Creating an Interdisciplinary ICT Bachelor’s Degree at Florida State University

by Michelle M. Kazmer, Ebrahim Randeree and Gary R. Heald

In July 2009, the College of Communication and Information at Florida State University was formed, comprising three schools: the School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS), the School of Communication (Communication) and the School of Communication Science and Disorders. The newly combined college offers many opportunities for synergistic research and teaching; such opportunities were being explored long before the merger took place and continue apace. Dating back to the 1990s, the deans of the then-colleges of SLIS and Communication were discussing the possibility of offering combined degree programs at the undergraduate level. Now, in 2010, a combined interdisciplinary undergraduate degree in ICT (here defined idiosyncratically as “Information, Communication & Technology”) is being developed.

Barriers

As interesting as this opportunity is for the new college, there are significant barriers to delivering the undergraduate ICT degree. The first potential obstacle is a difference in how the three schools’ existing undergraduate and graduate programs connect together. Within SLIS, the existing undergraduate degree is a BS in information technology while the master’s program offers the ALA-accredited MSLIS or MALIS. The undergraduate and graduate programs within SLIS have not been designed or intended to be sequential, and very few SLIS BS degree earners elect to earn the MSLIS. This discontinuity is also the case with the transition from the BS degree into a PhD within SLIS. The curriculum in the master’s program is determined largely by the guidelines of the accrediting body, and those graduates with the BS in IT who wish to continue their education sometimes have difficulty identifying an appropriate graduate program. Instead, students in the BS IT degree program focus on external certifications for career advancement, once they have graduated, with the possibility of pursuing a graduate degree in three to five years after graduation. In Communication, while of course not every student pursues graduate study, the undergraduate, master’s and doctoral degrees align clearly, and it is straightforward to continue from one to the next. In addition, the Communication undergraduate program is a long-established program with limited enrollment and is extremely selective in admitting students to its four majors. The entry-level GPA requirement is a 3.2 but in most semesters the last student qualified and accepted has a 3.4 or higher GPA. As a result, Communication rejects some highly qualified undergraduate students who then must find a different major program within the university. In contrast, the SLIS undergraduate IT program is still in growth mode, having been launched in 2005 and working to attract new students. SLIS’s IT program has some unusual hurdles in terms of its course prerequisites (as compared with Communication; see discussion below), but does not have a limit on its total enrollment.

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Opportunities

Despite these obstacles, there is a strong opportunity to improve the college’s educational offerings by creating a combined degree that uses the strengths of each school (especially in terms of faculty and courses) to complement the weaknesses of the other. Potential employers for SLIS’s IT students want employees with good technical skills, but also good communication skills; they seek group communication, leadership, technical writing and project management skills. Indeed, SLIS’s IT degree was always meant to create these kinds of technology intermediaries, but the curriculum only included one technical communication course and one project management course. Along the same vein, the potential employers for Communication’s students want employees with good communication skills, but also good technical skills; they are looking for people who can combine traditional communication knowledge – such as public relations, advertising and mass media – with the technical knowledge necessary to bring all of these things online into the world of mobile access, social media and user-created content. This push has resulted in companies demanding communications majors who can extend their skill sets beyond traditional approaches and embrace new marketing and public relations channels, new media communications and new consumer advertising channels.

The combined ICT degree provides the opportunity to meet these needs. It also provides a way to accommodate the talented students who do not gain admission to Communication’s limited-enrollment undergraduate programs each year, thereby keeping the much-needed extra full-time equivalent (FTEs) student hours within the College of Communication & Information and allowing us to share the load of additional students across Communication and SLIS.

The existing introductory courses in Communication can accommodate more students; the enrollment limitations for the Communication majors are primarily intended to keep upper-level undergraduate courses small. By opening the introductory Communication courses to students in the ICT program, we can offer those students a basic grounding in the primary areas covered within FSU’s School of Communication: advertising, public relations, mass media and communication as a discipline. Similarly, in SLIS, there is still room for growth in the introductory courses, although an interesting issue emerges here because the SLIS graduate programs are not in IT; there are few graduate students within SLIS to assist in teaching large sections of undergraduate IT courses.

Looking beyond the undergraduate courses, the ICT degree will provide the foundation for a master’s degree program designed along the same framework (a joint effort between SLIS and Communication). The master’s degree will also facilitate our goal of keeping our undergraduate IT majors in the school while additionally providing a web of cross-pollination for degree options.

An even more long-term opportunity exists in offering students a home within the college: students may start to focus on the college as opposed to the school; faculty may become further integrated as they work on joint classes, curriculum development and future courses; and the task of culture change can begin.

Initial Curriculum Design

Here, we provide an outline of the potential curriculum in its current form. We anticipate that it will change over time as the needs of our students, their employers and our faculty change. We wish to stress, however, that we are aware that this program is not completely unique; we are not presenting our ICT curriculum as one-of-a-kind, but instead wish to show how one such program is developed.

First, the prerequisites for the combined ICT program are taken from the prerequisites for SLIS’s undergraduate IT program. The prerequisites include pre-calculus, statistics, ethics, psychology, macroeconomics and web development or programming. These prerequisite courses are more wide-ranging than the existing prerequisites for Communication, in particular requiring more mathematics and more technical courses. Thus for the first year or so of the ICT program, students who originally intended to major in Communication may reach the junior year without the needed prerequisites for the ICT major; in future years, lower-level students will be advised to include the ICT prerequisites in their preparation whether they intend to major in ICT or Communication.
The program introduction module of the ICT degree covers conceptual courses about mass media, databases, information’s role in society and how technologies are used in the information professions. A technology and research module includes courses on research within the disciplines of information, advertising and mass media. The organization and culture module includes topics such as mass media law, intercultural communication and information architecture. The last specified module, called writing, presentation and promotion, includes public relations, public speaking, advertising, Hispanic marketing and business communication. Students must also choose an additional technology elective (e.g., usability, multimedia, web development), and will have the option to complete an internship or practicum. The program concludes with a capstone in project management. This capstone will combine content from both schools and is still under development. The new course will be designed to provide students with a project that combines IT project and communication tasks.

Organization, Implementation and Buy-in

In SLIS, as noted above, the undergraduate IT degree includes quite different content from the master’s degree programs. Reflecting this division, a separation of the teaching faculty, in which progressively fewer faculty teach at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, has evolved over the past several years. There are various good reasons for this, but currently the faculty in SLIS are pleased by the prospect of expanding the teaching opportunities through some of the courses in the ICT degree program. This expansion will also take advantage of some organizational memory within SLIS; before SLIS’s undergraduate program in IT was launched in 2005, SLIS (then the School of Information Studies and later the College of Information) had an undergraduate major in information studies. Some of the courses and content that were part of the information studies undergraduate program would blend well into the intent and design of the upcoming combined ICT program. For example, information retrieval (IR), taught primarily as a database or electronic retrieval course prior to 2005, can be reintroduced to undergraduates by including advances in IR in a variety of settings, as well as targeted IR for communication needs (marketing analysis, public relations and advertising searches).

None of us is interested in resurrecting a five-year-old course and teaching it in an unrevised format, but the committee that is identifying and developing needed new courses for the ICT program is simultaneously working hard to incorporate existing knowledge and teaching concepts rather than re-creating them in completely new courses (which also significantly reduces administrative overhead at the university and state level, because Florida has a state-wide course naming and numbering system that requires several layers of bureaucratic approval for a new course).

The faculty in both schools are not the only stakeholders in the process of developing the new ICT degree. It is important that the degree is seen as necessary by students and employers and that the implementation is perceived to meet the needs of both students and employers. One data point gleaned from Yahoo! HotJobs indicates that the top new career areas are in green jobs, health information technology and social media (especially public relations, marketing and advertising in social media, in other words, jobs for people with traditional communication skills who also understand technology). In addition, through our direct interactions with employers, both one-on-one and through career fairs, we are still seeing companies that seek students and graduates with the combined communication and information technology skills that will be part of the ICT degree. For example, we see employers who want to hire students to market their companies’ images online; they express a need for IT students who also understand advertising or communication majors with very strong IT skills – but agree it would be better if those skills could be aggregated in one well-rounded person. At our Fall 2009 career fair, which attracted 300 students and 27 companies, nine employers indicated that they were looking for both skill sets. In focus groups with potential students, we hear that respondents are extremely excited about the coming ICT program. They, too, see the need for the combination of IT and communication skills and believe that the ICT major would increase their marketability to potential employers.

Teaching, Research and Long-Term Collaboration

Returning briefly to the needs and interests of the faculty, we come back to the idea that creating a shared degree program can act as one starting point (of many) from which the faculty across the schools in the new college can
begin to work more closely together. Understanding how our teaching roles articulate together can be one way to work toward a better understanding of how our research interests intersect. At the undergraduate level, we envision this articulation happening through the topics we teach and the pedagogical methods we use. Looking beyond the undergraduate level to our upper-level graduate courses, we also hope that if we continue the trend of teaching together successfully, then we will build shared ground in teaching research methods and theory, which in turn will provide one way to lead us to shared research activities. As well, we look forward to the potential development of a master’s degree program in ICT, which will appeal to students who do not want either an ALA-accredited MSLIS/MALIS or a traditional communication master’s degree.