

**To: Joel Tohline, Interim Director  
LSU Center for Applied Information Technology and Learning**

**From: John M. Hamilton, Dean  
Manship School of Mass Communication**

**RE: LSU INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY INITIATIVE FUNDING REQUEST**

The Manship School of Mass Communication requests funding in accordance with LSU's information technology (IT) initiative to hire one new faculty member who will specialize in futures studies in information technology and media. Academicians with such a specialty generally are referred to as "futurists." The futurist who will join the Manship School faculty will be responsible for developing and teaching courses in futures studies as well as conducting research projects of a collaborative nature both within the Manship School and among other LSU academic units. Many of the objectives of courses in futures studies—preparing students to enter the modern, IT-intensive workplace; focusing research on economic development; and incorporating both of these within an interdisciplinary framework—are precisely those envisioned for the IT initiative. What follows establishes the basic premise for the Manship School's "futurist" faculty position and describes ways by which his or her expertise would benefit Louisiana.

### **The Futurist and Mass Communication**

"Futures studies," according to one source, "aims to understand and cope with the long term forces of change as they affect both the planet and people—both the whole of humanity and the individual." More specifically, "Futures researchers track technical innovations, value shifts, geopolitical tides, environmental perturbations, economic developments, demographic patterns, and other trends of change. From these data they create scenarios of possible alternative futures, which are then used as contingencies within strategic planning initiatives."

The Manship School has been acknowledged by media industry leaders nationwide as housing one of the most forward-looking mass communication programs in the United States. So much of what occurs in a program like ours requires not simply responding to the present but anticipating the future. What's more, mass communication as an academic discipline has become technology-intensive. The telecommunications technology with which the Manship School faculty must work requires the faculty to generate assumptions about the technology's role in what we do and how we do it, in what we communicate and what responses our messages will evoke. Thus, the mass communication discipline has become the natural residence for a futurist and for courses in futures studies.

Forecasting of a highly specialized nature resides at the core of futures studies research. The kind of forecasting typically associated with futures studies, however, differs from more traditional methods of forecasting in several ways. “First, futures studies considers a longer time horizon than most forecasters do. Futurists are typically studying the world 10 to 50 years from now in contrast to economists and market researchers who look out 1 to 3 years. Second, futurists focus on a degree of change which most forecasters do not consider—real, systemic, transformational change as opposed to incremental changes from existing trends. Third, since we cannot be certain about such long-term change, futurists describe alternative, possible and preferable futures rather than single predictions. Finally, futurists use both qualitative and quantitative methodologies where traditional forecasting tends to rely more on purely quantitative tools.”

### **Research Objectives and Louisiana Benefits**

What specific contributions might a futurist make to students in the Manship School of Mass Communication, to LSU, and to the citizens of Louisiana at large? First, the futurist would be expected to focus his or her research on technological forecasting, especially with regard to telecommunications technology. According to Graham Molitor, President of Public Policy Forecasting, writing in a recent issue of *The Futurist*, “The telecommunications industry is going to see more technological change in the next five years than it’s seen in the past 95 years. Five vital technologies contributing to these monumental changes are:

1. Optical transmission.
2. Satellite communications.
3. Wireless and mobile communications devices.
4. Broadband digital technologies.
5. Internet resources.

Molitor continues, “Each one of these enhanced communication capabilities creates enormous moneymaking opportunities, as well as improvements in cost, speed, quality, and convenience for consumers. Each one will contribute significantly to quality of life. Technological unemployment will displace some jobs, but new applications of these new technologies will create many more. All told, these developments will wreak dramatic direct and indirect results, many of them not foreseen at all.” Most significantly, however, is the economic role that telecommunications technology plays and will continue to play in the United States. Once more, according to Molitor, “Communication and information technologies have been cited by the U.S. Commerce Department as the principal drivers of the economy; Commerce gives credit for one-third of U.S. economic growth to the information sector.”

Molitor presents a range of issues that a futurist versed in telecommunications technology forecasting might explore. Consider just a few: How might communication capabilities throughout Louisiana and within specific businesses be enhanced? What moneymaking opportunities might such enhancement create? How might improvements in cost, speed, quality, and convenience for consumers be achieved? What benefits might derive from such improvements? How will such improvements contribute significantly to the quality of life throughout Louisiana? To what degree might technological unemployment displace some jobs? What kind of jobs are we talking about? What kind of new applications of these emerging communications technologies are we talking

about? And what kind of industries and thus new jobs will the “spin-off” of these new applications create? Finally, what kind of direct or indirect results—economic, social, cultural, legal, etc.—might these developments bring to the people of Louisiana?

The kind of research that futurists normally undertake can be focused narrowly or widely and, as evidenced from the preceding paragraph, can forecast developments in telecommunications technology in innumerable contexts. Regardless of the scope, futurists “can help communities, corporations and organizations envision their preferred futures and compare those visions with current trends and scenarios of possible futures. This process leads to the kind of practical planning and policy-making that truly brings about change.”

### **Curricular Objectives and Collaborative Benefits**

Examples of the kind of courses that a futurist might be responsible for developing and teaching in the Manship School are drawn from models devised by the Futures Studies graduate program at the University of Houston–Clear Lake. One course would focus on the methods, practitioners and issues of futures studies and futures research. A second course would focus on systems theory and its application to modeling, technological forecasting, and problem-solving. A third course would focus on qualitative research techniques for futures research and would incorporate such sub-topics as issues management, impact assessment and policy analysis, scenario development, strategic planning, and organization development. A fourth course would focus on quantitative research techniques as applied specifically to technological forecasting and would incorporate interviewing and questionnaire construction, Delphi survey methodology, descriptive statistics, trend extrapolation, and techniques of economic and demographic forecasting.

These courses could be taught independent of one another, or they could be collapsed in various ways so as to streamline content. Much would depend on the particular skills of the futurist who would join the Manship School faculty. The kind of courses described above also would lead to natural collaborative efforts, particularly with regard to cross-discipline instruction and research. The Manship School has developed a reputation for reaching out to other units on the LSU campus (e.g., the Political Science Department and the Speech Communication Department in the College of Arts & Sciences, the College of Agriculture, and the College of Design) to create not only cross-discipline programs, but also joint faculty appointments. The nature of the courses and research projects that we envision for a futurist on the Manship School faculty virtually begs for cross-discipline collaboration. Working with faculty from the Department of Sociology, for instance, would seem a necessary step in combining research methodology expertise from that discipline with that from the mass communication discipline in undertaking the projects that would most benefit the citizens and businesses of Louisiana.

### **Reporting Objectives and Public Benefits**

The addition of a futurist to the Manship School faculty would enable the School to develop coursework in yet another area, one which has been neglected by most mass communication programs nationwide but yet one that deserves greater attention now as never before. The matter at issue here is best described by Hazel Henderson, author of *Beyond Globalization: Shaping a Sustainable Global Economy*. “Futures research, planning, and

forecasting,” says Henderson, “are emerging from the back rooms of corporations and market-research firms and into the daylight of public conferences on the future of the whole human family on our interdependent planet. . . . The media covering futures conferences are still mystified. They do not see wide-ranging scenarios of global futures as ‘news.’ But the definition of news is changing: from daily reports of scattered events and scenes of conflict and disaster to a deeper probing of the underlying forces and processes that drive events.”

Tragic events of September 11 give particular cogency to Hazel Henderson’s remarks. While reporting on “scenes of conflict and disaster” were unavoidable initially, thousands of journalists have spent countless hours attempting to probe deeper into why those September 11 events occurred. Such probing and analysis, if we regard this as a reporting trend, should have wider application, particularly with respect to reporting about the future. As Henderson concludes, “The media can learn to report on future trends and research. They can expand their slavish overreporting of economic forecasts, technological hype, and corporate earnings and profit projections. Reporting on forecasts of social trends, resource availability, population, and technological impacts on people and the environment merit equal attention.”

We in the Manship School see the kind of reporting envisioned by Hazel Henderson as a vital component of a forward looking mass communication program. That is why our new futurist colleague would have the task of developing a course that, unlike those described earlier, would focus on the fundamental nature of futures studies and research and the most effective ways that journalists can employ in reporting the significance of such studies and research to their audience.

### **Conclusion**

The Manship School admits to a certain degree of boldness in what it intends to accomplish with approval of this proposal’s funding request. It is this kind of boldness, however, that has won the respect and admiration of colleagues throughout our discipline. In the same way that the Manship School has advanced its mass communication curriculum beyond what is offered at peer institutions, so does the School now intend to integrate a futures studies component that would advance its curriculum further and make it an even greater contributor to the state’s economy. We feel that it is an appropriate time to launch this endeavor, and we feel that the Manship School of Mass Communication provides the perfect blend of academic nutrients in which to most successfully grow that endeavor.