Proposal to Change the Name of the UW-Madison School of Library and Information Studies to the UW-Madison Information School

The UW-Madison School of Library and Information Studies hereby proposes to change its name to the “UW-Madison Information School” as of July 1, 2017. The name change will help other faculty and staff better understand how the Information School faculty could collaborate with them to develop information-related projects and proposals. A name change will also generate greater interest from foundations and other external funders who may assume that the faculty’s scope of interest is limited to libraries. Other drivers motivating the name change include attracting student audiences to the MA program, marketing to new revenue-generating capstone certificates, developing an undergraduate pipeline, and attracting the best PhD students.

The name “Information School” may at first seem overly broad, but it is a well-established norm within the large international scholarly community of information schools known by the nickname “iSchools.” The iSchools consortium includes 77 schools on 5 continents. Information Schools are concerned with the interactions between people, information, and technologies (both historical and contemporary). They are highly interdisciplinary professional schools that characteristically have multiple academic offerings. Information Schools do not claim information as an exclusive domain; rather, information scholars work closely with scholars from other fields on questions about information, people, technology, and their interaction in many different areas of research. The Information School will be an intellectual hub that promotes examination of information questions across various UW-Madison areas of scholarship.

During the 1980s-2000s, the field of information scholarship and information-related education programs saw significant changes in scope. Rapid production and dissemination of information by a wide range of organizations and individuals led the School’s peer academic programs to begin to adopt names such as School of Information (e.g., UT-Austin, Arizona), Information School (e.g., Michigan, Washington), School of Information Science (e.g., UIUC), and Information Studies (e.g., UCLA). This change was in large part driven by the need to broaden the scope of understanding of scholarship in schools. Referencing a single type of institutions (i.e., library) in a school name implied that library research was the predominant focus. A broader name helped people understand how information scholars examine information and data issues across a variety of formal organizational types (e.g., libraries, archives, museums, data repositories, classrooms, publishers, government agencies, laboratories, etc.). More importantly, it helped people understand that information scholars examine questions about information that are not tied to any particular formal organizational type at all (e.g., social media, circulation of personal information, information overload, etc.). The newer names better represented the breadth of information research now important to society and opened up new collaboration and grant opportunities.

The existing name, School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS), does not represent the range of scholarship of the faculty. The School’s research specializations address a variety of pressing information problems in society: information policy and ethics, especially privacy and intellectual property; organization of information across media types; digital youth, acquisition of digital literacies; scholarly communications and electronic publishing; community informatics and information and communications technologies for civic development; social and social
psychological aspect of information behavior and use; and history of print and digital cultures, history of libraries and archives and other information industries, and history of information labor. Faculty have affiliations with and contribute to projects in association with groups including the Center for Print and Digital Culture, Wisconsin Institute for Discovery Living Environments Lab, the Holtz Center for Science and Technology Studies, the Center for the Humanities, the Digital Humanities Initiative, the Center for Financial Security, and Research Data Services. Faculty have joint or affiliate appointments with Journalism and Mass Communications, the Law School, Afro-American Studies, Curriculum and Instruction, Digital Studies, and Biometry.

Academic programs provided by the School are also not adequately represented by the current name. In the past 15 years the school has expanded its academic offerings to include graduate preparation for a variety of information careers (including, but moving beyond librarianship and archives). Current SLIS master’s students can choose among courses in five concentration areas: data/information management and analytics; technology, information, and people; librarianship; digital archives; and organization of information. The School is a founding member of the Digital Studies undergraduate certificate, now the third most popular certificate on campus. And the school is managing the development of two capstone certificates with partner programs on campus: user experience design (with Computer Science) and analytics for decision making (with Communication Arts and Biometry). The new name will better signal the breadth of information-related academic programs supported by the school through its expanded MA curriculum, its undergraduate curriculum, and its new revenue-generating capstone certificates. The School consulted with, and obtained letters of support from, the departments of Computer Science, Communication Arts, and Journalism and Mass Communications. Current students have mixed reactions to the proposed name change. The School is nationally accredited every six years by the American Library Association Committee on Accreditation. The name change will not impact the School’s accreditation status in any way.

Discussions about the potential name change began after the completion of the last national accreditation in 2014. Earnest discussions began at the August 2015 faculty retreat and dominated the fall 2015 and spring 2016 plenary meetings. The School established a task force of faculty, staff, and students in spring 2016 to carry out the name change process, which worked from spring 2016 to fall 2016. The November 3, 2016 plenary (all faculty and staff) was also devoted to the name change. The entire faculty and staff of the school voted (by secret ballot) to support the proposed name change on November 3, 2016, by a vote of 24 in favor, 0 opposed, 0 abstentions. The SLIS executive committee voted to approve this name change on November 9, 2016, by a vote of 4 in favor, 0 opposed, 0 abstentions. On December 20, 2016, the L&S Academic Planning Council unanimously approved the proposed name change. Request for comment on the proposed name change was circulated by Dean Karl Scholz to the UW-Madison deans on January 11, 2017, garnering endorsements from CALS, Education, Engineering, and SOHE, and no objections. The University Academic Planning Council discussed the name change on March 16, 2017, and unanimously approved it.