Q&A with Dean Miller

David Miller, PhD, dean of the College of Computing and Digital Media since 2005, recently spoke to In the Loop’s editor about the past, present and future of CDM.

What has been your favorite experience as dean? Developing the digital media side of the college has been one of the biggest challenges but also one of my most enjoyable experiences. We introduced our first media degree, digital cinema, in January 2004, when we were still the School of Computer Science, Telecommunications and Information Systems. As degrees in game development and animation followed, we became the College of Computing and Digital Media to more accurately reflect the diversity of our offerings. Subsequently, we added more media-centric degrees, such as graphic design and interactive and social media.

In some sense, you can view the collaboration with Cinespace Chicago (see page B) as the culmination of the whole process of developing the School of Cinema and Interactive Media. We met the challenge successfully, and it’s very gratifying.

What challenges does the college face? During the past six years, we’ve had tremendous growth. So, another challenge is ensuring that we have the resources to provide students with the best possible experiences. We are continually striving to enhance the college.

How would you describe the CDM student body? Certain consistent themes emerge when you talk to people who employ our students. Whether they are producers and directors at Cinespace, employers involved with the LA Quarter [where students obtain internships in Hollywood] or companies who ask us to send more School of Computing interns their way, the feedback we receive is always positive. We hear that CDM students work hard, they know what they’re doing, they’re productive from the moment they walk in the door and they don’t have attitude. There’s a culture of students striving for success here. And there’s little sense of entitlement. I don’t think that’s always true elsewhere.

I was speaking with an alumnus recently who told me that every interaction he’s ever had with DePaul has been really good. He was a graduate of one of our master’s programs, and he remembers his experience very fondly. Our greatest number of alumni were students in our master’s degree programs, and what I see over and over again—which was not my own graduate experience, by the way—is the affinity felt by our master’s students. After all, they aren’t here nearly as long, and they’re often attending class at night after working all day. But they have such strong, positive memories of being here. There’s a level of personalization that stays with them.

Ultimately, I think it’s a testament to the faculty, the staff and the students themselves. I can’t quite explain it, but it’s very gratifying.

The overall average salary for CDM graduates increased 8 percent over 2011 to $66,413. The average salary for master’s degree recipients is $76,881. 96% of employed 2012 CDM graduates report that their job is related to their degree. 88% were employed and/or pursuing advanced studies six months after degree completion.

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Chicago’s Music Box Theatre, a beautifully preserved 800-seat movie palace that opened in 1929, has seen its share of historical happenings and famous guests, including David Lynch, Patricia Neal, Robert Downey Jr. and many others. But none of them could have received a warmer reception than the student filmmakers whose work was on display at Premiere Film Festival 2013. The 16 films shown at the eighth edition of this annual showcase of student work from the School of Cinema and Interactive Media were selected from hundreds of submissions from graduating seniors and 2012 graduates; all entries were eligible for awards in 17 categories.

Anxiety was a recurring theme for many festival films. “Petrified,” an animated short from Laura Norris (CDM ’13), offered an uneasy vision of a young girl frightened by her encounter in a dense forest with her doppelganger—a “living” stone statue. Alex Keller (CDM ’12) explored a similarly bleak environment in his computer-animated short “The Unreality,” which zeroed in on a noirish cityscape populated by demons from within.

The winner of the Judges’ Choice Award was “I’m Not a Hacker.” Andrew Stegmeyer (CDM MFA ’13) directed this caustically funny look at an information systems technician, played to perfection by Timmy Mayse, whose increasing workplace alienation sends him into a tailspin. In spite of the witty situations and dialogue, the final image of the protagonist alone with his mirrored reflection delivers a sad, lonely and somewhat ominous note.

The Audience Choice Award went to “Me vs. the Tooth Fairy,” which has been making the rounds at various film festivals, including the 2013 International Family Film Festival in Los Angeles and the 2013 Capital City Film Festival in Lansing, Mich. Director Greg Dixon, an MFA student in digital cinema, kept his talented cast in tune with a Dr. Seuss-like rhyming script about a young boy protecting his older sister from a monstrous tooth fairy. Paul Gustafson (CDM ’12), winner of the Judges’ Choice Award for cinematography, lent a sunny glow to this charming fable.

Other notable films included “dead leaves[wings],” an evocative animated film by undergraduate Alex XIII (aka Alex Marback) that celebrates the beauty and fragility of nature, and “Non-com,” graduate student Eric Marsh’s raw look at fallen soldiers from many eras, which garnered Judges’ Choice Awards for directing and ensemble cast. Additionally, “KOFN,” an eerie stop-motion animation by graduate student Shawn Spear that portrays the limitations of automation when dealing with human suffering, was recently selected for the 2013 Chicago International Film Festival City and State collection of shorts.
A brilliant blue sky arches overhead. Chunky cartoon kids stroll forward en masse. Buoyant carnival music trips through the air. This is the merry world of Dumpy, a clumsy elephant whose flexible trunk becomes an extension of the player’s body in a surreal game designed by CDM students. With the guidance of Assistant Professor Brian Schrank, a group of 12 student gamers created “Dumpy: Going Elephants” as a way to experiment with the Oculus Rift, a headset that immerses players in a virtual-reality universe. “We’re trying to push games in a new direction,” Schrank explains. “The headset isn’t available to the public yet, but we wanted to start developing with it this summer, so we were able to buy a pre-release version.”

The hardware resembles oversized ski goggles, except that you can’t see through the front pane. When players slip the Oculus Rift over their heads, a variety of miniature mechanics—LCD monitors, magnifying glasses and cameras—enact a three-dimensional, 360-degree virtual environment. “The Oculus Rift knows when you’re rotating your head, so we wanted to come up with a game that would use that affordance very intuitively,” Schrank shares. “Swinging an elephant trunk is a natural mapping to that.” Turn your head swiftly to the right, and the trunk simultaneously follows suit. More likely than not, the trunk will make virtual contact with some other object in the game, sending it tumbling to the ground.

While “Dumpy: Going Elephants” is a relatively simple concept—the entire point of the game is to knock down boxes, towers, gates and other obstacles in your path—the creative process highlights the college’s collaborative and iterative approach to learning. “We wrote a lot of ideas on the whiteboard,” says Daniel Martinez (CDM ‘13). “We noted what we liked and what features we could make. Then we just had to jump in and start making it.” Schrank adds that the students had been brainstorming via Skype and sharing ideas in a Google Docs file prior to meeting for the weekend riff jam, where they spent 16 hours working on the game. Graduate student Brian Gabor Jr. (CDM ‘12) emphasizes the fluidity of the process. “Four hours after we began, we were able to start playing the game and tweaking it,” he notes. This spiral model of software development is popular in CDM classes because it prioritizes experimentation and evaluation over explicit, predetermined goals. “You have an idea and you prototype it. You test it, evaluate it and then build another prototype,” Schrank explains. “You might think you’re going one direction, but you end up somewhere else, and that’s just as good.”

The finished game is “silly and lighthearted,” in Schrank’s estimation, but he points out that there’s more to the project than simulating a blundering elephant. “Even though we’re having fun, we’re also doing important work. You can invent the future in games because they’re constantly changing.” With CDM students at the helm, the future looks as bright as the virtual sun shining down on Dumpy.

CDM students who worked on “Dumpy: Going Elephants” include:

Gama Barajas
David Bayzer
Nathan Chamot
Joe Elsey
Nick Fanelli
Brian Gabor Jr.

Graham Gilreath
Tom Huffman
Chris Klein
Mike Langley
Daniel Martinez
Stephen Woo
Only two years after Cinespace Chicago Film Studios opened its doors in North Lawndale, DePaul’s School of Cinema and Interactive Media (CIM) has taken up residence on Stage 5, making DePaul the first and only university to create an official alliance with the Toronto-based company. “This opportunity is unlike that of any other film program in the country right now,” says Matt Irvine, associate professor and CIM director. “Our classroom is literally between [the sets of] two network television shows.” At a roomy 20,000 square feet, the soundstage makes even a gigantic Condor crane used for bird’s-eye shots look surprisingly small.

DePaul’s presence at Cinespace makes interaction with other productions not only likely, but expected. “Our students are already getting hired as interns,” Irvine shares. “It’s about being part of the environment and getting involved in the industry.” Assistant Professor Meghann Artes, who was one of the first faculty members to direct a film at Cinespace, observed this phenomenon firsthand. “We’ve had a lot of contact with professionals, since we’re right in the middle of where ‘Chicago Fire’ shoots,” she notes. In addition to that popular NBC show, other projects filming at Cinespace include Denis Leary’s new USA comedy series “Sirens,” the Wachowskis’ film “Jupiter Ascending” with Channing Tatum and the film adaptation of Veronica Roth’s best-selling young adult novel, “Divergent.”

In August, Artes brought 25 students to Cinespace to shoot “Speed Dating.” The quirky short was produced by Project Bluelight, the college’s professional motion picture production arm, and some of the students were working on a live-action film for the first time. “I teach digital animation and visual effects, so many of the students came from that background,” Artes explains. “But I wanted to try a film that incorporated several disciplines.” Artes settled on the technique of pixilation, which involves frame-by-frame animation of the actors. “It’s essentially stop-motion with humans,” she says. Each pose is photographed, and the still photos are sequenced to make the movie.

As the tongue-in-cheek title indicates, the story follows the travails of a young woman whose forays into dating are absurdly amplified thanks to the patently funny possibilities inherent in pixilation. “On the first date, a guy picks up her umbrella and eats it as fast as he can,” Artes says, laughing. Graduate student Alex Sherman (CDM ’12), who helped build the set, reveals the secret behind this visual gag: “We have 40 umbrellas, each an inch shorter than the last.”

“Speed Dating” was shot primarily on a bar set at Cinespace. “The idea is to have these sets for two years but repurpose or repaint them for different movies,” Sherman explains. “Students always want to use bars or restaurants or apartments, but it can be difficult to obtain permits or control sound when you’re on location.” The Cinespace collaboration eliminates those obstacles.

A week earlier, during another Project Bluelight production, a dozen members of the crew crammed onto a living room set to shoot “Nostalgia,” a film written and directed by Associate Professor Ron Eltanal. Some students taped down wires, while others adjusted lights or framed the scene with a state-of-the-art ALEXA camera. “The students have been amazing—just remarkably efficient and productive,” said Eltanal. Nearby, senior A.C. Rupe was working on décor for the set. “Basically, all of Cinespace is an art department,” she shared while trimming prop photos. “It’s kind of a dream. Most people don’t get to do stuff like this when they’re our age.”

It’s not only the students who express wonder at this opportunity. “Faculty are being let loose like kids in a candy store,” Irvine jokes. Artes wistfully affirms this assessment: “It makes me want to go back to school myself!” Outside the university, the collaboration with Cinespace has enhanced DePaul’s status as a leading film school, one that recently landed on The Hollywood Reporter’s list of the Top 25 Film Schools of 2013. Even veteran actors like Chicago theatre legend Mike Nussbaum are getting involved. Nussbaum, who was tapped for the starring role in “Nostalgia,” says, “It’s been my privilege [helping the students].”

The two Project Bluelight films are only the beginning. “I’m already writing a handful of scripts for these sets,” Sherman enthuses, and this can-do spirit pervades Stage 5. “I was here yesterday for 18 hours,” notes senior Neil Luka. “They didn’t ask me to—I volunteered.”
Growing up in Bulgaria, Krassi Hristova’s (CDM ’09, MS ’12) never had access to computers. “Not at school and not at home,” she notes. “I didn’t start learning computers until 17, which is quite late.” Hristova’s family moved to the U.S. with few belongings and hardly any money, but she quickly discovered an affinity for computer science. Recognizing this aptitude, Hristova’s computer science teacher introduced her to DePaul. “The moment I walked into CDM, it felt like home,” she says.

Hristova tackled an impressive array of classes, employment and extracurricular activities at DePaul. Yet some of her favorite experiences took place during slower moments when she dreamed about the future. “I would meet with [Associate Professor] Danny Mittleman to talk about careers and upcoming classes,” Hristova says. “He was a wonderful advisor, and I owe a lot of my success to his guidance.” With Mittleman’s encouragement, Hristova applied for and received a Microsoft technical scholarship; this connection eventually led to two Microsoft internships and then full-time employment.

After 18 months, Hristova left Microsoft to see the world. “Travel is one of my biggest passions,” Hristova explains. “I'm looking at photos of the Parthenon and the Coliseum in history textbooks, but I come from a very poor family, so travel was out of the question and seemed like just another dream.” Now, Hristova has visited 60 countries, and she hopes to log all seven continents by next year.

When Hristova returned to DePaul for a master’s degree, she quickly realized that she couldn’t take five classes each quarter as she had done before. “I tried, and it was the toughest 10 weeks of my life,” she laughs. The graduate experience was different in other ways as well. “Having worked in the industry made the classes come to life,” she explains. “Everything made more sense.” Hristova also benefited from the team approach to learning. “We had to work through problems together.”

Hristova draws on those skills every day in her current position as program manager at Hulu. “It’s a small company, so I work with one or two developers and a product manager,” she shares. “My job is to drive new features and products from conception to launch.” In her role, Hristova focuses on enhancing the user experience. “If you want to make an impact on the world, software is a great place to start,” Hristova says. “With software, you have the opportunity to delight people and help them get a task done faster, so they have more time to do the things they enjoy or be with the people they love.”

Although Hristova’s contributions take place behind the scenes, it doesn’t make the work any less rewarding. “People may not know who I am, but I’m making a product that’s intuitive and that people love to use,” Hristova explains. “I think that’s pretty awesome!”

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For more information on the Campaign, please contact Michelle Bibbs, director of development, at mbibbs@depaul.edu or (312) 362-7072.

Many Dreams, One Mission | IN THE LOOP

“Knowing that I have this support puts my mind at ease.”

After attending two other universities, junior Tracey Mei has finally found a home at DePaul. “I love the faculty and the resources that CDM offers,” she says. “The equipment and labs here are awesome.” The senior animation major, who teaches art classes on the weekends, invoked her work ethic in a recent scholarship application essay. When Mei was awarded the scholarship, she could hardly believe it. “I feel encouraged, and it’s going to motivate me to work even harder,” she notes. “I come from a low-income family, and just knowing that I have this support puts my mind at ease.”

Like more than two-thirds of her classmates, Mei relies on financial assistance to support her educational aspirations. As the university enters the homestretch of the Many Dreams, One Mission Campaign—the largest philanthropic undertaking in DePaul’s history—CDM alumni are coming together to fulfill a $2 million scholarship goal. With 44 percent of the goal achieved as of Sept. 3, 2013, additional gifts will help ensure that CDM continues to attract talented students, regardless of economic background.

Thanks to generous support from alumni and friends, CDM has met 98 percent of the academic and programmatic excellence goal, for a total of more than $9.7 million. The Many Dreams, One Mission Campaign will conclude on June 30, 2014, so there’s still time for alumni to make a gift in support of CDM scholarships or any other fund of their choosing. Gifts of any size make a difference because many small gifts add up to one big financial impact. “I’m very thankful for this scholarship,” Mei says. “My mom was so proud of me, and it really helps our family.”

To make a gift today, please visit giving.depaul.edu.
Nine undergraduate students tackled interdisciplinary research during the Medical Informatics (MedIX) 10-week summer program. Jacob Furst and Daniela Stan Raicu, associate professors in the School of Computing, worked closely with the student teams on projects inspired by the intersection of information technology and medicine, and, specifically, on research related to imaging informatics, such as liver segmentation and computer-aided diagnosis.

For the fourth consecutive year, the CIM Visiting Artists Series offered an inside look at the entertainment industry. Highlights included conversations and workshops with Chicago native Danny Pudi (pictured in blue), who plays Abed Nadir on NBC’s “Community”; Steve Levitan, the co-creator and executive producer of ABC’s “Modern Family”; and Lissa Treiman, a story artist at Disney Feature Animation.

“Don’t Quit Your Day Job,” “Breaking In and Staying In” and “Horror, Franchises and Writing with a Partner” were just a few of the intriguing workshops offered during the Page One Entertainment Writing Conference. The daylong conference concluded with two Oscar nominees: Lucy Alibar, who co-wrote the screenplay “Beasts of the Southern Wild,” and writer Bob Gale, a Hollywood legend who was nominated for the “Back to the Future” franchise. Pictured left to right: Kristyn Benedyk, Georgie Jeffries, Bob Gale, Kay Alden, Lucy Alibar and Janice Ferris Esser.

HerCDM, an organization that supports female students in the college, is off and running. The group registered as an official organization with the Office of Student Involvement during the spring quarter and promptly elected an executive board to provide leadership and guidance. “They have great energy and enthusiasm,” shares HerCDM staff advisor Jaclyn Hugg. “The sky’s the limit with HerCDM!”

Renowned filmmaker Steve James, whose credits include the documentaries “Hoop Dreams” and “The Interrupters,” delivered the college’s commencement address in June. During his address, James urged new graduates to be engaged in their communities. “The world you will inherit and help shape is both a scary and exciting place,” he said. “Revel in the world and then go create something from it, not apart from it.”

Together with the School of Hospitality Leadership in DePaul’s Driehaus College of Business, CDM hosted the “Big Data in Hospitality and Tourism” symposium this past spring. Disney’s Jonathan Beard was the keynote speaker; other presenters included Orbitz employees, staff from the School of Hospitality Leadership and CDM faculty.

High school students got a taste of the college experience during the CIM Summer Academy. The intensive, weeklong program introduced students to the basics of digital cinema production, 3D computer modeling, animation, graphic design and computer game development.
DePaul was recently recognized as one of the best schools in the country for film and media education. When The Hollywood Reporter released its list of the Top 25 Film Schools of 2013, DePaul’s School of Cinema and Interactive Media came in at number 21. The article noted that CIM students “get their hands on cameras from day one” and also highlighted the Cinespace collaboration (see page 8) and Visiting Artists Series.

The award-winning game “Octodad,” originally created by DePaul CDM students in 2010, has prompted a sequel. “Octodad: Dadliest Catch” will soon be available on PlayStation 4. Sony’s tentative release date is early 2014.

Team DePaul, composed of students Edric Delleola, Paul Duszak, Alex McCartney-Gibbs and Linsey Hardwick, won third place at the inaugural World Business Chicago Logistics Hackathon. The computer science students wrote a program in Python to tackle the problem of traffic congestion in Chicago.

Coleman Faculty Fellow

Associate Professor Theresa Steinbach was recently named a faculty fellow by the Coleman Foundation Faculty entrepreneurship Fellows Program. This award recognizes the efforts of professors who support entrepreneurship education at their universities.

“DeClub App”

CDM student Jai Chandarana won a $1,000 scholarship from DePaul’s Center for Creativity and Innovation in the Driehaus College of Business for his mobile application, “DeClub App.” The app helps students interact with clubs, fraternities, sororities and other organizations on campus. Chandarana is pictured at left (fourth from right in the top row) with fellow student winners from the center’s competition.

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“Dumb Day”

“Dumb Day,” an animated short by Kevin Eskew (CDM ’11), was one of eight films selected from 266 submissions to be showcased in the 2013 Cartoon Brew Student Animation Festival.

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National Science Foundation Grant

Associate Professor Jane Cleland-Huang received a three-year, $499,500 grant from the National Science Foundation to investigate search-based approaches for configuring and composing a self-adapting trace engine.

IBM Award

Assistant Professor Alexander Rasin received a 2013 Big Data and Analytics Faculty Award from IBM. Rasin was one of only 14 university professors worldwide to receive the $10,000 award.
You may have noticed that the CDM newsletter has a new look, a new feel and a new name.

Tell us what you think!

Log on to alumni.depaul.edu/newslettersurvey to answer a brief survey about the revamped newsletter.