The iSchool movement: Reflections from the profession

By: Meghan Ecclestone

Vicki Whitmell is the Executive Director of the Ontario Legislative Library. She is currently teaching two courses at the iSchool: the Information Professionals Practicum and Management of Corporate and Other Special Information Centres.

This interview was a result of my enrolment in the Information Professionals Practicum – my instructor, Vicki Whitmell, had made some very insightful comments in class about the iSchool movement, and how the Faculty’s changes are being reflected in the professional world. I attempted to capture that comment and allow Vicki the opportunity to elaborate on those thoughts. The following is an interview that builds on Vicki’s initial comments and, I think, begins to close the gap between the theoretical and practical elements of the iSchool movement.

Meghan Ecclestone: How is the Faculty’s recent shift to an iSchool being reflected – or not reflected – in the changes you see in the professional field?

Vicki Whitmell: As I understand the iSchool concept, it is meant to develop in students the knowledge, techniques and abilities that cross all areas of information management and access. If that’s the case, I believe that the school will be graduating students with the broader set of competencies that are needed to meet current and future organizational challenges.

Like other organizations, the Legislative Assembly of Ontario needs professionals who bring with them a knowledge of electronic and print collections, emerging information technologies, user-centered design, research and analysis, records and knowledge management, as well as preservation and digitization techniques and methods. This combination of interests, knowledge and experience may be a tall order for many information professionals who have traditionally taken a more narrow focus to their studies and careers, but I am hopeful that graduates of the iSchool will be better equipped to take on a wide variety of responsibilities in the future.

At the Legislature the library, the research group, the information and records management group and the information technology department work closely together. All of the major groups in the organization that deal with information, information services
and information technology see the value of this relationship.

Like other organizations who hire graduates of the Faculty of Information, we are still looking for, and identifying with, those who have or are graduating from a specific stream and who may call themselves librarians or archivists. However, this type of professional identity should and will change over time as we work with iSchool graduates who identify with, and practice as more broadly-defined “information professionals.”

We will be looking for those who understand how people use, manage and access information and will be able to provide both the content and tools that they need to do it well. We will all be information managers but some of us will still specialize in areas such as reference, systems and technology or collections.

As an instructor at the iSchool I am pleased to see how many students already see the opportunities afforded by the Faculty and are taking a variety of courses from more than one of the traditional professional streams.

**ME:** As a practitioner, what does the iSchool mean to you?

**VW:** When I first heard about the changes to the Faculty and its move toward a ‘path’ structure I was very concerned. I was unable to see how the students graduating within this curriculum would have the experience and knowledge I look for when hiring new professionals.

How would I know, for example, if a student applying for a reference librarian position would have the core set of skills required to fulfill the position? Would I have to ask students for copies of their transcripts and study the Faculty’s course descriptions? Would students graduating from the iSchool be interested in traditional “librarian” positions?

After learning more about the iSchool, however, and in light of the changes taking place among information organizations, I am confident that the iSchool will develop the kinds of professionals whose skill sets, knowledge and approaches needed to manage this new vision of information and its management in organizations.

There is a need, though, for the iSchool to better educate existing professional communities about the changes to the program and courses in order to reassure practitioners that students will graduate with the skills and knowledge that are and will be required.
ME: How do you think the iSchool can best serve students seeking a career in the information professions?

VW: The iSchool needs to have an excellent understanding of current directions in the information professions at the practical level and they need to provide opportunities for students to meet and learn from practitioners in the field. This will help students make sound decisions about their careers and it will give them the professional network needed to secure the type of work they wish to pursue after they complete their degree.

The iSchool also has to instill in students the importance of developing leadership skills the ability to advocate on behalf of our organizations and our professions, and the desire for continued learning and change – these characteristics are paramount to students’ success in the changing information professions.

Meghan Ecclestone is a second-year student in the Master of Information Studies program at the Faculty of Information. She is Managing Editor of the Faculty of Information Quarterly, and anticipates entering the library profession upon graduation. You can contact her via her blog, www.meghanecclestone.com.