

Informatics Student Activities at UCLA

by Sarah Buchanan

Sarah Buchanan is an officer of the student chapter of ASIS&T at UCLA, the 2007 winner of the Best Student Chapter-of-the-Year award. She can be reached by email at sarahab@ucla.edu or through the chapter's email at asis@ucla.edu.

Editor's note: Each year ASIS&T honors one or more student chapters with a Student Chapter-of-the-Year award. I ask that chapter to recruit a student to serve for a year on the *Bulletin* Advisory Board and to write a column for us. In 2007 the winners were UCLA and Simmons. Sarah Buchanan is our current student member from UCLA.

Informatics is an essential component of current study and practice within the field of library and information science. As a 21st-century discipline, it entails the design and implementation of information technology applications to a burgeoning variety of contexts including web spaces, online catalogs, digital libraries and electronic journals, to name a few. Whether students realize it, many electronic resources are already in place at universities that not only support student learning, but provide the primary means of instruction and intellectual content of courses. From the practicalities of developing wiki portals to enhance student access to class resources to selecting the appropriate metadata scheme with which to display library records, informatics pervades many aspects of the student learning experience.

At the UCLA Department of Information Studies, the student chapter of ASIS&T has worked throughout the 2007-2008 academic year to bring the field of informatics to campus and help guide informatics and technology-related developments into everyday classroom discussion. The term informatics is interpreted by our department to include all aspects of electronic and/or computer-based information retrieval, including web design, user interfaces, electronic privacy and even data retention policies. One component of our informatics specialization, for example, is information architecture, a more limited concept that many of our chapter members interpret as an application of the theory of informatics to effective backend design of a web page or database, in a way that meets defined user needs. Jesse James Garrett, in his paper "The Elements of User Experience" (available at www.jjg.net/elements/pdf/elements.pdf)

describes the web as a duality, one that must meet task-oriented (software) and information-oriented (hypertext) needs on behalf of users and designers.

In concert with the principles and goals of the national ASIS&T organization, student officers at UCLA have sought to promote access to information technology and communicate the value of understanding how technology affects information-seeking behaviors and the acquisition of new knowledge. Above all, we as a group have emphasized that technology is ultimately about *people*, not machines, and that individual people remain the driving force behind the creation of new ideas, new ways of connecting those ideas and new methods of responding to an information-rich society. The student members of the UCLA ASIS&T chapter have gained a new understanding of the complex interplay between people and information through our yearlong activities.

The ASIS&T student chapter at UCLA sponsored a series of Informatics Journal Group discussions in which we invited several information practitioners to speak to current students. We were privileged to hear from our department's own adjunct lecturer, Lynn Boyden, as well as two current doctoral students, Alla Zollers and Katie Shilton, on topics both introductory in nature ("What is Information Architecture?") and more advanced. For example, we discussed "Physical, Social and Experiential Knowledge in Pervasive Computing Environments," by G.R. Hayes, et al, in the context of a discussion about how individuals experience the information boundaries of places and spaces and how to envision design that respects those boundaries.

At these discussions it was most rewarding to hear

different perspectives, including those of students, on the current state and future direction of the informatics field. As a group, our chapter finds these informal group discussions to be a stimulating means of scoping out different ways in which professionals and professionals-in-training currently deal with digital information. Our participants discussed how we can positively impact users' access to these resources by designing effective digital resources, including websites and databases, and improve public perception and appreciation of information architects as information providers.

As students interested in pursuing informatics professionally, we also discussed professional development with our speakers. The informatics field is continually expanding, and we found no prescribed path shared among informatics professionals who often come into the field from other related disciplines or practices. Compared to the library and archival field, for example, two other specializations at our department, the informatics field affords students a less-prescribed path and encourages creativity and innovation in order to comprehend the value of information as used by different organizations both locally and globally. These circumstances leave students with many exciting and original options to consider, and we have the opportunity to chart new territory and contribute to the development of informatics in the coming years. Organizations continue to face the need for effective resource allocation, management and data retrieval in order to accomplish daily business tasks, and many businesses are turning to digital solutions – hence our emphasis on the value of informatics in the study and shaping of information.

Students in our program interact with a wide range of computer-based resources on a daily basis – from Moodle and Blackboard to the library OPAC to blogs on many subjects – and the ability to critically evaluate and propose

suggestions for enhanced user access of these resources is a valuable skill for students and pre-professionals to have.

At a fall ASIS&T chapter event, interested students attended a campus visit by two journalist bloggers who shared their professional experience: Jenny Burman, who writes for L.A. Observed and follows the news of Echo Park, a Los Angeles community (www.laobserved.com/echopark/), and Brad A. Greenberg, a UCLA alumnus who writes for the Jewish Journal (<http://jewishjournal.com/thegodblog/>). These writers shared their perspectives and experiences regarding the legitimacy of blogs, the establishment of trust with their readers within a Web 2.0 context, becoming involved in community life and the soliciting of subject material for their parent publication (if applicable).

Some of our officers were also involved in our department-wide CareerFest, where we held panels and planned events involving local professionals who offered invaluable advice to both first- and second-year students. Our ASIS&T student chapter was very privileged to be able to arrange a Yahoo! Entertainment Usability lab tour in Santa Monica, where we heard from several informatics professionals and viewed current eye-tracking and behavior-based technologies.

The student chapter at UCLA also held three special workshops this year based on topics that sparked a lot of student interest: Creating Websites, ContentDM and Databases. We try to cover topics we believe are integral to our education as information professionals, but may have not gotten adequate classroom discussion time. Our instructors provide expert guidance regarding topics such as the fundamentals of HTML and CSS, how to edit metadata in the ContentDM digital management system, the technical differences between relational and flat databases and how to best create a simple database appropriate to user needs

in FileMaker Pro. Throughout our planning of these events, we strive to address audience members with varying levels of technical expertise, from basic (data entry) to more advanced (writing code, digital imaging, etc.). Finally we hosted a conference panel, in which our panelists shared tips for first-time attendees and advice regarding how to best approach the conference experience.

In the upcoming year the ASIS&T student chapter at UCLA will strengthen our connection with LACASIS, increase conference attendance among student members, promote the use of a blog among the other information

studies student groups and continue discussions with professors regarding topics that might not get adequate mention in our classes, but that are still relevant to current trends and practices. The ASIS&T student leadership team remains committed to sharing our knowledge of informatics and technology as a new school year approaches, and we welcome input from any current professionals regarding our activities and outreach efforts. The informatics community at our university is thriving, and we are excited to introduce new ideas and concepts to incoming and continuing students in the upcoming year.

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