Information Exploration

UNIVERSITY LAUNCHES INFORMATION ALLIANCE WITH BIG-NAME EXPERTS, BIG QUESTIONS

HOW CAN LINGUISTS work with social scientists and historians to "translate" not just language but culture? How can experts in public policy, journalism and computer science help expand public access to government data and documents? How can scholars collaborate across disciplines to address the gulf between the "haves" and "have-nots" of the information age?

A new university initiative is hoping to answer such questions by exploring—in a broadly interdisciplinary way—the potential of information to inspire innovation and change lives. The Future of Information Alliance, officially kicking off Nov. 14–18, will bring together faculty, staff and students from every school and college on campus to share ideas about a fundamental need: how to better understand and enhance the role of information in our lives.

"In our first year, we want to identify the questions we should be asking together," says Ira Chinoy, associate professor in the Philip Merrill College of Journalism and co-director of the Alliance. "Then we can seriously attack the answers." A Nov. 14 panel featuring national experts will get the

conversations started. Dan Russell, Google's "director of user happiness"; Microsoft's Mary Czerwinski, head of the largest human-computer interaction research group in the country; and Abdur Chowdhury, formerly the chief scientist at Twitter and at Maryland's Institute for Systems Research, will discuss their work at a forum open to the campus community.

"We'll be hearing perspectives from people who are involved in shaping the future information environment," says Chinoy, who was the director of computer-assisted reporting at *The Washington Post* and teaches the same and journalism history at Maryland.

The visiting innovators will also be featured at an invitation-only program Nov. 15 at the Newseum, which is partnering with the Alliance. University President Wallace Loh will open the program and WAMU's Kojo Nnamdi will moderate.

Russell, Czerwinski and Chowdhury will spend the rest of the week at Maryland in programs open to the campus community and featuring faculty from a variety of colleges

"Our unique strength is our diverse array of great faculty that we can bring to bear on these types of issues," says Patrick O'Shea, vice president for research. The Alliance has been launched with funds from O'Shea, the provost, and the dean of every college. Among the Alliance's activities will be

a program of competitively awarded seed grants to support collaborative research.

It's about leveraging the strength of the campus' strong interdisciplinary activity "to meet a grand challenge," says Allison Druin, associate dean for research in the College of Information Studies and co-director of the Alliance. Her research in human-computer interaction led to the creation of the International Children's Digital Library.

The alliance's website, www.fia.umd.edu, reflects the group's crowdsourcing approach by featuring numerous Twitter streams that allow members to pose questions, seek collaborators and learn what colleagues are talking about. It follows a guiding principle borrowed from Russell: Information is fast, dense, social, local and evolving.

Curated pages on the site provide opportunities for specific topic discussions moderated by subject experts. There also will be relevant links and a database of member projects.

Both directors look forward to what's in store for the site and Alliance. "We expect that not only surprising, but important things are going to happen," says Druin.

For more information, visit *www.fia.umd.edu.*