anticipates helping some or all students with such costs, a budget that the development director and I can use to seek funding would be most helpful.

As is to be expected in a fast-changing, technologically-based field such as IS&T, the need to review curriculum regularly is a key to remaining relevant to the market. I echo the review team's implication that our curriculum should, to the extent possible, teach to the job market our majors will face upon graduation, rather than the market as it exists today. This is easier said than done, given the very large proportion of IS&T majors who are working in their field, but the faculty should develop an explicit, appropriate timeline for reconsidering the entire curriculum. I cannot say whether we should currently be teaching Java or Python, but we should be asking the market, not simply assuming that teaching Java remains the best option.

Another feature of curriculum redesign is the role that IS&T might play in delivering business analytics, big data, project management, enterprise software, and other such coursework. The college is currently struggling with this question. The IS&T team has expertise that can help get the college to the best

solution. This is an example of integrating more closely with the other college disciplines, as suggested by the review team.

As the college's Strategic Planning Committee recently recommended that each major have a capstone that constitutes a High-Impact Practice (HIP), this is an appropriate time to consider adding a major capstone project, as recommended by the review team. Depending on faculty workload associated with that course, the faculty might consider making the case to the chair and dean to limit the student-faculty ratio in the capstone.

Assurance of Learning

It appears to me that the major criticism of the review team was the IS&T discipline's approach to Assurance of Learning (AOL). Defining learning outcomes and objectives carefully, collecting appropriate data regularly to measure student learning, spending the time and energy to analyze the data carefully, and making changes all need deeper faculty commitment. Loop-closing activities must be evaluated immediately through a parallel procedure. The pursuit of an exit exam will also be helpful. However, surveys are indirect measures that can only supplement, but not supplant, what direct metrics can do to inform us. The faculty must devote significant attention to AOL this year to get it on track. Faculty must own AOL in their disciplines. It should not take a program review to identify a concern with the AOL process.

Resources, Administrative Re-Organization and Open Communication

It appears that at least some IS&T faculty remain upset that the program used to be an independent department with eight faculty members. It is now a five-person (up from four-person) discipline within a huge department. The college plans to split that department in fall 2017, perhaps placing the IS&T faculty with another discipline that would not be its ideal choice of partner.

Taking the split first, it is important to note that the review team's characterization of the change as a "merger between IS&T and SCM" is incorrect. Those disciplines are already in the same department (though that was not always the case). Regardless, it remains clear that IS&T faculty are concerned about a number of associated issues, including, according to the review team's report, "curriculum, equipment, faculty hiring/promotion, budgets, etc."

In response to those concerns, I note that WSU faculty in the specific discipline normally control their own curriculum, except when the course is used widely by other majors. There is no reason to expect that to change with reorganization.

Regarding equipment, the IS&T program has traditionally collected course fees to support classroom equipment purchases. That account now stands at approximately $75,000, which should be sufficient to fund new classroom purchases into the foreseeable future.

I note also that the college recently sought and received one-time funding from the provost to fund half of a major project, with the college's general budget funding the other half. That project, which will cost approximately $320,000, has two main components, one of which is the creation of an "innovation classroom" designed by the IS&T faculty to showcase new technologies for students.

This major capital expenditure commitment should make it clear that the college continues to invest in IS&T and has no interest in seeing it become in any way subordinate to another discipline. The IS&T

faculty can reinforce that by continuous improvements to its curriculum, classroom equipment, and pedagogy.

Regarding hiring, when new positions are funded or existing positions become open (or anytime, actually), faculty may make a case to their chair for hiring in their discipline. These cases are typically made through the department chair, although IS&T also has a member in the associate dean position. The academic members of the Executive Team weigh the various cases and reach a decision regarding which discipline to fund. Since many majors have mostly-full courses, the case for additional IS&T faculty will hinge on increasing enrollments in the IS&T program(s). The degree to which IS&T must use adjuncts can certainly be part of the argument, although economics, another discipline with a heavy emphasis on service courses, also has high adjunct use compared to the rest of the college. I note, however, that the use of adjuncts in both areas currently falls within accreditation guidelines. I encourage the faculty not to wait until a position is available, but rather to develop immediately the argument for an additional position in IS&T and to share it with the department chair and me. However, I do caution that the university's current budget situation makes it extremely unlikely that we will get a new position for Fall 2018. I would be happy to meet with the IS&T faculty any time to listen to their case for additional faculty members directly, of course.

Regarding promotion and tenure, I remind the faculty that the college has a tenure document that governs that process and associated expectations of performance. The PPM performs an analogous service for promotions to associate professor and professor. Neither of those documents is likely to change with the administrative restructuring, so there is unlikely to be any shift, whether large or small, in tenure or promotion expectations. Moreover, current faculty are grandfathered in under the current tenure document, so even if the college changes the document, current faculty would not be affected.

Regarding budgets, no decrease to department budgets is expected after the reorganization. Indeed, the two new departments will see a slight increase in combined budget due to the way the college allocates department budgets (a fixed amount plus a per-faculty amount). Faculty travel budgets are allocated to the department, so that unallocated travel funds may be reallocated within the department, but the expectation is that each faculty member is "entitled" to use his or her share of the annual travel budget. That expectation will not change with reorganization.

There is also a potential budgetary *benefit* from being paired with the named SCM program. That program receives $200,000 annually from a donor. That amount will eventually be provided through an endowment. That could mean that the SCM program has less need for departmental funding. Moreover, we have identified a possible donor who might name the IS&T program, providing an endowment with a perpetual $120,000 or so in funding specific to IS&T. We anticipate making this ask in mid-autumn, 2017.

The review team report also "recommends that the IS&T program seek transparency with administrators" about the reorganization. If I have been less than transparent, that certainly has not been my intent. The chair and I laid out the reasons why the department should split. There was virtually no feedback from faculty questioning or disagreeing with that rationale. We had a series of meetings to discuss the reorganization and the chair and I attempted to answer all questions openly and honestly. The department faculty voted a variety of ways, ensuring that many possible new structures were considered. The IS&T plus SCM option came out as the option finally selected by the department faculty as a whole. True, it was not unanimously supported, but neither was any other option. After the

voting, I contacted every IS&T faculty member with an offer to meet with them one-on-one and confidentially. Three of the IS&T faculty members talked with me. All three assured me that they supported the new structure and could work well within it, although some stated that they would have preferred another outcome. I am not sure what else we could have done to be transparent or to give faculty more input, but I would certainly be happy to learn from you if you have suggestions. If you still have questions about the reorganization, please ask me about them.

The review team's final suggestion on the reorganization is that we agree that the department chair of the new combined department alternate between IS&T and SCM. I have discussed this possibility with Provost Miner. She and I agree that a formal agreement to mandate this would violate the current policy (PPM 1-19) regarding the appointment of department chairs. If the faculty feel strongly about this, you could petition Faculty Senate's Executive Committee to charge the appropriate university committee with considering language that would allow such a rotation. Doris Geide-Stevenson will chair Faculty Senate during 2017-18 and would be a good person to consult regarding process, should you so choose.

I urge caution, however, regarding placing any restrictions on the selection of department chairs. This is not because I favor any particular person for the chair, but rather is based on the belief that selecting the best person is accomplished most often when significant input is sought (as it must be according to PPM 1-19) and good judgement is used. Imposing an alternating chair structure could result in requiring that a less-capable person from the discipline whose "turn" it is must be chair even though one or more candidates from the other discipline would be preferred by a majority of faculty. That is my personal perspective. The faculty are free to pursue changes to PPM 1-19 if they wish.

Of course, the IS&T faculty must be willing to provide their advice and concerns regarding potential chairs with the dean during the appointment process. My process always includes the invitation for faculty to meet privately and confidentially with me to share their thoughts. However, if faculty opt not to share, they cannot expect me to consider their views in my deliberations.

In conclusion, I understand that change generates uncertainty. When tenure is at stake, the uncertainty can be magnified. In the end, whether the reorganization is successful and whether the IS&T faculty and program thrive in the new environment will depend critically on the willingness and ability of the IS&T and SCM faculty to find synergies, foster communication, and explore opportunities for collaboration. I encourage faculty in both disciplines to open discussions about these possibilities, as well as talking through the legitimate concerns of the faculty in both areas.

My door remains open to any faculty member or group of faculty who wants to talk about any issues. I would also be happy to meet with the IS&T faculty sporadically, regularly, or frequently, depending on the faculty's wish.

Program Identity

As an economist, I understand the struggles of a discipline that many in the college view as a "support" or "service" area versus one viewed as a "fundamental business major." IS&T is viewed by some Goddard faculty in this way. However, like economics, the discipline is a valid area in which to pursue a major, too. Indeed, the IS&T faculty have done a good job through the years of ensuring that it generated undergraduate majors and had a place in the MBA certificate program.

With recent hires, it appears that the faculty are rethinking the program's identity for the future. The addition of 3D printing to the curriculum is one example. The contemplation of adding holographic technology to the innovation classroom is another. I applaud the faculty's willingness to envision what IS&T should become at WSU and then to take steps to make that vision become reality.

One important step that has been missing from curriculum for the past seven years is the lack of an industry advisory board. The review team has recommended forming one again. The faculty have agreed to do so, but set a late-2018 target date. I strongly encourage the faculty to put the advisory board in place as quickly as possible, with the target of December 1, 2017, at the latest. While this is an ambitious schedule, it also means getting industry advice, feedback and connections a full year earlier. In a tech field, a year lost is a long time.

I also applaud the faculty's recent efforts to increase enrollments in the IS&T major. As mentioned above, this is the most likely path to additional faculty lines. Moreover, it supports the goals of both the college and the university to recruit more students and to retain a higher percentage of those who start at WSU. It is likely that the WSU central budget model is likely to change to one that rewards programs with growing student credit hours. I encourage the faculty to maintain its strong ties to college advising and career services, and to reach out to the college's marketing manager for additional support in its enrollment growth initiatives.

One concern mentioned by students is the lack of IS&T course offerings during the summer. This is a college-wide (and university-wide) problem, because the university hasn't dedicated a formal budget to summer teaching. However, if the faculty are willing to teach during the summer and moderate enrollments exist, the college will fund summer courses. It is also potentially possible to negotiate some shifting of fall/spring in-load courses to count summer teaching in-load. Accreditation imposes some restrictions on this model, but there remains some flexibility.

Finally, I applaud the agreement to rebrand the program from IS&T to Management Information Systems (MIS). In the short term, the loss of the well-established, well-regarded IS&T brand might be harmful, but in the long term, the more modern MIS identity will serve the program well. Again, I encourage the faculty to work with the college marketing manager to assist with the rebranding of the program. I would be willing to discuss a moderate budget to support that effort.

It is worth stating explicitly that marketing of what IS&T is and how it matters is an issue that not only students, but also college and university faculty & staff should be more aware of.

Other Issues

The review team praised the quality of the virtual lab that our IS&T faculty currently operate. Their report noted that there are often one or two staff people responsible for analogous labs elsewhere. It would be useful to me to have the IS&T faculty educate me on what is required to run the virtual lab as well as it has been running and what sort of personnel and financial support might be required to ease this administrative burden on faculty. Could a student assistant help in this regard (and are there any security concerns about using an IS&T student)?

Conclusion

The IS&T program has a long-standing tradition of excellent teaching. The shift to embrace new technologies and broaden the program's scope, efforts to connect more closely with the business community, stronger emphasis on scholarship, and new ties to top-level graduate programs for our students are just some of the reasons I believe the IS&T program is now on a steep, upward trajectory. Keep up the great work, team!