

iNSIGHTS 2025 Cover

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Information is everything.

The next 75 years: The Future of the iSchool.

From the Dean and Stay Connected

FROM THE DEAN

Soo Young Rieh, Interim Dean, Brook E. Sheldon Professor of Management and Leadership

Dear iSchool Alumni and Friends,

I am honored to serve as Interim Dean for this incredible iSchool community of scholars, educators, practitioners, students, staff, alumni, and friends who are dedicated to making a positive impact on people's lives through information, guided by human-centered and sociotechnical approaches. We constantly identify and address information grand challenges while exploring new opportunities and initiatives we must take on to enhance the impact of our research and education.

In this issue of iNSIGHTS, you will discover how dramatically the iSchool has transformed in recent years. The scope of our research has expanded significantly, spanning areas such as human-centered AI, ethical and responsible AI system design, data science, human-computer interaction, information access and use, librarianship, digital archives, and preservation. In Spring 2025, we will celebrate a major milestone of graduating our first cohort of undergraduate students who joined the iSchool as freshmen in Fall 2021, when we launched the Informatics program. We are proud of the success of our new undergraduate program in which currently 400 students are enrolled across six concentrations. The MSIS and MSISP programs continue to be robust, with graduates securing positions in technology, business, healthcare, government, education, and non-profit organizations. Our PhD program has experienced significant growth, doubling in size over the past few years, with doctoral students leading innovative research. We also offer a successful postdoctoral fellow program for early career scholars.

Our alumni network is the cornerstone of our school's mission. Your achievements and contributions inspire current students and enrich our community. Whether you're advancing technologies, designing innovative tools, analyzing human behavior, preserving history, curating data, or providing access to information, you are exemplifying the values of the iSchool.

As Interim Dean, my goal is to foster stronger connections within the iSchool community while enhancing its visibility beyond the school. I am confident that together, we will continue to cultivate a thriving iSchool community where learning is a lifelong journey and research is driven by societal impact.

Soo Young Rieh, Ph.D

STAY CONNECTED

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ON THE COVER: Top to Bottom: Graduate student reviewing data visualization project, MSIS students collaborating on user experience design project, Professor Sarah Norris dry cleaning a historical architectural document.

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Undergraduate Informatics Program Celebrates First Graduates

The iSchool's undergraduate Informatics program launched in fall 2021, and now, in what feels like no time at all, we're preparing to send our first graduating class out into the world. We couldn't be prouder of the 400 Informatics students who pioneered the iSchool's very first undergraduate degree program — or the faculty and staff who envisioned this track and worked tirelessly to bring it to life.

Students in the program can pursue a BA or a BSI degree, focusing on one of six concentrations:

Human-centered data science: Ethical data analysis and use in artificial intelligence, machine learning, information retrieval, data curation, and data analysis.

User experience design: The study of innovative systems rooted in user experience, with consideration for societal impacts.

Social justice informatics: The use of information and technology to empower individuals, eliminate inequalities, and level the playing field for all in the Information Age.

Health informatics: The role of information and technology in clinical, patient, and medical research health care settings.

Cultural heritage informatics: The management, organization, and preservation of — and access to — information from previous decades and centuries, in a wide range of technological forms.

Social informatics: Improved organizational efficiency and a more ethical and humane work and living environment, through data, information, and technology.

The addition of this program was a pivotal development for the iSchool. "This program not only enhances the skill set of future professionals," says Farzana Tasnim, the academic advisor and student life coordinator for the undergraduate program, "but it also enriches the information industry by fostering a new generation of thinkers and doers who are ready to make a significant impact."

Our first graduates are undoubtedly ready to make that impact. "From day one they have committed to the program and growing opportunities for themselves and their peers at UT Austin," says Natasha Saldaña, assistant director of undergraduate student services. "They started all the student organizations, and many of them have interned at well-known companies and organizations and are paving their own ways in the field."

The Center for Identity Officially Joins the iSchool

"I hope to see even more partnerships with industry leaders, allowing students to work on cutting-edge projects that solve real-world problems." — Farzana Tasnim

As the program grows, Saldaña hopes students will continue to use their education to improve our communities, and Tasnim envisions future interdisciplinary collaboration.

On the alumni front, the team hopes future graduates will create a strong alumni network that fosters lifelong connections, scholarship, and mentorship opportunities for students. Some of the goals for that network are to help secure funding for academic scholarships and conferences and to provide students with career and graduate school mentors.

The undergraduate program in Informatics is an incredible addition to the iSchool. "It is game changing to have students coming out of an undergraduate program and into the workforce," says Saldaña. "They are at the forefront of change and have incredible ideas and a passion for the field."

Congratulations to our first full class of students who joined the Informatics program as freshman — we can't believe you'll be graduating as seniors this spring! And thank you to the staff and faculty who have made this program possible. We can't wait to see the amazing things our newest graduates achieve.

The Center for Identity Officially Joins the iSchool

In the spring of 2014, the iSchool teamed up with The University of Texas Center for Identity to offer a Master of Science in Identity Management and Security (MSIMS) degree. Now called the Master of Science in Information Security and Privacy (MSISP), this cross-discipline initiative has become the premier degree program for professionals seeking to enter or advance careers in information security and privacy. "The MSISP curriculum brings together technology, governance, risk, privacy, public policy, law, and the social sciences to deliver a unique education for professionals working in any market sector," says Dr. Suzanne Barber, the director of the Center for Identity.

The MSISP program has always benefited greatly from its connection to the Center for Identity, with its interdisciplinary nature enabling a more comprehensive perspective than is available through other, similar programs. However, until recently, the Center for Identity remained a separate entity.

In the fall of 2023 — as the MSISP program approached its 10th anniversary — we were thrilled to officially welcome the Center for Identity to the iSchool.

It's no secret that the iSchool values cross-disciplinary initiatives as part of our ongoing "bridge building" mission, and we are thrilled that the Center for Identity is joining us in promoting that value. "Bringing together leading researchers and educators from different disciplines under a common mission to advance information security and privacy has shaped a unique and impactful educational experience for our students," says Dr. Barber. The MSISP program is a central iSchool offering, and we couldn't be happier that the Center for Identity is now under the same umbrella, working hand-in-hand with us to further the iSchool's mission.

Informatics Trailblazer & iSchool Scholar Nani Tang

Nani Tang knows being part of the first full undergraduate Informatics class means she gets to leave her mark. "It gives me the opportunity to set the vision for future generations," she says. "It's a space filled with growth, and I'm happy to be part of it."

Like many at the iSchool, Tang's fondest memories of her time here revolve around community: "Senior sunrise at Mt. Bonnell, the chats I've had with my academic advisor, Jeffery [Willett], and my first competition with the UX Design Club." Tang and her partner, Marisol Guel, won, cementing both their passion for UX and their friendship. "I gained a lifelong UX partner-in-crime!"

Tang is also part of the current iSchool Inclusion Institute (i3) cohort, leading a 20-month research project on character design and gender representation in gaming. "i3 is a community," says Tang. "It has guided me personally and professionally, and I'm grateful to have met this wonderful group of people I can always depend on."

After graduation, Tang plans to pursue a career as a UX Researcher. "Understanding people to create meaningful experiences for them makes my work feel impactful," she says. "I'm excited to see where this journey will lead me!"

UT Austin Hosts iSchool Inclusion Institute

In the Spring of 2022, the UT iSchool was honored to become the host of the iSchool Inclusion Institute (i3), formerly hosted by University of Pittsburgh's School of Computing and Information.

i3 is a research and leadership development institute for undergraduates from underrepresented populations. Twenty to thirty students from across the country are selected each year to become i3 scholars, a yearlong experience that includes two summer institutes, a year-plus research project, and participation in several conferences. Participating students receive professional development training tailored to their individual needs, and scholars come away with invaluable research and project management experience, professional skills, and peer-reviewed publications.

"Over the last 10+ years, i3 has blossomed into an incredible community as we collectively imagine and build a brighter, more equitable future together," says Dr. Kayla Booth, Director of the i3 Program.

Learn more at i3-inclusion.org.

Empower the Next Generation of information leaders making the world a better & fairer place.

3 Ways to Contribute — One-Time Donation: Immediate support for our students and programs. Recurring Donation: Sustained support, allowing us to plan and grow our initiatives. Endowed Gifts: A lasting legacy that will benefit the iSchool for generations to come.

Information is everywhere. Giving happens here. Every gift makes a difference. Thank you.

A Little Help From Our Friends

The transformative work iSchool faculty and students are doing wouldn't be possible without the support of our alumni and friends. We are immensely grateful for everything our alumni network has enabled us to accomplish over the last 75 years, and we are counting on continued support in the next 75.

Here's a look at how your donations impact the iSchool—and create a ripple effect touching countless lives and communities:

Student Support: Donor-funded scholarships and fellowships enable talented students from different backgrounds to pursue their education without financial barriers. This transforms students' lives and enriches the iSchool learning environment. Financial contributions also help students prepare for impactful careers by attending conferences, obtaining certifications, and building relationships with industry experts.

Innovative Research: Donor support fuels projects that address critical issues such as accessibility and inclusive design, misinformation, digital equity, and data privacy. By investing in our research initiatives, you are supporting advancements in technology, policy, and practice that benefit society at large.

Community Engagement: Our outreach programs allow us to work closely with local organizations, rural librarians, and educators, providing critical information resources and support to underserved populations. Donations from alumni and friends help us bridge the digital divide and ensure everyone has access to reliable information.

Faculty Excellence: Donor gifts support faculty development, ensuring that our faculty can continue to excel in their teaching and research. This attracts top talent to the iSchool, further enhancing our reputation and the quality of education we provide.

With your support, we can strengthen the impact of our foundational programs including archives, preservation, and librarianship. Your generosity not only builds a stronger iSchool but also helps shape a more informed, connected world.

Scan the QR code on page 4 to give now or connect with Shannon Hickson, Director of Development & Alumni Relations to discuss your gift. shannon.hickson@ischool.utexas.edu 512.232.0738 (office) | 512.797.4563 (cell)

The Next 75 Years

At the iSchool, we like to call ourselves "bridgers." And one of the most important bridges we build connects the past, present, and future. So, as we celebrated our 75th anniversary last fall, we traversed that bridge, looking back to see how our history has shaped our present — and how our past could serve as a springboard for the next 75 years.

The More Things Change... The More They Stay the Same

In many ways, the iSchool looks very different today than when it was founded in 1948.

THEN: Founded as the Graduate School of Library Science, the school was initially dedicated solely to library sciences. NOW: Our areas now embrace human computer interaction, data science, user-centered design, social informatics, the study of AI, all alongside library and information science.

THEN: The GSLS opened in 1948 with just one classroom, two faculty members, and 50 students. NOW: The iSchool boasts more than 60 faculty members and 757 students (more than half of whom are women), and a network of 6,000 alumni and counting.

THEN: The GSLS offered only a master's degree in library science and certification for school librarianship. NOW: Our educational pathways include an undergraduate program, two master's programs, two 4+1 year integrated programs, a school librarian certificate program, dual degrees with other leading UT programs, and a thriving PhD program.

Information Is Everywhere... And Everywhere: The iSchool has been housed in the UT Tower, the Harry Ransom Center, the Sanchez Building, and now the UT Administration Building and the Flawn Academic Center (FAC). As it moved around campus, it expanded its scope to encompass emerging methods of information collection and distribution — not to mention the sheer volume of information being produced.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, the GSLS curriculum evolved to include information science, and in 1980, it became the Graduate School of Library and Information Sciences. In 2003, the name changed again, to the School of Information (the iSchool), to reflect the diverse nature of the information field.

While the names have changed over the years, iSchool research has continued evolving to embrace the myriad ways to leverage the avalanche of information to overcome society's biggest challenges.

One might think, with all this change, today's iSchool is unrecognizable from the GSLS of 1948. But in two key ways, it hasn't changed a bit.

Unshakeable Core Values: The chief constant is the belief that information professionals can change the world for the better. During our 75th anniversary celebration, Dr. Philip Doty, associate professor emeritus, shared a few of the ways one might describe the field of information science.

He listed the pursuit of social goals through communication and information; the intersection of people, information, and technology; and the goal of bridging the past, present, and future. "We encourage cultural expression," he said. "We encourage the curation and stewardship of that cultural expression...all to support important ethical, economic, political, and other forms of the social good."

It's clear to anyone in the iSchool's orbit that these values, built on library and information science traditions, are just as strong today as they were in 1948.

The Student Experience: Dr. Doty also spoke on love, noting that in healthy relationships, we accept our partners while inspiring them to become even better versions of themselves — and that the iSchool has done this for students and faculty throughout history.

Our students are the heart of the iSchool, and they can confirm this notion. Dr. Calvin Boyer, the school's first PhD graduate (1973), asked, "Is it any wonder that I look back on my years in the GSLS with such affection that words escape me?"

Jiwon Park, a current MSIS student (class of 2025) expressed a similar sentiment:

The Future of the iSchool

"Exploring a completely new field at the iSchool didn't just expand my knowledge; it opened up new interests and passions I never knew I had. It was a journey of not only learning something new but also rediscovering myself in unexpected ways."

"It is incumbent on all of us to create the world we want to live in, for ourselves and for our kids," said KUNGFU.AI co-founder Stephen Straus in a panel discussion during the anniversary celebration. How will the iSchool work to build that world in its next 75 years?

New Faculty, New Grads: This chapter started strong, with five new faculty members: Drs. Andrea Baer, Steve Hershman, Brian McInnis, Ryan Moore, and Nathan TeBlunthuis. Our scholarly community has grown significantly in recent years, and these faculty members will be valuable additions, supporting our vision of changing the future by engaging the present and preserving the past.

As we welcome these professors, we're preparing to say goodbye next spring to the first full class of graduates of our undergraduate Informatics program (pg. 6). Launched in fall 2021, the program allows undergraduates to pursue a BSI or a BA in Informatics with a concentration in human-centered data science, user experience design, social justice informatics, health informatics, cultural heritage informatics, or social informatics.

We know these students will graduate ready to create a more equitable and just society — and these new faculty members (along with their colleagues) will have a lasting impact on every student they encounter.

Community & Accessibility: One of our core values is that information serves humanity. Our panelists echoed that belief, with Dr. Angela D.R. Smith and James Green looking at the future of information studies through the lens of building systems that truly benefit their users.

Dr. Smith, assistant professor, encouraged iSchool graduates to carefully evaluate the potential community impact (both planned and incidental) of the systems they're building. Green, past board chair for Knowbility, highlighted the need to nurture empathy for users to ensure these systems are accessible.

Community and accessibility are key research areas, with students and faculty studying and designing cutting-edge systems rooted in the user experience and a new lab dedicated to understanding the influence of information, data, and technology on equity, or lack thereof, in society (pg. 12).

1948: Founded as the Graduate School of Library Science. 1953: Became one of the first schools of library science to receive accreditation from the American Library Association. 1967: Added an additional year of study, leading to a Certificate of Advanced Study.

The Future of Libraries

"Time will tell more of the story of the UT iSchool, and it is up to all of us to make that story one we can continue to be proud of." – Dr. Philip Doty, Professor Emeritus

"When I think of the work of a library," said Dr. Smith, "I think of it as a meeting of the minds on diverse topics." In considering the future of information studies, she visualized the library as a nexus of connection, bridging academia, enterprise, government, and community to make research more accessible outside of the ivory tower.

As the Virginia and Charles Bowden professor of librarianship at the University of Texas, Dr. David Lankes (who also moderated the panel) is exploring the role of libraries in today's fragmented, digital society — and his focus reflects Dr. Smith's perspective. "New Librarianship," according to Dr. Lankes, is more about creating and sharing knowledge than maintaining physical collections (pg. 17).

Though libraries have changed, they remain foundational to society. From amplifying rural libraries to preserving books and papers to archiving digital information, they also remain foundational to iSchool research.

Finally, ethics are a significant concern for information professionals today. Panelist Gloria Meraz, Director and Librarian at the Texas State Library and Archives Commission, stressed that trust relies on authentication.

"I think it is critical...for all of us to be well honed in the skills necessary to provide the authentication of information...and to show that we are the ethical profession to be able to guard that information."

1969: Added a PhD program in Library and Information Science.

1980: Name changed to Graduate School of Library and Information Science.

2000: Master of Library and Information Science became the Master of Science in Information Studies.

2003: Name changed to School of Information following a unanimous vote from faculty.

The Future Is Bright

For Straus, the looming ethical challenge is bias in machine learning and AI. "The world is inherently biased," he said. "The data we'll feed into the machine learning models have to be worked on by a diversity of people."

From our master's program in data privacy and security to our ethical AI research initiatives (pg. 14), the iSchool is dedicated to rebuilding trust in information by centering ethics and social good in everything we do.

Though the iSchool will inevitably evolve in the coming years, we can rest assured that, in terms of what matters, 1948, 2023, and 2098 will look very much the same. Holding onto our core values and centering humanity in every initiative will empower students, today and in coming decades, to lead the way in building information systems that create a better, fairer world.

To celebrate our 75th anniversary, the iSchool hosted a celebration at the Austin Public Library for alumni, students, faculty, staff, and friends. Together, we reflected on the school's rich tradition of leadership in the Information Age and explored the ways we're harnessing the power of information to make the world a better and fairer place in the next 75 years (and beyond)! Attendees enjoyed hearing memories from the school's first PhD graduate, remarks from Professor Emeritus Philip Doty, and a panel discussion on the challenges and opportunities facing information professionals today.

Eric Meyer, eighth dean of the iSchool, concluded the program by reflecting on how much the school changed during his tenure alone. From the launch of the undergraduate program to the new location on main campus, the school is rapidly growing in size and impact.

"I can only imagine what the next 75 years of innovation and interdisciplinary scholarship that emerges from this institution looks like, but I am confident that however information and technology evolve in the future, our school will maintain an unwavering commitment to information excellence like we are celebrating today," Dean Meyer said.

2014: The iSchool began offering a Master of Science in Identity Management and Security (MSIMS) program. In 2019, this became the Master of Science in Information Security and Privacy (MSISP) we offer today.

2021: Launched an undergraduate BA/BSI program in Informatics.

2023: Celebrated our 75th anniversary, looking back with gratitude and forward with excitement.

2024: Hosted our first annual iSchool Research Showcase. This year's showcase focused on Artificial Intelligence.

Dr. Ciaran B. Trace, 1971-2024

Last spring, we remembered Professor Ciaran B. Trace, who passed away unexpectedly. Dr. Trace joined The University of Texas at Austin School of Information (iSchool) in 2010 and was a passionate advocate for the archives and records management fields. She led the effort in establishing the iSchool's partnership with the Institute of Certified Records Managers, allowing students to apply completed coursework toward examination credit for either the Certified Records Analyst (CRA) or the Certified Records Manager (CRM) designations.

Dr. Trace's teaching and research explored the history of the information professions and the intersection of archival work with emerging and cutting-edge technologies. Her particular interest in the written record as a tool for accountability and transparency informed the development of a teaching curriculum that reimagined and prepared the informational professional for the digital age.

As an instructor, she emphasized the importance of ethical and culturally responsive approaches to information work and engaged students in discussions that tackled important issues such as community archival engagement, notions of objectivity and bias in the historical record, the intersection of archives and human rights, and the role of technology in transforming archival labor and infrastructure.

"Throughout her thirteen-year tenure as a faculty member, Dr. Trace's professional contributions have enhanced our school's national and international reputation for excellence in graduate education in Archives and Records Management."

Dr. Trace was a dedicated mentor who championed the important work of archivists and records managers, inspiring many students to the profession and supporting opportunities to build skills, experience, and professional connections in the classroom and beyond.

She served as the faculty advisor for the UT student chapter of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) until 2022. A member of the national SAA organization since 1997, Dr. Trace was the first recipient of SAA's Archival Innovator Award in 2013 (along with Dr. Luis Francisco-Revilla at the Texas Advance Computing Center) for their work on an augmented processing table, which examined how surface computing could be used as a learning tool to make the processing of archival collections more efficient and enhance the way people interact with both physical and digital archival materials.

In 2016, Dr. Trace was appointed editor of *Information & Culture*, becoming the first woman in the journal's fifty-six-year history to serve in that role, which she held until 2022. Dr. Trace was selected to posthumously receive the David B. Gracy II Distinguished Archival Service Award for 2024, presented by the Texas Historical Records Advisory Board (THRAB).

In recognition of her outstanding commitment to teaching, scholarship, and service, Dr. Trace was promoted to full professor in 2023. Throughout her thirteen-year tenure as a faculty member, Dr. Trace's professional contributions have enhanced our school's national and international reputation for excellence in graduate education in the Archives and Records Management.

Dr. Trace was a beloved instructor and mentor for hundreds of students and alumni in the archives and records management professions, a dedicated researcher whose work sought to understand the impact of information work and information institutions on everyday life, and a well-respected colleague who will be missed by many who were fortunate enough to have known her.

Two iSchool Labs Bridging Past, Present, & Future

As we reflect on the last 75 years and look forward to the next 75, it seems only fitting to celebrate the iSchool's oldest and newest labs, the IX Lab and the REALITY Lab, highlighting both their accomplishments and their plans for the future.

Established in 2004 by Dr. Randolph Bias, and now directed by Dr. Jacek Gwizdka, the IX Lab is the iSchool's oldest research laboratory, and it's celebrating quite the milestone this year. Like the iSchool itself, the lab has undergone remarkable evolution throughout its lifetime. Its initial focus was on understanding how people use and interact with information systems, with the goal of advancing UX as an empirical field. As information studies broadened, the IX Lab grew to encompass the design and evaluation of human-information interaction, ultimately venturing into neuro-information science — a field that bridges the study of neurophysiological processes with how individuals seek, process, and use information.

From its origins in data-driven usability research, the IX Lab has transformed into an interdisciplinary hub exploring fundamental questions about human-information interaction. For example:

How do we determine the relevance of information?

What makes information search cognitively demanding?

How do users evaluate the credibility of online health information?

What role does human bias play in the information search process?

How can large language models improve the search experience?

In looking at the future of information science and the challenges facing both researchers and practitioners today, the IX Lab team is dedicated to grounding projects in real-world challenges, with the goal of measurably improving the ways we interact with information.

Congratulations to the IX Lab, director Dr. Jacek Gwizdka, and team on this milestone — here's to another 20 years of innovation and discovery!

The iSchool's newest lab, Research on Equity, Access, and Inclusion in Technology & Society (REALITY Lab), was established in the spring of 2023 to explore issues of social justice at the intersection of technology and people.

The lab's directors, Drs. Earl Huff and Angela D. R. Smith, are proud to provide this space for students to ask questions about — and seek solutions for — injustices happening in society today. "Many students have joined our lab sharing this vision," says Dr. Huff, "leading to some very interesting and inspiring work that will leave an impact on the world we live in." Dr. Smith echoes that, saying, "It's been exciting not only to teach students in the classroom about injustice, accessibility, racial and social justice, and the like, but also to couple it with real-world experiences."

Looking toward the future, Dr. Huff is interested in the potential of generative AI to support equity for students in K-12 classrooms. Dr. Smith, more broadly, is looking forward to opening up discussions around concepts like inclusive design, equity and justice, liberatory technologies, and more in order to achieve equitable outcomes. "Through these efforts," she says, "we can see how to make changes within our research, our practices, and in how students carry these efforts into the subsequent phases of their careers."

At its core, the lab is dedicated to connecting with students' varied social justice interests. "The REALITY Lab takes a lot of the issues students care about and makes meaning of them," says Dr. Smith.

And Dr. Huff agrees. "The REALITY Lab...gives undergraduate students pursuing that area a chance to learn more about the work we do — and more importantly, the work they want to do."

PhD & MSIS Program News

Our graduate students continue to inspire us with their dedication to furthering the mission of the iSchool through their research and their passion for building bridges — between disciplines, communities, and more.

2024–2025 Enrollment Numbers: MSIS 271, MSIS 43, PhD 43. Total: 357.

Congratulations to Our 2024 Capstone Award Winners!

Our spring 2024 poster session showcasing graduate research and professional experience projects was the largest in our school's history, and the Dean's Choice Awards were hard won and well deserved.

Graduate Winner: Utkarsh Mujumdar — Designing a Multi-Perspective Search System Using Large Language Models and Retrieval Augmented Generation

"An important learning for me during my capstone project was the ability to think about problems from the perspective of a user, while developing and designing a system. It will help me with my future working on applied AI products that are geared towards non-technical users." – Utkarsh Mujumdar, MSIS '24

Graduate Honorable Mention: Madhav Varma — Developing a User Interface for a Clinical Decision Support System (CDSS) Tailored to Individualized Dietary Interventions, Informed by Behavior Change Theory

"Delving into the intricacies of designing software solutions for [the healthcare industry] underscored the importance of understanding and navigating the unique challenges inherent in healthcare workflows. I became acutely aware of how the fusion of clinical and UX research methodologies can yield innovative technological solutions." – Madhav Varma, MSIS '24

Are you curious about how to get involved and potentially sponsor iSchool Capstones within your organization? Please reach out directly to our Capstone Program Director, Dr. John Neumann: john.neumann@austin.utexas.edu

PhD Student's Amazon Fellowship Bolsters Research

Last summer, PhD student Ajay Jaiswal was awarded in the UT Austin-Amazon Science Hub's first round of research gifts across the university. "I am extremely grateful to Amazon for acknowledging my research and providing generous support and opportunities to collaborate with researchers within Amazon," says Jaiswal. "Through Amazon, I got the opportunity to use powerful computing resources to facilitate my research requirements and contribute to open science."

Jaiswal's work is focused on democratizing AI through large language models. "My research has been devoted to efficient training and inference algorithms for LLMs," he says. "During my time at the iSchool, I have explored compression opportunities for LLMs to enable their democratization, developing benchmarks for evaluating their capabilities, trust, and safety standards, and building novel algorithms for efficient and reliable machine learning systems."

Jaiswal is just one of the 43 PhD students doing inspiring work. From Chelsea Collier's work on smart cities to Jessica Needle's interest in surveillance to Qianzi Cao's research on librarianship, for starters, these researchers are poised to shape the future of information science.

MSIS Student Celebrates iSchool Community

When asked about her memorable experiences and achievements at the iSchool, Esther Cho (MSIS '25) focuses on the community. "The Gone to Texas fireworks at the start of the semester was an unforgettable moment that brought all students together," she says. "Beyond that, one of my favorite experiences was teaming up with fellow UX students on a group project, where we successfully developed a high-fidelity prototype. We celebrated the end of the semester at Claypit, the cozy Indian restaurant near the iSchool, which added a personal touch to our academic journey."

Cho says her biggest accomplishment here is the strong network she's built. "I've developed close relationships with faculty and staff, who are incredibly supportive, and I've learned a great deal from my peers through feedback and collaboration."

Cho's fond reflections are music to our ears, as we know collaboration and community are the foundation of our work. Only by bridging different perspectives, experiences, and walks of life can we collaborate to enact positive societal change.

Ethical Artificial Intelligence

AI x iSchool

"Artificial intelligence has realized some of information science's biggest dreams," says Dr. James Howison, the iSchool's interim associate dean for research, "giving access not just to documents but the information inside them, through questions expressed in everyday language, with results packaged in an accessible and usable way." But, he cautions, "Generative AI has metastasized into something that can impact the world in ways that are hard to understand."

Ethical Artificial Intelligence: Data, Systems & Users

At the iSchool, many of our researchers are focused on ethical AI, with varied specializations but one common goal: ensuring AI's impact is more dream than nightmare.

Data

Generative AI relies on scraping vast amounts of user-created data, often without consent. Assistant professor Dr. Hanlin Li focuses on empowering creators through data stewardship. "Data producers are forced into a binary choice," she explains in a recent Tech Policy Press article. "Stop sharing their content and data with the public altogether, or let companies run wild with this valuable resource. But it doesn't have to be this way." Her work promotes solutions like transparency about data reuse, feedback channels between data producers and companies, and sharing of data-generated revenue.

Systems

AI systems are expensive, and academia can't always compete with corporate tech giants, but that doesn't diminish the iSchool's role in systems development.

Our researchers are developing highly targeted systems built to perform newer tasks, with data that's not yet being widely used on a corporate level. For example, iSchool PhD graduate Md Mustafizur Rahman, working with Dr. Matthew Lease, recognized that, because of the relative rarity and subjectivity of hate speech, existing systems designed to build benchmark hate speech datasets were either highly inefficient or far too limited. So, in a 2021 research paper, he explored the use of information retrieval methods to create a superior benchmark data set for broader detection of hate speech on Twitter (now X).

This project — like many AI projects at the iSchool — not only promotes more effective AI systems, but it also empowers academia to hold tech giants accountable when they claim bias and other harmful limitations of AI are unsolvable. Our iSchool researchers can use this work to prove that it is possible to develop more equitable systems.

Users

A common fear is that AI is "coming for our jobs." The iSchool's Chelsea Collier, Tina Lassiter, and Dr. Kenneth Fleischmann challenge that fear directly: "The intersection of AI and data cooperatives could...support and empower, rather than subjugate or replace, skilled trade workers," they write. Their Smart Hand Tools project creates AI-driven tools to support skilled trades, improving workplace safety and productivity while preserving jobs.

Dr. Min Kyung Lee and Dr. Matthew Lease are also exploring how AI can better serve end users, focusing on co-designing systems with those communities. For example, when they saw a gap between available AI tools and the actual needs of fact-checkers, they involved end users in the design process, developing systems that would actually add value to their work.

Bridging the Disciplines for Positive Societal Change

The goal of all this work is to create systems that drive real value for society, and we are fortunate to have university-wide involvement.

Good Systems is an eight-year, interdisciplinary initiative to harness the benefits of AI while mitigating harms. The team – which engages 30 academic units with multiple iSchool faculty as leaders – defines a "Good System" as an AI-human partnership driven by six values: agency, equity, trust, transparency, democracy, and justice.

Partnerships, diverse perspectives, and varied expertise are required to design truly Good Systems, and this program highlights the power of collaboration across campus — and across Austin.

1. Li, H. (2023, July 20). Data scraping makes AI systems possible, but at whose expense? Tech Policy Press. <https://www.techpolicy.press/data-scraping-makes-ai-systems-possible-but-at-whose-expense/>
2. Li, H., Vincent, N., Chancellor, S., & Hecht, B. (2023). The dimensions of Data Labor: A road map for researchers, activists, and policymakers to empower data producers. 2023 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3593013.3594070>

iSchool Researchers Guide AI to Support Human Achievement

Humans & AI Make the Perfect Team in the AI&HCC Lab

Led by Dr. Matthew Lease, director of iSchool doctoral studies, the Laboratory for Artificial Intelligence and Human-Centered Computing (AI&HCC) seeks effective human-AI partnerships that capitalize on each party's respective strengths. According to Dr. Lease, the team strives to develop "responsible AI technologies that are both fair and explainable, so stakeholders can capitalize on AI speed and scalability alongside their own knowledge, experience, and human ingenuity." Lease's current Good Systems project on combating the avalanche of false and conflicting information online is a perfect example of this work. "Our mission is to design, build, and test innovative AI technologies to support journalists, professional fact-checkers, and information analysts."

What's next for the lab? "We recently announced the NSF-Simons AI Institute for Cosmic Origins, a five-year, \$20 million institute I will co-direct," says Dr. Lease. He is excited about the institute's focus on using generative AI to accelerate scientific discovery — and all the research questions this poses: "How can scientists harness modern large language models to accelerate discovery? How can scientists and AI best work together? How can humans and AI compensate for each other's limitations? How can scientists utilize AI automation without being led astray by AI hallucination? We have plenty of exciting questions ahead to keep us busy!"

Congratulations to Dr. Lease on two recently awarded honors, both for papers from 2013 that have had a significant and lasting impact in the field!

2024 Inaugural "Test of Time and Impact" award, Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence and Conference of Computation and Crowdsourcing

2024 "Most Influential Paper" award, International Conference on Automated Software Engineering

The AI Health Lab Bridges AI Experts & Clinicians to Improve Patient Care

The AI Health Lab, led by the iSchool's Dr. Ying Ding and the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering's Dr. Jon Tamir, with clinical advisors from Dell Medical School, is an icon of the power of interdisciplinary collaboration to drive meaningful impact with AI.

The lab's chief purpose is to provide better patient care through human-centered AI. Some of their work includes medical chatbots that facilitate patient-doctor communication and medical and therapeutic assistance to patients, generative AI to improve accuracy and efficiency of medical information analysis, and several LLM innovations in the healthcare field.

The AI Health Lab works closely with clinicians from Dell Children's Hospital and several Dell Medical School departments, and Dr. Ding credits these collaborations for the lab's successes. "To build better AI health innovation, we need these different groups of [AI and medical] experts to work closely together. It is not easy as they do not share common terminology and do not always understand each other. Our lab acts as the translator to bridge the AI experts with clinicians."

Librarianship in the Age of AI

Libraries were the sole focus of the iSchool when it was founded. Will AI render them obsolete?

Absolutely not, according to Virginia and Charles Bowden Professor of Librarianship Dr. David Lankes. "While many publishers are looking at AI as a potential existential threat," he says, "librarians have been thinking of AI as 'augmented intelligence,' meaning the librarian is able to do a better job using AI tools."

In a way, libraries have been preparing for AI for years. "Librarians were taught to determine quality resources from low quality items," says Dr. Lankes. But when the web took off, offering endless free information, their focus shifted. "Librarians realized in a world of overwhelming and vastly distributed content creation, their role was not gatekeeper but facilitator," says Dr. Lankes. "The focus was on what people needed as the determinant of quality." Librarians shifted from gatekeeping information to working with people to identify the information they needed for their specific purpose and expertise — even if that meant helping someone access Wikipedia.

"All of this means that, as AI gained public attention, librarians were ready," says Dr. Lankes. "AI becomes another tool in their mission, not a challenge to their existence."

As for the broader question of libraries' role in today's society, "The mission of librarians hasn't changed in centuries," says Dr. Lankes: "To improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities." Though the means and media have evolved, this role is as critical as ever — more so with the proliferation of AI-generated images and information. As AI expands into the public sphere, Dr. Lankes says, the library community has a responsibility to "shape it toward ethical use and as a means of greater inclusion of authentic voice into the global conversation."

Alumni News: Andrea Cato and Sarah Cunningham

Andrea Cato (MSIS 2011) credits the iSchool with the mindset that has guided her career path. "I constantly think about how I can make the world a better place in ways that might seem small but could be significant to someone else. The iSchool is where I really adopted that mindset."

Cato's career has spanned a wide range of iSchool disciplines. She started in collection management at a corporate library, but soon her path evolved. "I started using data more and more and moving to more and more data focused roles, which led me to my current position as a staff engineer at an Austin technology company," says Cato, who is now a senior data enablement engineer at Workrise.

The gap between librarianship and data may seem vast, but Cato didn't think so. "My time at the iSchool helped me realize this was a natural progression and that the parts of librarianship I enjoyed the most are also what I enjoy about my current role."

Cato's connection to the iSchool didn't end with her graduation. Since 2019, Cato has been a lecturer at the iSchool, teaching a data storytelling class designed to help students understand and design for users' needs, evaluate data sources carefully, and ask future-centric questions.

As an alum, Cato's proudest contribution to the iSchool is the impact she's had on her students. "It has meant the world to me when students have reached out after the semester ends to tell me about a job opportunity they received because of the skills they gained in my course."

She's also taken pride in connecting students to opportunities like capstone projects, internships, and full-time jobs, and she encourages other alumni to do the same.

"Alumni can share their expertise and provide avenues for real-world experiences, which can contribute to students' eventual job opportunities and help them get more out of their remaining time at the iSchool."

The iSchool and its students thrive on alumni contributions, and they come in a variety of forms. To alumni who are considering giving back to the school through their time and expertise, Cato says, "A right-sized approach for you is definitely possible. That certainly might be teaching a course, but it could be as simple as encouraging a colleague with a project to submit it as a capstone opportunity, being a guest lecturer, or participating in mock interview events."

And, she notes, the benefits are reciprocal. Once they enter the workplace, "students bring their contemporary skill sets, energy, and a fresh set of eyes."

With her commitment to empowering the next generation of information professionals, Andrea Cato is instilling in both students and fellow alumni the same dedication she, herself, honed at the iSchool: making the world a better place through small moves with significant impact.

Sarah Cunningham hasn't left the iSchool since she received her MSIS in 2003. She's been a lecturer here since 2004, alongside her 23-year role as audiovisual archivist at the National Archives at the LBJ Library.

Why do both? "Part of the reason I teach audio preservation is my passion for saving as many historic tapes and recordings as possible," says Cunningham, who also serves on the National Historic Recordings board and the Radio Preservation board. "The life span for reel-to-reel recordings

A Connection to the Past

is short, and most tapes...are in need of digitization, making this a crucial take for archives."

Early in her career at the National Archives, Cunningham digitized the presidential speeches, Lady Bird's private audio diaries, oral histories, and other historic documents. But despite the value of these initiatives, she sees them disappearing from educational spaces. "Audio preservation is not as common as other information sciences, making it rarely taught in other schools...Many archives contain audio recordings, and it is important that archivists know what to do with these recordings to preserve the spoken word."

While the archives and preservation tracks are shrinking, Cunningham notes, "[the iSchool's] programs remain some of the best in the nation...The audio preservation graduates are now employed at The Bob Dylan Center, National Archives, Library of Congress, numerous universities and history centers, and more!"

Cunningham credits her role as iSchool lecturer with her ability to have a full career and give back to her community at the same time. When other alumni are looking to do the same, she encourages them to speak with students as guest lecturers and at conferences, connecting with them and providing professional support when possible.

Jane Garner (B.A. '59, MLS '69) is on a mission to improve library services and foster community development with a planned gift to the School of Information (iSchool). Together with members from the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM), they are bridging the gap between communities in need and the resources they deserve. Jane's generosity will help propel the iSchool's mission to empower students through access to knowledge and make a lasting impact on global education.

iSchool Legacy Challenge: When you document a planned gift for the iSchool through the Legacy Challenge, we will designate immediate challenge funds to an area of your choice within the school. These challenge funds are limited, so don't delay!

"Library sciences play a key role in the preservation of history and culture. As a librarian, I feel deeply motivated to help the next generation of librarians get their start so they can continue our mission and change the world." — Jane Garner (B.A. '59, MLS '69)

Building Bridges Across the UT Campus

The iSchool prioritizes collaboration with other University of Texas disciplines, with all parties benefitting from each other's unique skills, perspectives, and resources. Here are just a few examples of the bridges we're building from the iSchool to other research units.

The iSchool's Matthew Lease will codirect the newly announced CosmicAI Institute, housed in UT's Oden Institute for Computational Engineering and Sciences. Focused on leveraging AI to explore the cosmos, this institute will include faculty in the areas of astronomy, computer science, statistics and data science, linguistics, information sciences, math, mechanical engineering, and aerospace engineering.

iSchool Professor Ken Fleishmann, in collaboration with researchers from the LBJ School and the School of Engineering, is leading the Smart Hand Tools project as part of the Good Systems Challenge. Instead of automating tasks, this project seeks to support task effectiveness, which empowers workers rather than eliminating them.

iSchool associate professor Amelia Acker is a 2022-2024 faculty fellow in the Humanities Institute, focused on digital futures and social justice in and through the humanities. Her work supports faculty, students, and staff in applying digital technologies and computational methods to humanities research, while also examining technology through a humanistic lens.

School of Information: Connections Across the University

Along with faculty from the school of engineering and the colleges of education, liberal arts, and natural science, iSchool faculty members Earl Huff, Jr., and Andrew Dillon are working with the federally funded National Disability Center on actionable research that positively impacts disabled higher education students' experiences and outcomes.

What happens when robots are all around us? As part of the Good Systems Challenge, the iSchool's assistant professor Elliott Hauser, along with team members from the robotics, English, architecture, and communications departments (among others), is stepping out of the laboratories to study robot interactions in the communities where they will be used, including here on the UT campus.

As exciting as new technologies are, early design decisions can easily lock in inequality and undermine hoped-for benefits. The iSchool's Min Kyung Lee and civil engineering's Chandra Bhat, among others, are working to ensure this doesn't happen with a particular technology we've been dreaming about collectively for decades: urban air mobility. (Yes, flying cars!)

Stay Connected, Stay Informed

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You're part of our legacy.

Help us shape our future.

What do all iSchool faculty, students, and alumni have in common? We know the value of information, and we love using it to make connections. Updating your contact information ensures you stay up to date on the most important and relevant news and updates coming out of the iSchool as we reflect on our first 75 years and make plans for our future.

Scan the QR code to update your contact information today!