To: Faculty of Information  
From: Brian Cantwell Smith, Dean  
Date: June 16, 2008  

Re: Information Services at the Faculty of Information

Summary

For several years Information Technology Services (ITS) has reported directly to the Dean of the Faculty. This has allowed us to evaluate needs, assess capacities, and in general raise the level of the Faculty’s IT-based services, as part of our shift to becoming an information school (“i-school”).

At the same time, the Inforum has undergone its own reconfiguration and growth. Recently, it has been expanding its mandate in two specific ways: (i) extending its support beyond library services to include archives, museums, and a wide range of other information practices; and (ii) preparing to increase its “laboratory” role, as the Faculty deepens its commitment to reflective practice.

Although it has been important to have had these two units report separately during this period, I believe it is appropriate, as we arrive at a moment of leadership transition, that we bring them back together. On July 1, 2008, therefore, we will integrate the administrative unit and set of functions provided by Information Technology Services and the administrative unit and set of functions provided by the Inforum into a single reporting unit, provisionally called Information Services.¹

Details are spelled out below. Overall, the goals of the consolidation are to:

1. Demonstrate leadership and progressive thinking about the delivery of progressive information services and practices at a leading i-school;
2. Be relatively “future-proof,” with neither administrative units nor individual positions tied to specific technologies or practices liable to change in the next few years;
3. Move beyond the fetishization of digital technologies as a distinct type, as the use of digital media as the substrate for all knowledge, information, and creative expression takes ever deeper hold in society; and
4. Recognize shifting perspectives on how the concept of technology is used to understand the material bases of the delivery of a service or the performance of a function.

As part of the change, the term ‘Inforum’ will no longer name an administrative or functional unit. Instead, in conformance with informal practice, the term will become the name of the wonderful physical space on the 4th and 5th floor of the Bissell building, which serves as a social and academic hub for information resources, collaborative activity, and exemplary personal service. Joe Cox, currently Director of the Inforum, will be appointed as Interim Director of Information Services.

A • History and Context

For the past 3–4 years Information Technology Services (ITS) has been administered separately from the Inforum. This has had several benefits: (i) it has freed the Inforum to concentrate on developing its content-based services, including the expansion to include Museum Studies, and preparation to serve a more serious laboratory role, in line with the Faculty’s commitment to strengthen the role of reflective practice in its academic (research and teaching) program; and (ii) it has allowed Faculty administration to focus on and improve our substantial needs in information tech-

¹A provisional name, expected to be changed before the proposal goes into effect. Suggestions are welcome.
nology and accompanying services.

In 2003 Ab and Tony were the Faculty’s only ITS personnel, overseen by Susan Brown in conjunction with the ACMOB group. Governance was handled by a combined “Inforum and Information Technology” Council committee. In 2004 ITS was separated out, eventually to be overseen by a distinct “IT Services” committee of Faculty Council. Its staff has been greatly expanded to include Rob Harvie, James Hallam, Nakul Hoelz, Tasha Caswell, Lisa Page, Bert Shire, Danny Lee, some of Kathleen O’Brien, and, at different times, a number of other people associated with the ATRC: Smriti Dev, Greg Gay, Heidi Hazelton, Harris Wong, and Cynick Young, among others.

This major ITS expansion has been undertaken in part in response to a substantial challenge faced by the Faculty. For an information school (“i-school”), high-quality ITS is not merely an issue of operational convenience; it is a **substantive matter of academic content and program excellence**. It is essential to our academic mission that our students develop skills and our faculty members conduct research within the context of a state-of-the-art computational and information infrastructure.

Unfortunately, the level of information technology services provided by UofT is not (yet) at that level. In this respect, the digital ITS situation differs from that provided by the University of Toronto Library system (UTL), which operates at a much higher level in its respective domain. To some extent the issues around ITS are recognized in Simcoe Hall. The newly appointed Chief Information Officer (CIO) is mandated to address some of them. We will continue to work with and support the University, and will work closely with the new CIO, to improve the general level of ITS support across the three campuses. University-wide resources are scarce, however, and for the foreseeable future, in my judgment, we will not be able to develop the level of ITS excellence within the Faculty required by our Academic Mission by relying on UofT-supplied services. Like the department of Computer Science, therefore, we must make it a priority to complement and amplify, **with substantial additional service and expertise, what is provided by the University in general**.

An additional factor driving this mandate arises from society’s rapid transformation to embrace digital media as the substrate for all knowledge, information, and creative expression. It is academically essential that we move forward decisively and stay abreast of our fast-moving subject matter.

Perhaps the most important consequence of the transformation to ubiquitous digital media is the fact that is no longer possible to maintain a workable distinction between “computing” or “IT” based resources and the services provided in the Inforum. One way to understand the past 4 years’ separation of these functions in the Faculty is that it addressed a primarily administrative need—by allowing us to conduct a thorough assessment of our capacities and needs. Recent discussions, however, have demonstrated the impossibility of maintaining this distinction for substantive reasons. Especially as the end of my own decanal term approaches, it is important to conclude this administrative overview and put information services on a sustainable administrative footing.

### B • Faculty Organisation

Given these considerations, on July 1, 2008 the Faculty will be organized as shown in figure 1. The full range of laboratory and support information services necessary to the successful operation of the Faculty will be provided by an **Information Services** administrative unit, covering both digital and material resources and services, and including human services of help, guidance, training, etc.

One way to understand the division of labour between the resulting **Information Services** and the rest of the Faculty has to do with the subject matter of the relevant people’s responsibilities or service functions.

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1 Of course the ATRC is part of the Faculty; its size, requirements, and staffing, however, make it somewhat separate for purposes of this memo.
1. People in other parts of the Faculty—faculty members, researchers, students, (other) administrative staff, etc.—use information services in order to do work whose “imaginative focus” is on such content issues as course subject matters, financial situation, research grant proposals, student standing, etc.

2. Personnel and services in the Information Services division will focus on services to enable those functions—such as learning management systems, instant messaging, exhibit spaces, and so on.

Needless to say, the distinction is not sharp. Moreover, a critical part of our academic program (which we have yet to implement very successfully, but remain strongly committed to) has to do with reflective practice—working the subject matter expertise and experiential participation of our academic program back into the Information Services division (as indicated by the “returning arrows” in the diagram). Nevertheless, I believe that the distinction between Information Services and the other triad of Research, Academic Program, and Administration is both intuitively accessible and functionally workable.³

Endorsing the above division of labour has the following strong consequence:

*It will not be appropriate to ask members of the Information Services unit to shoulder tasks specific to particular needs of research, studies, administration, etc.*

³Unlike the distinction between “IT-based” and other Inforum services, which, in my judgment, grows increasingly untenable with every passing year.
That is: no room is provided within this conception of **Information Services** for “content coordinators,” “content writers,” etc. I believe that this is a proper outcome. For one thing, the Faculty cannot afford such “intermediary” personnel. In addition, that such people be needed is contrary to the Faculty’s academic mission. Instead, the Faculty must commit to providing usable authoring tools, guidance and training, and technical support. In addition, the Faculty as a whole, not just the members of the **Information Services** unit, must adopt the following policy:

*All Faculty business (information, content, communication, etc.) must be conducted directly on administratively supported media channels—phone, email, the Web, paper when appropriate, meetings, the intranet, other online tools, etc.*

What we cannot provide are “media translators”: typists, helpers to make phone calls—or technical assistants to translate syllabi or policy documents onto the Web.

**C • Information Services Operations**

The full range of services to be provided by **Information Services** division is impressive. An initial list is given in Appendix A. How these services will be provided, how priorities will be ordered, what level of service is a realistic goal to provide in what timeframe, etc., will be key tasks of the management of the proposed **Information Services** Unit.

There is also no way—given present or imaginable future resources—that the Faculty of Information, on its own, will be able to mount the effort that will be required to bridge the gap between services offered by UofT in general and the needs of a leading information school. Nor will we have the resources to buy them—should that even be considered a good idea. The only plausible route forward is through a major and strategic program of coordinated collaboration.

*Except conceivably on a temporary ad-hoc basis, until we get the new structure in place.*
A sketch of some of the functions of an Information Services Unit is given in figure 2 (previous page). Sources of potential “help” and other resources include: (i) the University in general, (ii) our peer community—especially the open-source community with which we have already established strong ties, and (iii) potential University-based partnerships. Such collaborations are not just fiscally necessary; they are substantively essential as well:

1. We must not build redundantly, or in a solitary way (“home-built” software is almost inexorably a recipe for disaster);
2. Everything we do must be built to open shared standards, to ensure interoperability and long-term sustainability;
3. We must be active participants in the creative discourses and practices of our peer institutions;
4. Innovation in the field of information requires building on the foundation of what is already built and shared;

Once we have an overall grasp of the services we need to provide—i.e., once Appendix A can be turned into anything remotely resembling a list of requirements or priorities—we should consult and potentially establish partnerships with other UofT units who face similar challenges. Some candidates include:

1. The University of Toronto Library System (UTL, under Carol Moore);
2. The Faculty of Medicine (through Avi Hyman, Medicine’s chief information officer);
3. OISE/UT (where Bob Cooke currently serves as CIO); and
4. The Computer Science department within the Faculty of Arts & Science.

We should also consult and coordinate with Bob Cooke, the new UofT CIO, so that partnership efforts can amplify and dovetail with emerging UofT directions in this area.

One area where partnership is particularly critical is in the area of software development. In order to develop state of the art services, especially within an open-source context, it is essential to have available the services of a highly talented team of developers. It is not realistic to assume that any one or two people can possibly shoulder the development work that will be required. Especially in recent years, skill levels have developed and specialized to the point where excellence in critical target areas is not compatible with someone who has “general development skills.” By itself, however, the Faculty of Information simply cannot afford to support more than one or at most two such developers. If we collaborate with a group of partners, however—with, for example, our supporting 1–2 people, Medicine and UTL each contributing 4–6, and OISE/UT another 2–3—the result would be a “pool” of approximately a dozen developers who could reasonably cover an adequate range of development skills to deal with all major issues.5,6

It will be critical, for the Faculty’s success, to engage in this kind of partnership in such a way that our Faculty needs are not subordinated to different goals and priorities of larger units. One possibility we should explore is whether we may be able to act in a coordinating or management fashion, with respect to such a collaborative enterprise, given that the subject matters that it will address falls within our Faculty’s subject matter expertise.

5The pool would presumably include expertise in security, ID management and authentication, user interface design, DHTML development, Java programming, Ajax, scripting, etc. Consultants or short-term contracts could cover more specialized skills in special circumstances.
6Another possible financial model is that each member of the partnership buy developer time from the pool according to its needs. At one point we might occupy require the entire pool for a large time-limited task; at other times, we may not need developer resources at all. The pool would be coordinated in such a way that its staff are (in general) always occupied with the needs of some unit. Such models would need to be explored and developed.
D • Structure

It will take some time to develop an appropriate functional structure within the new Information Services Unit. It is expected that the (Interim) Director, in conjunction with the (Acting) Dean, may want to convene a task force to address organisational issues.

At present we expect the organisation to include the following positions:

1. **Lab Coordinator**: A new position, at the level of Librarian (or equivalent), to oversee and coordinate the laboratories managed within the overall portfolio (see below).

2. **Services Coordinator**: A librarian-level position to oversee reference and information resource functions.

3. **Collections Coordinator**: A librarian-level position in charge of the multiple collections developed and maintained in service of the academic programs of the Faculty.

What is not yet as clear is how to set up appropriate management of functions traditionally associated with ITS. As mentioned in §A (top of page 2), it will include numerous different people, currently spread across the Inforum, ITS, and the ATRC, and deal with such issues as:

1. Digital Resources
2. Web Services
3. Communication
4. Networking
5. System administration
6. … etc.

A top priority of the management of Information Services over the next few months will be to determine and implement an appropriate its management strategy that meshes seamlessly with other functions served by the division.

Another critical function to be managed as part of Information Services is the oversight and coordination of laboratories within the Faculty. To date, the Inforum has been caught between two competing agendas: (i) to provide steady, reliable services to the academic program of the Faculty; and (ii) to serve as a laboratory for progressive, experimental development of techniques and approaches and practices within the information professions. Instead of putting a single unrealistic demand on a single unit, we propose the creation of a Library Laboratory, along with the several other laboratories currently being formed, to work in partnership with the library functions and services, but to do so in a radically more experimental and exploratory way.

The Information Services division will therefore be launched together with the establishment of the following five laboratories, which will be coordinated under its leadership:

1. Library Laboratory · Director: Joe Cox
2. Critical Making Laboratory · Director: Matt Ratto
3. Inclusive Design Laboratory · Directors: Jutta Treviranus and Steve Hockema
4. User Interface Laboratory · Director: Joan Cherry
5. Studio Design Laboratory · Director: Cheryl Meszaros

F • Conclusion

It will require time to work out the details of this organizational change, and to develop nimble, flexible procedures to ensure that the functions and responsibilities assigned to the new division are organized and managed in an effective way. Taking on that work will be a priority of the senior

\( ^7 \)Another provisional name.
administration of the Faculty over this coming summer and fall, especially of the (Acting) Dean and the (Interim) Director. It should be noted, however, that the new arrangements are one of relatively high-level organization. No reduction is contemplated as regards resources in any specific area; nor is impact anticipated on anyone’s immediate job. Rather, the notion of an Information Services Unit is proposed as a unifying overarching framework in terms of which to move forward on a broad range of issues already on our plate.

One strong consideration in support of the new organisation is the simplicity and communicability of the Faculty organisation it enables, as depicted in figure 1 (page 3). There is great merit in our having a structure we can explain to insiders and outsiders alike. In addition, the new structure stands witness to our commitment to provide leadership in the area of information systems in a way that represents the future—rather than in a way based on material contingencies and or historical habit.

In sum, the existence of an integrated Information Services function will give the Faculty the ability to move forward in exciting and progressive ways.

Respectfully submitted,

Brian Cantwell Smith
Dean and Professor, Faculty of Information Studies
Appendix A — Proposed Information Services

Figure 2 (p. 4) indicates that Information Services will involve elements of 3 traditional categories:

1. **Human**—People and human services;
2. **Physical**—Material things—books, equipment, physical space, laboratories, etc.; and
3. **Virtual**—“Online,” or “digital” resources

The aim is not to reinforce this traditional classification, however, but to subvert it—recognizing that figure 1’s distinction between Information Services and other parts of the Faculty cross-cuts the classical trichotomy.

This Appendix presents a provisional (far from exhaustive) list of information services to be provided by Information Services, to convey the breadth and the depth of what is at stake. The field’s relentless dynamics mean that any such list will be in constant flux. Staying up to date, establishing priorities, providing leadership where possible, collaborating with peers at all levels, and bringing coherence to the broad array will be major challenges for the Unit’s management.

Not included below are resources and projects expected to be provided or developed by the other two divisions of the faculty: academic and administrative, including such examples as:

1. Alumni records, donor records, financial records, and blueprints—to be developed, managed, used, preserved, etc. by alumni, development, financial, and facilities personnel, respectively;
2. Web sites for Faculty Council, student councils, etc.—to be developed and maintained by the respective governance groups;
3. Listings of news and events, to be maintained on the Faculty web site by the communications office.

In these and myriad similar cases, the responsibility of Information Services is to provide appropriate infrastructure, tools, assistance, etc., so that these other units, as an integral part of doing business, can develop and use such resources in a maximally effective and efficient way.

Throughout, the emphasis must be on modular, effective services operating in accord with public, open interoperability standards, rather than on systems or platforms. These services should be able to be readily targeted towards specific tasks and domains and flexibly and dynamically assembled by users into custom services that support their broad range of individual needs and activities.

**A • Assistance**

1. Reference services (in person, online, distributed, etc.)
2. Help desk services
3. Cadre of service support personnel

**B • Content Management Services**

1. Content management systems (CMS)
2. Collaborative software & authoring tools
3. Data bases, spreadsheets, etc.
4. Analysis and modeling tools
5. Design, annotation, prepress services
6. Publication services (physical & web)
7. Software development environments, including scripting, programming, etc.
8. Information classification and organization support services
C • Information Resources
1. Books, journals, and paper collections
2. Material objects, paintings, exhibit items, and other concrete resources (e.g., microscopes).
3. File repositories
4. Electronic journals and archives
5. Archives (paper & electronic)
6. Open software forges
7. Institutional repositories
8. Electronic “archive of record”

D • Locations
1. Nooks & crannies, couches
2. Group study rooms
3. Research labs
4. Exhibit spaces

E • Communication
1. Email / distribution lists / podcasts / VOIP
2. Web services, wikis, blogs, forums …
3. Location services, way-finding
4. Time management, calendaring,
5. Publication resources: on-paper (pre-press etc.), web-based,
6. Exhibit support
7. Web-casting

F • Collaboration
1. Collaborative software development: authoring systems, versioning systems
2. Collaborative authoring tools (visual, literate, aural, physical)
3. Collaborative mediation: iChat, video-conferencing systems, online-conferencing
4. Social networking: social tagging, file-sharing, support for peer review, annotation
5. Projects & groups: project support, project management software, group management

G • Academic
1. Learning management system
2. Course support: syllabi repositories,
3. Electronic reserves (cf. info resources)
4. Course evaluations
5. Research tools: simulation, modelling, visualization, etc.
6. Research facilities: user interface labs, 3D labs (scanners & fabricators)

H • Systems
1. Identity management; authentication, profiles, account management, etc.
2. Presence services
3. Cataloguing, search, and information retrieval services
4. Networks:
   a. (Multicast) internet access, virtual private network (VPN)
   b. Support for networked mobile devices
   c. Web: support for web apps, Ajax, scripting support, etc.
5. Maintenance
   a. Systems: remote desktop support, administration, etc.
   b. Equipment & license registries
   c. Backup, archiving, and restoration services
   d. Hardware and software maintenance, upgrading, bug tracking and resolution, etc.
6. I/O: Printers, copiers, scanners, renderers, fabricators, digitisation, audio, haptic
Appendix B — Terminology

There is an issue of what to call the resulting division. It might seem natural to call it “The Inforum,” not only because that has historically been the name for the most prominent, substantial, and successful unit of this kind within the Faculty, but also because it did at one point oversee all IT-related functions, and also because it is consonant with the Faculty’s intellectual orientation not to focus on digital media and technologies per se, but instead to focus on practices and services built on top of them.

A problem that has arisen over the past several years, however, is that in popular and informal usage the term ‘Inforum’ designates a physical place on the 4th and 5th floor of the Bissell building (so we say: this event is happening in the Inforum; right now Judy is in the Inforum; etc.). As long as all of the Inforum’s services were “contained” within this space, this usage was not problematic. An increasing number of developments, however, are challenging any close alignment between space and function. At FIS East, for example, we created an “Inforum East”—but it, too, quickly took on the connotation of being a place as much as (or more than) a function. More seriously, as documented below, we want the “Laboratory” part of the Inforum’s current mandate to be developed and taken more seriously throughout the Faculty—including such facilities as Matt Ratto’s “Making Lab,” the User-Interface laboratory on the 3rd floor of Bissell, the proposed Inclusive Design laboratory, etc. But then people will wonder: are those labs part of the Inforum? If so, then if you say that someone is in the Inforum, what does that mean? etc. 8

After consideration and consultation, therefore, we have decided to:

1. Change the official role of the term ‘Inforum’ to correspond to what is already common usage: as a name for the wonderfully cohesive collaborative “hub” located on the 4th and 5th floors of the Bissell Building (while reserving the right to have other “Infora,” or perhaps other Inforum sites, in other buildings as we develop and expand); and

2. Establish Information Services as an administrative unit or function within the Faculty, moving into it everything that has been administratively within the Inforum and/or within the IS/IT area.

In one sense this proposal merely makes official something that is already the case. In other ways it may seem violent, disrupting something that has been hugely successful—one of the Faculty’s prime assets. But notice that the common claim that the Inforum is the “jewel of the Faculty” need not change. In no way do we anticipate reducing its importance or centrality or role as a hub of activity and community. The goal is the opposite: to take that spirit of collaboration and excellence and have it permeate everything in the Faculty, including our operations in other buildings.

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8In a Faculty Council meeting last fall, the suggestion came up of giving another name to the physical space in Bissell currently associated with the Inforum (the suggestion ‘Cox Hall’ was mentioned in passing). It is unlikely, however, that any such proposal would work; people’s association of names with physical places is strong, and very difficult to change.