*Teaching Case*

# The Power of an MIS Degree: Inspiring students by connecting with innovators

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## Abstract

Recently the ISEDJ introduced a new area within its case study category that seeks to capture and disseminate successful classroom practices and teaching strategies. The primary motivation behind this enterprise is the construction of a repository that will help new academics draw from successful classroom strategies and techniques that have been successfully employed by peers around the world. This paper is a contribution toward this inaugural effort. The aim of this paper is to share a website we developed that helps our department tackle several challenging problems including the active engagement of students throughout the MIS curriculum, recruiting students to the MIS major and connecting our students and program to innovators throughout our region. Through this site we are effectively showing our students the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of technology and how studying MIS can help one pursue almost any career imaginable. This paper describes the site we developed and clearly shows how others can implement this format within their programs. Finally, this is applicable to all courses within the MIS Model Curriculum.

**Keywords:** MIS Enrollment, MIS Curriculum, Student Recruitment, Innovation, Entrepreneurship

## 1. Introduction

"So, what can I do with an MIS degree?" This is a question that prospective students ask almost every MIS faculty member. In fact, in our discipline's recent history, it appears that many of us have not had a satisfactory answer to this simple question as evidenced by the enrollment declines observed globally. This realization and the subsequent conversation and ideas on how to combat enrollment declines has been documented widely and discussed in many of the major MIS journals (Koch, Slyke, et al 2010; Gefen, Ragowsky, et al 2012). For those of us who have committed our professional lives to the advancement of our discipline, we are somewhat puzzled by the question because from our perspective the answer is self-evident: "What can't you do with an MIS degree?"

The transformative role of technology and its importance are well documented and a crucial element of modern business and society. In fact, this is one of the dominant narratives of our time, and its importance can't be overstated (Friedman and Mandelbaum 2012; Schmidt and Cohen 2013). Furthermore, many argue that a critical understanding of technology is also necessary for the cultivation of an informed citizenry, which underpins dynamic and vibrant nations (Rushkoff and Purvis 2010). This is why it is particularly surprising that many of our students don't see the connection between studying MIS and a successful career. The faculty in our program have wrestled with this issue and have made substantial contributions to the discipline's exploration of the enrollment crisis (Firth, Lawrence, et al 2008, Eoin and Firth 2013). The aim of this paper is to share a successful strategy that has far surpassed our expectations. Beginning in October of 2012 we began publishing weekly profiles that highlight entrepreneurs, technologists, and innovators within our geographic area. As you will see, the profiles we publish are unique in that they focus on the nature of modern work and how technology fits into their successes.

The remainder of this paper is influenced by the structure the Journal of Information Systems Education recommends for its Teaching Tips submissions (See Lending and Chelley 2012). Following this introduction you will find a more detailed description of our suggested practice and a brief discussion of how we manage the process. We will then discuss how we employ the profiles in classroom discussions and suggest a few alternative uses. We then provide evidence in the form of a Google Analytics report that shows the number of page views during the 2012-2013 academic year.

## 2. Site Description: Meet the Innovators

During the late summer of 2012, we conceived of an idea that we believed would help our students see the value of an MIS degree and to enrich our classroom discussions with real-world examples of how people use technology to accomplish exciting work. Accordingly, we put together a website that features innovative technologists and entrepreneurs and we asked them to discuss topics that complement the MIS mission. It also encourages students to explore technologies with which they are unfamiliar. The site became operational on October 1, 2012, and has far exceeded our expectations. Initially, we simply wanted to inspire our students by introducing them to people doing impressive work in our area; however, it has turned into a resource that has captured the imagination of not only our students but also the larger technology and entrepreneurial communities in our region. This has been particularly helpful because our MIS program is increasingly drawing students interested in entrepreneurship.

Each profile consists of six questions, which are:
1) Who are you and what are you doing?
2) What hardware are you using?
3) What software and web services do you use?
4) Describe the system you use to manage your time and resources to make sure the right things are getting done.
5) What books, ideas, and people have influenced your thinking and might be of interest to others?
6) What can our state do to increase its creative and entrepreneurial cultures?
*** See http://www.mtusesthis.com to view completed profiles.

In choosing participants we seek out people we believe our students can identify with and ask them to write their profiles in an approachable and engaging way. When visiting the site the reader will immediately notice that we strive to feature a diverse group of occupations and individuals. The profiles range from coders working in their basements to successful entrepreneurs who have sold their companies for hundreds of millions of dollars. Perhaps the most useful feature is that we link to all of the technologies and resources our featured guests reference. For example, if a developer uses

Github to manage software development, we link to the technology. We also ask the participants to share two pictures with our audience. The first image a participant provides is a profile image, while the other is a picture of his or her workspace. In the future we are considering having participants share screenshots of their mobile device's home screen as well.

The management of this project takes some planning and organization, particularly as this project has grown. For example, we currently have over forty-five people working on profiles. We have streamlined our processes and rely heavily on Google Docs. We simply create and share a document with the person completing the profile. That person then completes the profile and subsequent revisions in Google Docs prior to being published on our site. In addition, we rely on two Google Spreadsheets to track profiles that are actively being worked on as well as setting and managing the publishing schedule. The simple tools we use allow us to easily manage this project and are widely available to colleagues around the world. We choose to host our site off of the university's servers because this allows us more freedom in the process. The hosting requirements are modest, and all modern higher education institutions can easily provide the hosting capabilities for a project such as this.

We introduced the site to our students in October 2012 by taking a little time to share the project with students in many different courses ranging from our Intro to MIS course to graduate students within our MBA program. We shared with them our goal for the project and demonstrated how the site worked. We then placed links to the site in our learning management system and announced new profiles as they were published. Our early intention was to get students to begin to explore and learn about people and technology on their own and without the motivation of an exam. We chose not to introduce exam questions related to the profiles in our courses, and we will probably keep that policy in place during the next academic year. Almost immediately we began to receive positive comments from students across our program. As new profiles were published, we would often begin class by discussing the profiles and the technologies our featured participants were using.

Throughout the last academic year, two dominant themes emerged in our students in relation to this project. The first major theme was the surprise our students experienced when they discovered local, enterprising professionals immersed in work our students had not yet begun to consider. We often feature people who have chosen paths outside of the typical corporate environment to pursue more entrepreneurial and creative opportunities, a concept which is consistent with the direction of our school and program. Slowly our students began to look at our region and its business environment in a different and more positive way. In addition, we are able to show how technology is often a critical component that is infused throughout the modern work environment. We then began to invite some of the people we profiled into the classroom as guest speakers, which has been an extremely successful practice.

The next major theme we identified will shock some outside of our discipline, but many MIS faculty will not be the least bit taken aback. This theme concerns the limited exposure of our students to widely available mainstream technologies. The authors of this paper collectively have over 50 years of experience teaching undergraduate and graduate MIS courses, and we believe one of the greatest myths regarding the "millennial" generation is that cohort's technical sophistication. While today's students have grown up with digital technology embedded in their lives, it is our experience that a significant proportion of this group only uses these incredible digital tools in very superficial ways; therefore, discussing the various technologies in class turns out to be a tremendous learning opportunity because it exposes our students to new tools and applications while simultaneously encouraging them to explore in a low-pressure environment. Effectively, we are introducing our students to successful people with whom they may often identify and then showing them that these individuals use technology in efficacious and innovative ways.

The exposure and exploration of these themes in class discussions helps our students see the power of an MIS degree. We emphasize that studying MIS helps prepare people to take advantage of the technology-intensive nature of modern business regardless of the industry or area within which they wish to work. In addition, we show our students that it is incumbent upon them to go beyond the surface of technology and to dive deeper. Once we discuss the profiles, it is evident to our students that their own use of technology often pales in comparison to how these successful people use the same tools. Furthermore, we encourage our students to look

critically at their own use of technology and to realize that their use often favors the simple consumption of information rather than higher level creative and management applications of technology.

While we are thrilled with our students' interest, we are equally happy—and surprised—by the interest in this project by outside constituencies, including the tech and entrepreneurship communities. We hear regularly from members of these groups and their interest in this project. It turns out that our site serves as an important resource for some members of these communities to learn about people, technical tools, and influences of those we profile. This also helps our program connect with these individuals, which allows us to share what we are working on and to get them involved with our program and students. This has also turned out to be a good mechanism for connecting students with employers for internships and job opportunities. In addition, some of those featured have been asked to join our MIS advisory board.

## 3. Google Analytics Report

We are surprised at the reach and the number of viewers our site received from October 1, 2012, through May 31, 2013. Appendix A reflects metrics captured through Google Analytics. The data presented are descriptive measures that simply illuminate the general exposure the site received. As the Google Analytics report indicates, we received over seven thousand unique visitors, which implies that our reach is well beyond our student population. Interestingly, 67.7% of our site visitors are new viewers, while 32.3% are returning viewers, meaning that we have over two thousand viewers that have returned over multiple sessions. In the future we plan to develop a more sophisticated set of measures to specifically capture our students' use of the site and its effect on their choices of majors. We hope to report our findings to colleagues through this journal.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper represents a contribution toward a new category within the case study area of the ISEDJ. The project outlined in this paper has far exceeded our expectations, and we believe colleagues from around the world will find our experience useful and easily see ways they can implement this concept. As the field of MIS continues to mature and evolve, we must strive to find creative and novel ways to engage our students and show them the value and power behind the MIS discipline. We submit the effectiveness of this project is due to the fact that we bring in credible, engaging voices from outside the academy to convey the value of integrating business and technical knowledge, which, at the end of the day, is the story of MIS.

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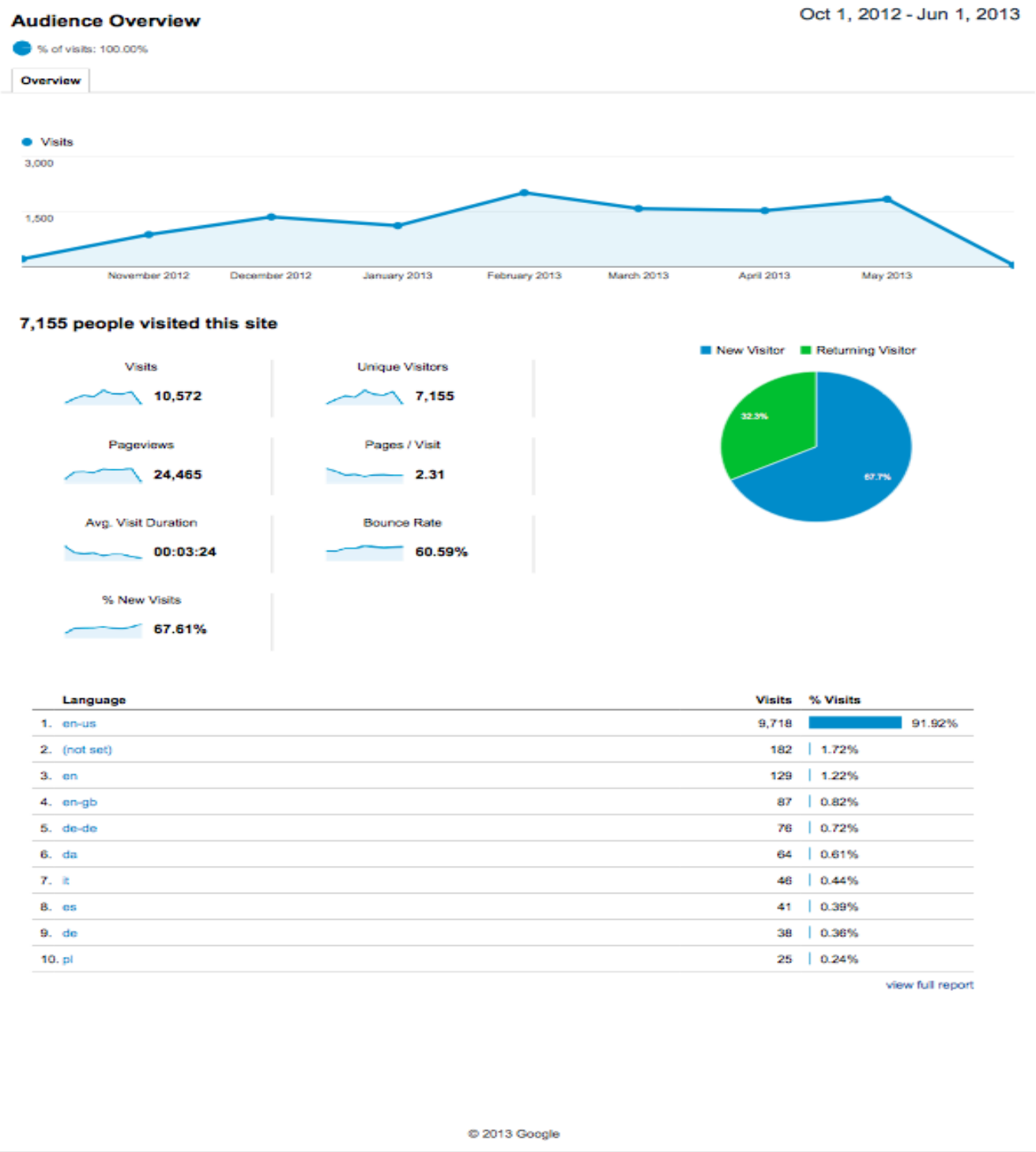
# Appendix A


Audience Overview
Oct 1, 2012 - Jun 1, 2013
% of visits: 100.00%
Overview
Visits
3,000
1,500
November 2012
December 2012
January 2013
February 2013
March 2013
April 2013
May 2013
7,155 people visited this site
Visits
10,572
Unique Visitors
7,155
Pageviews
24,465
Pages / Visit
2.31
Avg. Visit Duration
00:03:24
Bounce Rate
60.59%
% New Visits
67.61%
New Visitor
Returning Visitor
32.3%
67.7%
Language
Visits
% Visits
1. en-us 9,718 91.92%
2. (not set) 182 1.72%
3. en 129 1.22%
4. en-gb 87 0.82%
5. de-de 76 0.72%
6. da 64 0.61%
7. it 46 0.44%
8. es 41 0.39%
9. de 38 0.36%
10. pl 25 0.24%
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