University of Pittsburgh

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Patricia E. Beeson
Provost
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Dean Ronald L. Larsen
School of Information Sciences
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Dear Ron:

During the coming year, we will have many opportunities to look back on the progress of the University over the past 18 years, progress that has been seen in every aspect of our mission: the transformation of our undergraduate programs, the increased recognition of the University as one of the country's (and the world's) leading research universities, and the dramatically different level of engagement with the communities we call home. This transformation did not just happen. It reflects our high aspirations; the hard work and commitment of our faculty, staff, students, and alums; and the careful, strategic approach the University has followed and that lies at the heart of our planning and budgeting system. If we are to maintain the momentum that we have built over the last 18 years, we will need to continue to develop these fundamental building blocks in the years ahead.

One of our most important University-wide commitments has been to achieving excellence in our educational programs, and I am pleased to see that the School's plan includes several initiatives to advance this goal. At the undergraduate level the School has well-considered plans to enhance student preparation for life-long information careers, including expanded opportunities for experiential learning, enhanced alignment with employer needs, and a focus on allowing undergraduate students to experience the feel of a start-up enterprise. The plan to take advantage of the high percentage of foreign students to focus the School on global awareness will strengthen the educational programs as it better prepares students for work in an increasingly global economy. These initiatives are well aligned with School and University goals, and I look forward to hearing more about them in the coming years. At the professional level, I am pleased to see that the School is making progress on a number of plans for master's degree students, and that more initiatives are underway this year. At the doctoral level, it is good to hear that all of the new PhD graduates have found positions in academia, industry, or other fields.

In the most recent survey of the Student Experience at Research Universities, information science majors show levels of satisfaction comparable to students at our peer institutions on several key metrics including overall academic experience, value of education for the price, and desire to re-enroll at the school. Along with these successes, there are areas of concern.

Acknowledging the very small number of respondents and also that student satisfaction should not be the sole driver of our undergraduate programs, I do think the School probably wants to look more closely at a few areas where student responses to the SERU survey suggest there may be problems. Two areas of particularly concern are the quality of instruction in the upper division courses and the quality of instruction by graduate students. The later is a concern across campus and one that I am asking all deans, as well as CIDDE and the University Council on Graduate Studies, to pay particular attention to over the coming year, both for the importance to our undergraduate programs and to the success of our graduate students' academic careers.

Moving forward, one of our highest priorities needs to be continuing to pursue excellence in our educational programs. Considering the challenges ahead, including the changing nature of educational technology and the economic challenges facing many families, the most successful residential programs will be those that engage students by taking advantage of the personal interactions afforded by an on-campus experience and providing opportunities outside the classroom that complement the in-class experience. This, of course, has been our focus for more than a decade and, as a result, the University of Pittsburgh is well positioned relative to peers to meet the current challenges. With this in mind, as you consider strategies for advancing your educational programs, particularly on-campus undergraduate and professional programs, I ask that you consider how best to enhance those interactions. Some possibilities for enhancement include leveraging technology to deliver content in large-enrollment courses, developing pedagogical approaches and training, particularly with regard to graduate teaching assistants, and creating additional opportunities for meaningful undergraduate research, internship, service and study abroad experiences that are well aligned with the academic curriculum. Many students considering graduate-level professional programs do not have the opportunity to be completely immersed in a full-time residential experience, and may not benefit as much from those programs as traditional undergraduates. This may be particularly true for students interested in studying information science who tend to be very comfortable with alternative modes of delivery. To remain competitive with these students, I believe the School will need to consider developing more flexible modes of delivery that blend online and on-campus environments, flexible executive formats, and fully online programs. The School, of course, was a pioneer with online delivery with the MLIS program which is now one of our PittOnline offerings; I hope that the School will continue to provide leadership to the rest of the University community by looking for creative ways to enhance online course delivery and providing more online programs.

At the center of the School's and the University's advancement over the past two decades has been its success in developing a strong faculty committed both to its scholarly ambitions and the success of its academic programs. The School of Information Sciences continues to recruit top faculty in priority areas. While recognizing the drawbacks of the Academic Analytics database, these data indicate that the School of Information Science's faculty compares favorably to its peers in publications, broadly defined (i.e., books, journals, and conference proceedings), but lags behind peers in external grant funding. The School's recognition of the difficulties of funding in the current climate and its proposed strategies for increasing funding seem promising, and I hope that they will help the School be successful in reversing the decline in research support.

Your diversity initiatives, particularly the i3 project, continue to have positive effects on the information science field nationally. Your commitment to creating and maintaining a diverse School is demonstrated by your careful tracking and reporting of data in this area. I hope that we will soon see the results of these efforts in terms of the diversity of the School of Information Sciences faculty and student body. Broadly speaking, implementing the recommendations of the Faculty Diversity Taskforce, endorsed by the full Council of Deans, will be important in advancing our efforts to continue to strengthen diversity.

Another key focus moving forward needs to be continuing to find efficiencies and ways to reallocate resources in support of our highest priorities. If we are to continue to advance, we must continue to make hard decisions regarding which worthwhile efforts to support and look for new revenue streams that build on our core strengths. One potentially promising source of new revenues is summer programs and I ask you to consider how the School of Information Sciences might enhance its summer offerings in conjunction with the University's broader efforts. We also need to continue to strengthen our ability to attract corporate funding, as it will help develop internship opportunities and research funding, as well as open up potential sources of employment for our students. The initiative on innovation and entrepreneurship and associated changes in our policies and practices should help connect us more closely with the corporate community while at the same time strengthening our ability to spin off new technologies. Your input and assistance with this initiative will be important to its success moving forward.

If we are to continue to use the planning and budgeting system effectively to advance the University, we need to be ambitious in setting our goals and need to have strong plans that reflect our high aspirations, with strategies clearly tied to those goals, and guided by honest and accurate assessments of progress that include both quantitative and qualitative measures. In general, you have succeeded in presenting a clear, carefully considered plan for the School, and the inclusion of Academic Analytics and SERU data, as well as internal benchmarking data will make the School even more successful in the future. I am pleased to see your ideas for establishing an identity for the School, particularly your desire to distinguish the School in terms of its ability to blend humanistic and technological elements of information management. In my letter last year, I encouraged you to benchmark the School's progress relative to other Schools of Information Science, and I repeat that encouragement at this time, particularly because measuring progress in isolation is not as effective as measuring it against peers. Broadly speaking, I hope that continuing to refine the planning process and developing useful assessments of progress will help the School continue to advance in the coming years, and I look forward to working with you towards this goal.

The comments above reflect my thoughts on your plan, as informed by discussions with my senior staff. The Provost Area Planning and Budget Committee has also conducted an independent review of your school's plan and their comments are attached. I hope that you find these useful as you enter into this new planning cycle.
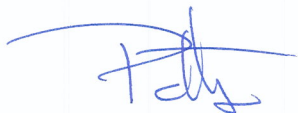
We reached an important milestone last October, when we passed the $2 billion mark for the capital campaign, Building Our Future Together. As we have asserted all along, the importance

of this campaign was not the amount of funds raised, but what we were able to do with these funds. Along with a number of major building and renovation projects, we were able to create and support a number of important academic initiatives, and establish more than 1,500 new endowments for faculty and student support. Our ability to raise this money and create these opportunities has been a direct result of the strength of our academic programs and our dedicated faculty and students, and I congratulate you and the members of the School of Information Sciences for the important role you have played in these efforts.

Thank you for joining me in accepting the challenges and opportunities before us and working together to remain focused on our priorities in our ever-evolving environment. I am proud to have worked alongside you and the members of your School during the past year, and I look forward to continuing to do so in the upcoming year.

Sincerely,

Patricia E. Beeson

PEB/arm

School of Information Sciences
Plan for FY 2013 – Summary

The University of Pittsburgh School of Information Sciences (SIS) Strategic Plan/Annual Update, submitted March 1, 2013, covers strategic planning for the period, FY 2013 to FY 2018. The report evidences the Schools' extensive efforts to respond in a timely and creative way to enrollment pressures, to distinguish itself from other iSchools in terms of research and education, and to increase diversity.

SIS is to be commended for dealing flexibly and realistically with the reduction in MLIS enrollment, which has been caused by external factors. The combination of increased enrollment in other degree programs such as the BSIS and MSIS programs, appointment of new faculty with teaching interests and abilities that cut across program boundaries, and increased enrollments of full-time, out-of-state students appear likely to address the problem successfully. In addition, the transitioning of the online MLIS program to the more efficient Pitt Online platform and the efforts to maintain the MLIS program's accreditation seem likely to help stabilize and enhance the program.

The goals of SIS, to (1) educate 21st Century "Informationists", (2) foster inclusiveness in the profession, (3) enhance the University's research and (4) distinguish itself among its peers, are entirely appropriate.

Regarding the first goal, the planned inclusion of an undergraduate research methods course component, the 50% increase in research-based co-curricular events for undergraduates, the outreach to high school students, the consultation with relevant industries to identify employment market needs, and efforts, with the Office of Career Development & Placement Assistance, to survey graduating students and track post-graduation employment and satisfaction all stand out as effective strategies.

The placement metric and target of placing 80% of graduates in appropriate professional positions in relevant fields within 6 months of graduation and the target of extending the LIS Partners Program to 10 new partners for MSIS students and 5 for MST students in 2013-14 are appropriate.

Recruiting diverse undergraduate students through targeted initiatives such as the iSchool Inclusion Institute (i3) is a laudable strategy to achieve the second goal. Hopefully, SIS's continuing efforts to attract diverse faculty candidates will ultimately bear fruit. SIS has identified a number of metrics that can help the school gauge the increase in its efforts in this regard: the number of diverse students who attend the i3 and who ultimately apply to and complete their studies in iSchools, the proportion of applicants and enrolled students from under-represented segments of the population, the numbers of diversity-related recruitment events attended by iSchool recruitment staff, and the number of diversity faculty candidates interviewed, made offers to, and, ultimately on the faculty.

In support of the third and fourth goals, SIS has pursued a strategy of identifying signature areas of research and education (e.g., building community around big data, spatial information, information security assurance, and network analysis). These areas seem intellectually exciting and practically valuable, focus the effort to distinguish SIS as an iSchool with unique and significant research strengths, thematically unify SIS's efforts to provide students with a research focus and address employment market needs (the first goal) and could even become the basis of multidisciplinary efforts with other University schools and centers. The planned hires of two tenure-stream faculty in support of this research and education strategy seem well-founded. SIS also plans to hire two non-tenure-stream faculty and to employ adjuncts and professors of practice to cover educational gaps and practice-oriented needs. Although hiring non-tenure-stream faculty achieves flexibility and reduces long-term costs, it also may reduce commitment both from the faculty and from the school. It is to be hoped that ultimately tenure-stream faculty can be employed instead.

Increasing collaborative research between faculty in the iSchool and other units on-campus is a useful strategy for enhancing research at the University, the third goal. The number of collaborative proposals submitted is an informative measure in this regard (as would be the number of such proposals actually funded.) The number of student referrals annually from, and the number of collaborating visitors affiliated with, other iSchools are also useful. The suggestion that SIS and its students help other components of the University deal with Data Management Plans (as required for research proposals to NSF and NIH) is particularly welcome.

Surveys of other iSchools' faculty would also be informative, although it was less clear whether such surveys have already been undertaken or would be in the future. The report targets percentages of surveyed iSchool tenured faculty who would "consider Pitt to be among the top schools integrating technological and humanistic elements" and ... who would "consider it to be in the top 5 schools with these characteristics". Are there current survey results with respect to these categories? One might ask the same of the extent to which "Pitt is [currently] recognized among the iSchools as the predominant institution whose iSchool combines the highly technological with the humanistic elements of large scale information management in a coherent manner" or to which "[i]t's Telecommunications and Networking program is ... recognized as the most technically rigorous among the iSchools, worldwide." More information about the surveys and about how these categories have been defined would be useful.

It is highly commendable that SIS is working closely with its Industrial Advisory Council regarding exploring employment market needs and signature research areas. In addition, Professors Hassan Karimi and Peter Brusilovsky are to be congratulated for their creative service contributions to the University community.

Reallocation Analysis

The SIS reallocation plan appears to be largely on track. Costs savings have been, or will be, realized from senior faculty retirements, transferring the online MLIS program to Pitt Online, reducing financial aid in and trimming low-enrollment courses from, the professional

Masters programs. The reallocated funds are being applied for junior tenure-stream faculty hires and postdoctoral research support in signature areas, enhanced new faculty start-up packages for new faculty; creation of new courses for Pitt Online; and new undergraduate specializations in the BSIS program.