Minutes of 2/18 Tufts CS Townhall

ACTION: Explore whether it is possible to restore vending machine service to Halligan during construction.
RESPONSE: Sadly, this is not possible because no location in Halligan meets all the necessary conditions. Sarah Richmond has already explored the possibility extensively, and concluded it was not possible.

ACTION: Ask Student Council members to advertise future townhalls to their constituencies.
RESPONSE: We’ve added this to the advertising plan for future townhalls.

Announcements
New Building
New building is on track.
May be noisy in April and May
We’re trying to get muddy area next to construction fence near College Ave. paved.

On Hiring
Alexa Sharp turned us down.

We made an offer to David Lillethun, who interviewed on Friday 2/14. He has 3 weeks to decide. He seemed enthusiastic about the offer. We were able to make an offer because everyone who talked to the candidate liked him.

We have another open teaching track position. We have at least two more candidates interviewing. We have lots more teaching needs than we are working to fill. We want to hire as diversely as possible, but it’s a challenge to get applicants.

We are also interviewing for a tenure-track position in security / human data interaction. So far, we’ve seen 5 candidates for this search. We have at least 3 more coming. We need to see these 3 before we start to make decisions about how to proceed.

The candidates for the tenure track position in computational statistics/theory start coming next week. This position is jointly supported by the SoE and DISC.

There’s also a candidate for a tenure-track position in engineering education with a focus on computer science coming next week. This position is supported by the Tufts’ Institute on Research on Learning and Instruction (IRLI).

If the stars align, we could have 5 new CS hires: 3 tenure track and 2 teaching track. But we’d have to get really lucky for that to happen, as the job market is extremely hot for all these positions:
Question and Answer

Q: Is there a process for tracking mental health issues among the student body?

A: Not a formal process, but it is an issue the faculty is talking about. The faculty aren’t mental health professionals, so there is a limit to what we can do. We do try to refer students in need to appropriate resources. We know that our courses are rigorous and demanding, which can exacerbate mental health issues. One of the reasons we provide so many undergraduate teaching assistants is to make sure there are resources available to help. We are currently assessing our introductory sequence, but it is not clear how to improve it because there are so many different constituencies. Kathleen would love to hear suggestions for how to improve things.

More information not mentioned at the town hall: The President’s Mental Health Task Force (MHTF) just concluded a three-year assessment of student mental health at Tufts and has made many recommendations, some of which have already been implemented. Tufts is partnering with the JED foundation for the next four years in an effort to continue the work of the MHTF. We have staff in the Division of Student Affairs, Academic Advising and Health Services that make sure no one is falling through the cracks and all students are offered the many resources Tufts offers. This staff regularly reaches out to faculty to ask about students who may be struggling.

In terms of CS specifically, the advising staff (Megan and Nicole) are critical partners with faculty and the advising deans in helping to make sure that any students who may need help are identified and pointed toward suitable resources.

Q: What’s the difference between Computational Statistics and Machine Learning?
A: More on the core theory, less on the applied but in the same space.

Q: Is the engineering education candidate giving a colloquium?
A: Yes! Wednesday 2/26 from 3-4pm in Halligan 102.

Q: Are we anticipating that the new Comp Stat/Theory candidates would take over 170? Who would take over from Alexa?
A: We are currently planning to have Marty Allen teach Comp170 in the fall, but that is subject to change pending our hiring (see above).

Q: What are the classes in distributed systems that a student can take?
A: Cloud Computing and Debugging Cloud Computing. We are working to add to our systems offerings, but it will take a while.

Q: What are the new online programs looking like?
A: The plan is to launch the new online masters in the spring/fall. 116 and 160 will be launched by Ming and Matti. I'm working on 105 slowly. They'll be rolling out 2 a semester until all 10 are being offered every semester.

Q: Will there be TAs?
A: It’s an open question how we will support the online students.

Q: Do you know what elective classes are going to be offered over the summer?

Q: What changes will there be for grad students?
A: We hired CJ Cassidy as the new position of graduate student coordinator. She plays a role for graduate students similar to what Megan Monaghan and Nicole Fundaro do for undergraduates. The graduate student review process is happening now, a little later than usual. Faculty are currently writing their assessments of their PhD students. The grad committee is reviewing the progress of all Masters’ students based on their course work.

Q: Types of events you’d like to see happen on the student side?
A: I’m delighted with all the types of events the students are making happen. I think it’s good to have a combination of social, mentoring, and technical events. I think there is a good mix. I hope the BSCS group has the critical mass to keep going. It would be nice to have similar groups for other underrepresented groups. I feel there might be some other groups which are missing, but without a spokesperson to come forward it’s hard to help. We are also trying to build stronger relationships with alumni.

Q: Why is 105 a graduation requirement?
A: Kathleen enumerated the positive aspects of comp105. Students go away and then come back and understand the connection between 105 and tangible skills. 105 is a secret weapon which helps our students be more successful than at other places. It’s different from 40 where the benefits are immediately obvious and can be recorded on your CV. Recently, Norman asked students from previous instances of 105 whether/how 105 helped them in their jobs. He compiled the responses (an impressive >5 page document) and distributed it to this semester’s class. Take a look if you are interested in seeing their answers!

Q: I noticed that CyberSec / Cyberwarfare no longer qualify for CS Credits.
A: We think it is a great course and encourage interested students to take it! By design, this course is half political science; thus we decided not to count it towards the A&S major because we want to ensure that the A&S CS major covers sufficient technical content.

Q: Is there anything being done to integrate ethics into the CS curriculum?
A: We’re talking about it. We’d like to. We had a proposal last year but it wasn’t funded. We’ve been talking to people in the philosophy department about a possible collaboration. The faculty feel we should be integrating it, but we haven’t done it. There’s only so much we can do at once.

Q: I have heard that there are open TAships in the department? Is the department trying to find a billion PhD students?
A: Yes.

Q: What’s a TA?
A: Kathleen described the differences between a graduate and an undergrad TAship. We are trying to fill the TAships as best we can. In the past we’ve been careful not to over-admit. We have decided to be more aggressive in admitting prospective PhD students to try to reach our target number. But we haven’t hit our limit yet. There is lots of demand for PHD students. We are really excited about our class of applicants.

Q: The new building will be finished when? What happens to Halligan?
A: The new building is on track to be finished in June 2021. Almost all of ECE will be consolidated into Halligan. The new building will be joint between a bunch of departments, including Math, CS, Econ.

Q: Where will greenline connect?
A: Greenline will be on the tracks between the new building and Boston Ave.

Q: Will the new building be noisy because of train?
A: There will be more trains. It won’t impact Halligan. The new building will have special windows designed to block the noise. A bigger concern is the HVAC system.

Q: Is the skywalk still a thing?
A: No.

Q: What is a skywalk?
A: A bridge from a previous design of the new building to the other side of Boston Ave.
A: The skybridge was scrapped when the building design was scaled back.

Q: Is Lisa teaching 20 long-tem?
A: Unclear.

Q: Will we make a new under 100 level electives?
A: Not presently. There will be the new CS For Future Presidents / How Systems Fail classes which will be under 100 level.

Q: Could you tell me more about How Systems Work / How Systems Fail?
A: Kathleen describes Masters in Cybersecurity Public Policy classes. Intended for people who only have Comp11 but need to know more about CS, but aren’t going to be programmers. They will be service courses for the broader community.

Q: There was mention of a linear algebra class directed at CS Students?
A: Linear Algebra now counts for Engineering students in CS. Not yet required for A&S Students, but we are moving toward that. But we can’t just dump that on the math department. Calc II is mostly in there for math sophistication, but Linear Algebra could serve the same purpose. LA could serve more stuff in CS.

Q: 136 is offered every year? Who will teach it?
A: In the spring, once a year. Don’t know who will always offer it.

Q: Can I take NLP at another school?
A: That’s a good question to talk to CJ Cassidy about.

Q: How frequently is NLP being offered?
A: As frequently as we can find someone to teach it for us. Hiring a tenure-track faculty member in NLP is on our strategic hiring plan, but not for this year.

Q: Will we have a statistics class?
A: Unclear.

Q: Vending machine?
Action Item: Find out about vending machine. Resolution: Sadly, we won’t be able to install a new vending machine in Halligan before the new building is finished because no location in the building satisfies all the requirements.

Q (Kathleen): How is TA training class going?
A: I think it’s going OK. I think the it’s more about dealing with the emotional student. (Another student) From what I’ve heard it was helpful.

Q (Kathleen): Do you have a sense that TAs are doing a better job?
A: No students have cried yet. I think so it’s probably better but I don’t have metrics.

Q: Has comp11 gotten Hyped up?
A (TA from comp11): I think the course is teaching them more, faster, but I feel the lectures are more focused and methodical. There’s less boilerplate.

Q: Advice on getting more students attend townhalls?
A: Have student groups help via student council.
A: Allow anonymous questions
A: Email 30 minutes before hand, with “FREE FOOD” in subject.