Questions from the charge letter to the Academic Unit Review committee in Stewarding Excellence, with draft responses from John Unsworth, Dean, Graduate School of Library and Information Science:

April 11, 2010

Background:

The Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) has been a leading indicator in the University of Illinois’s pursuit of excellence since it joined the University in 1897. For more than a hundred years, our School has been consistently excellent, and it has been recognized nationally and internationally as a leader. The field of Information is to the 21st century what Physics was to the first half of the 20th century and Computer Science was to the last half. Therefore, and because we are already strong, we have important contributions to make to the future of the University.

GSLIS is a free-standing academic unit, reporting through its Dean to the Provost. It has not been administratively connected to the Library since the 1970s; it is not housed in the Library, and GSLIS faculty are separate from the faculty of the Library, though we collaborate with Library faculty in many ways.

The GSLIS Masters of Science in Library and Information Science is accredited by the American Library Association, and it is one of only two accredited LIS Masters programs in the state of Illinois, the other being at Dominican University. That means we are also the only accredited LIS masters at any state university campus in Illinois. There are only 57 accredited LIS programs in the United States and Canada. In a speech that our founder Katharine Sharp gave in 1901, she noted that students at that time came "from Leland Stanford Jr. University on the West and from Smith, Wellesley, and Vassar on the East, with representatives from the principal colleges between." We continue in that tradition, drawing our students from all 50 states and from around the world (about 15% international).

GSLIS faculty are diverse in their disciplinary backgrounds—about half have Ph.D.s in LIS, but the others come from doctoral programs in English, History, Medieval Studies, Philosophy, Communication (in LAS), Sociology, Public Policy, Computer Science, and other disciplines. These faculty currently account for about $3M/year in research expenditures, with funding coming from private foundations like the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and government funders like the National Science Foundation, the Institute for Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Library of Congress. Our graduates go to work in all kinds of libraries (public, academic, corporate, etc.) as well as a broad variety of information professions not in libraries. Our doctoral graduates go to work in top academic departments and research labs around the world. We participate in the campus-wide informatics minor and the campus-wide
bioinformatics Masters, and when it is approved by IBHE, we will also participate in the campus-wide informatics Ph.D.

1. How were the units established, and were there specific objectives identified by statute or Board of Trustees action that require consideration?

On June 8, 1897, The Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois faculty appointed Katharine Sharp as the Head Librarian and Director of the newly established Library School. In September 1897, The Armour Institute’s Department of Library Science in Chicago, founded four years earlier, was transferred to the Urbana campus of the University of Illinois, under President Draper. Winton Solberg’s book *The University of Illinois, 1894-1904: The Shaping of the University* (University of Illinois Press, 2000), notes that

Under Sharp the Library School became a jewel in the University's crown. Librarianship offered career opportunities, and people rushed into the program. . . . In the years from 1897-8 to 1903-4 women outnumbered men by 208 to 9. Although Illinois supplied more students than any other state, over half of those enrolled came from nineteen other states and the District of Columbia. Canada sent two; Hawaii, Japan, Norway, and Sweden sent one each. (195)

In 1898, a year after the School had come to this campus, Melvil Dewey, Sharp’s teacher and mentor, wrote to President Draper to say that

"Your reputation up to this time is easily first among all American universities for what you are doing, and you can hold the leadership in this rapidly growing department easier than you can build up a new one." (198)

More than a century later, competition in our field is more robust than ever, but we have not rested on our laurels, and so the University of Illinois’s Library and Information Science program is still “first among all American universities,” at least according to the national ranking of our Masters program. GSLIS is also the only #1-ranked School or College on any of the three campuses of the University of Illinois (c.f. US News, for at least the past decade). With 113 years on the Illinois campus, GSLIS has the longest history of any LIS program in any one institution, with the oldest Ph.D. program in library and information science (established in 1948), and one of the oldest and largest online programs among schools of its kind and, indeed, here on this campus.

It’s also notable that Katharine Sharp organized the school’s alumni association in 1898 at the annual conference of the American Library Association—the first alumni association at Illinois to be organized around a particular college or school—and alumni efforts to establish the first endowment fund began in 1925, in support of the Katharine L. Sharp Scholarship.

In *Reminiscences: Seventy-five Years of a Library School* (1969), Robert Downs, Dean of the School and Director of the Library from 1943-1971, reflects,
"As the Graduate School of Library Science (its proper title since 1959) enters its fourth quarter century, it has a solidly established reputation for high standards; for producing able and distinguished alumni; for a strong faculty, for sound curriculum, and a deep concern with fundamental research; and an impressive publication program... there is every reason to believe that the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library Science will remain one of America’s leading professional schools in its field, as it has been for the past several decades." (93).

And to bring all this up to the present, here’s an observation from one of our recently hired junior faculty:

GSLIS has a long tradition of excellence and balance in the face of change, or what I characterized as holding the center during my interviews at GSLIS. I accepted the offer to join the GSLIS faculty because of this history. That tradition of excellence is also the reason our alums continue to contribute financial support to the school, and the reason we continue to draw students from throughout the US, as well as internationally.

2. Could the college or school forge intellectual alignment with another college or school, with synergy in values, goals, and missions and enhance their intellectual and academic mission?

With regard to the College of Media, the GSLIS faculty began discussing this question before a Stewarding Excellence committee was established, and discussion became more focused when the search for a new Dean of Media was suspended. During March, the GSLIS faculty devoted about 200 person-hours to discussing the possibility of a merger with Media. As part of that discussion, I asked faculty to identify points of connection in other departments across campus with intellectual kinship to the GSLIS mission, and particularly those who might make us stronger and more competitive in the future. Faculty had their strongest connections in Computer Science, Communication, Art and Design; also mentioned, but less frequently, were History, Media, Education, Law, Linguistics, Anthropology, Business, English, Industrial Design, Landscape Architecture, Philosophy, Religious Studies, and Statistics. During this exercise, I also asked faculty what programs they thought offered the most serious external competition, breaking that down into two categories: those with, and those without, LIS programs. All of the most frequently mentioned schools in both categories were organized as we are now: as a faculty of one, with a dean, reporting to a Provost.

Having considered all this information, and having spent about 200 person-hours on discussing a possible merger, the GSLIS faculty voted 19 to 1 to suspend the discussion, indicating their lack of support for a merger. As a participant in those discussions, I can tell the committee that the faculty focused precisely and positively on possible synergies that could enhance the intellectual mission and the excellence of the School. While there are some overlaps between the two units, and there are certainly some individuals of interest, as there are in many other places on campus, in the end, the faculty did not think that a merger of the GSLIS and Media would
make GSLIS stronger or more competitive. In terms of synergy and strategic advantage, it seems to us it would be more useful to adjust the rules of engagement, especially around undergraduate majors, so that faculty from different units could profitably collaborate in new interdisciplinary curricula, rather than trying to meet the intellectual challenges of the 21st century by reorganizing departments and colleges.

3. Are there unique elements of each of these four small colleges and schools that necessitate continuing as an independent freestanding academic unit?

I won’t presume to speak for the other three, only for GSLIS. The first and perhaps most important argument for remaining as a free-standing unit is that, by doing so, we have managed to remain at the top of our field. For more than a century, we have been one of the strongest programs in our field and on this campus, as well, in terms of our national and international recognition, ranking, scholarly productivity, grantsmanship, placement of graduates—in fact, by any measure except size, GSLIS has a remarkably long and consistent history of excellence as a free-standing unit.

A second important reason, I would argue, is that it is in the interest of the campus to have a diverse set of perspectives represented on the Council of Deans. It’s generally accepted today that diversity of perspective makes for more effective problem-solving, in any kind of organization: if all the units represented by deans were large units, and few or none were professional units, we would not be better off as a campus.

With respect to research and teaching, at GSLIS we focus on the intersection of people, information, and technology. Other units on campus may share part of this focus, but the emphasis on the intersection is unique to GSLIS as a unit. There are certainly faculty in other parts of campus interested in this intersection, and hence the high number of mentions for Computer Science (particularly their Human-Computer Interaction faculty), Communication, and Art and Design. For GSLIS, this intersection defines a discipline and an intellectual tradition (libraries have always been early adopters of new information technologies). It also defines the group of schools with which we most strongly identify, namely the iSchools (who held their annual conference here at Illinois last February, at the end of my two-year term as Chair of the iSchools Caucus of deans). It’s worth noting, in the current context, that members of this group are meant to be deans of Schools or Colleges, reporting directly to a Provost.

There is also a local consideration worth mentioning here: the GSLIS faculty prize the fact that they are a “faculty of one,” with no departments within the School. They believe, and I agree, that this contributes to engagement across the broad range of disciplinary backgrounds among the faculty, and it contributes to collegiality and intellectual stimulation within the School. I believe that GSLIS is known, across this campus, as a cohesive and constructive group, and I think the form in which we are organized is part of the reason for that.
4. Could the administrative infrastructure of the college or school be reduced through organizational changes or consolidations? Could personnel costs be reduced? What would be the economic benefits of possible mergers involving these smaller college/schools, both in the short term (1-2 years) and in the long term (3 years and beyond)?

I think GSLIS has an appropriate level of administrative support and articulation, and while it is possible that another unit with inadequate support in some area might be able to piggy-back on our structure, I don’t think we could maintain our current levels of tuition income, grant expenditures, donations, placements, or ranking without our current administrative structure, developed over the last seven years. We have two associate deans, one for Academic Programs and the other for Research, and four assistant deans, for Development, Communication, Infrastructure, and Students. The associate deans are both faculty members, and both still teach, advise students, etc. Each of these assistant and associate deans has a budget to cover his or her area of responsibility, and each has considerable autonomy in accomplishing his or her goals. By virtue of this structure, over the last seven years we’ve been able to:

- More than double the ICR we generate
- Nearly double our grant expenditures per faculty FTE
- More than double our goal for the ongoing capital campaign
- Reduce our cost per IU to offer courses
- Increase our enrollments by about 50%
- Double our net tuition from on-campus students
- Increase our net tuition from off-campus students by about 60%

I’d also like to note that, in 2007, we went through extensive discussions with Linda Katehi, when she was Provost, about the future of GSLIS. Those discussions centered around putting GSLIS in a position to be a full-fledged participant in the campus-wide informatics initiative, with a particular focus on launching an undergraduate informatics major as the long-term solution to our reliance on GRF. I agree that this is the solution we need to pursue. We already participate as a core unit in the campus-wide informatics minor (even though changes in tuition distribution that would make this participation sustainable, and that were promised years ago, have not yet been fully implemented), and the faculty at GSLIS is eager to get an informatics major started. To date, we have been prevented from doing so by objections from CS and ECE. I believe, however, that if these units can have a sense of ownership of some part of the program, and if we can come up with a sustainability model for interdisciplinary undergraduate majors, we can find a way to move forward. Multi-college participation has been part of our plan for the major from the beginning, and frankly, if we can’t figure out how to do this, it’s hard to see how Illinois can compete in the 21st century.

Finally, with respect to the economic benefits of mergers among these four units, please see the attached spreadsheet showing various measures of productivity in these and other units on campus. The conclusion supported by this document is
that mergers would not significantly change the financial footprint of any of these units, in terms of their productivity. They vary in the nature of their productivity (research vs. teaching, for example), but they are in the median range for campus, if you measure tuition plus research income per FTE, and there is no obvious reason to assume that combining them would change that status. On the other hand, we’re exploring possible administrative collaborations with other small units, and we will certainly find whatever economies of scale are to be had across these units. The fully articulated administrative structure of GSLIS may well be an important resource in designing and managing these collaborations.

5. **Would the campus as a whole lose value through consolidations or mergers of these colleges or schools with other units, if the educational and scholarly pursuits of these units are maintained in an alternative organizational structure?**

Please see the attached, “Desperately Seeking Synergies” by Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Harvard Business School, from *When Giants Learn to Dance* (1989), for some thoughts about the difficulty of maintaining value through consolidations and mergers. Kanter’s book was published during the heyday of acquisitions and mergers in the corporate world, but it has a great deal of relevance to our current situation in public higher education as well. She writes,

> The point of the current corporate shape-up boom is to achieve synergies—the value that comes when the whole adds up to more than the sum of the parts . . . But synergies are notoriously difficult to achieve, even with smart acquisitions and a sound mix of activities. The track record for acquisitions is mixed; immediate financial benefits to the acquiring firm are hard to achieve. And the costs of restructuring may even reduce performance.

Thus, the first challenge facing businesses as they seek the shapes and forms for value creation is retaining the value inherent in the pre-existing pieces, avoiding the perils and pitfalls that actually subtract value and make the whole worth less than the sum of its parts. (58-59)

Kanter’s account of business mergers is rich in cases and replete with the voices of those affected by the process in those cases. Her emphasis, ultimately, is on the importance of buy-in from the members of the organizations involved, their commitment to the process, and “the bond between people and organizations.” It makes for instructive reading.

Apart from synergy, there’s also the question of savings. How much could be saved by combining GSLIS and Media? If experience at other universities is any guide, a forced merger would be likely to demoralize faculty and donors, costing both units talent and support. On the other hand, there may be administrative economies of scale to be realized across the four units, and possibly beyond, through a more structured collaboration. We are currently exploring the opportunities for shared administrative services, and I hope that we will have some suggestions on this front before the Academic Unit Review committee concludes its work.
6. Who are the stakeholders, internal and external, and how is their perspective to be considered?

GSLIS stakeholders are many. Internally, we collaborate in some way with every other college on this campus. Our students are integral to running the Library, and increasingly they also find work in research positions elsewhere on campus. Our experience in offering online programs is a resource for campus. We play a critical role in a number of large, multi-institutional research projects, like the $20M Datanet project at Johns Hopkins, the multi-million dollar National Digital Information Infrastructure Preservation Program developed by the Library of Congress, and many other projects funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and others. We maintain contact with about 7,000 alumni around the world, and for most of those, we gave them the education that secured them professional employment and shaped their careers. GSLIS faculty have recently and regularly been elected to the top leadership positions in the international iSchools group, the American Society for Information Science & Technology, the Association for Library and Information Science Education, the Web-Based Information Science Education Consortium, the Association of Computers and the Humanities and the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations, the Data Curation Conference, the Text-Encoding Initiative, and any number of other organizations. We have worked closely with the Illinois State Library and with public libraries in Chicago and throughout the State, as well as with K-12 school libraries in both rural and urban areas of Illinois, and we provide Masters graduates to the top academic research libraries in the country, and Ph.D. graduates to the top faculties in the country.

I will be happy to solicit input on the value of the program from representatives of these and other constituencies. We can also survey employers, faculty at other iSchools, funding agencies, and others to provide the committee with input on specific questions you might suggest. Whatever we do, I am certain that the Chancellor and the committee will hear from alumni, friends, and other constituents as part of this process: librarians are civil, but they are also committed to the idea that civil society depends on information and participation.

Summary:

If Stewarding Excellence is actually about stewarding excellence, we hope the Academic Unit Review committee will recommend that the campus refrain from fixing something that is not broken, in order to fill a hole much larger than GSLIS in its entirety. Can we save money by merging small units? Yes, in very small amounts, and quite possibly at a cost that’s higher than the savings. Do the small units have value as pilot fish in a large enterprise? This has been demonstrated in various ways over decades, if we actually look at the history of this campus. Could GSLIS help the campus meet the challenges of educating students and producing research
for a world in which information and information technology are core issues? Yes, if campus incentive structures didn't compel others to oppose us. We agree that we need to evolve, and we have been doing that steadily over the century, and especially over the last fifteen years with our online program. From here forward, we think evolution requires greater participation in undergraduate education, and we are eager to undertake that. If we're allowed to do that, we will be less dependent on General Revenue Funds in the future. We also think we have value to offer to other units, especially in the area of online education, and we would be happy to see incentive structures established that would make doing so sustainable.