What it Means to be an iSchool

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Though considered by some to represent a major break with LIS education, Schools of Information (‘iSchools’) might better be seen as representative of efforts to extend concerns with information and human users beyond the agency model of traditional LIS approaches. In this paper, the key attributes of iSchools are identified in terms of intellectual coverage, interdisciplinarity, and research commitment. Rather than formally distinct from LIS programs, iSchools are considered exemplars of a type of program into which more LIS programs might evolve.

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Introduction

In its broadest sense, [information science] stands for the systematic study of information and may include all or any combination of the academic disciplines discussed in this volume. (Machlup and Mansfield, 1983, p. 18)

Schools of Information have proliferated since Machlup and Mansfield’s seminal book, particularly over the last decade. Such has been the growth of iSchools in the early decades of this century that it is perhaps difficult now to appreciate fully the consternation arising from the announcement of school name changes in the late 1990s and early 2000s, first by the University of Michigan, and then by the University of Washington and the University of Texas, Austin. Since then, many other schools have modified, abbreviated, or completely changed the names of their programs to reflect a growing recognition of the intersection of people, information, and technology as the core of our concerns. Currently, among the ALA-accredited LIS programs, over 30% use the general School of Information or Information Studies names, with the majority of these having dropped the word ‘Library’ at some point in the last two decades.

Even though the iSchool community’s origins can be traced to a small group of U.S. schools that offered ALA-accredited degrees in the late 1980s (the so-called ‘gang of three’ consisting of Rutgers, Syracuse, and Pittsburgh; later the ‘gang of four’ with the addition of Drexel), the emergence of a national information school community involved both renaming and the creation of new programs. By the time the iSchool group had grown to 10 schools in 2003, it had admitted two ‘green field’ programs—new academic units created especially for the study of information—at Indiana University (where a School of Informatics was created despite the existence there of a longstanding program in LIS), and at Penn State University, which created its own College of Information Science and Technology in 1999.

There has been growth in information related programs beyond North America also. The iCaucus, an international group of schools who gather under the ‘information school’ umbrella, now numbers 33 members, and includes a diverse range of programs, mainly from the U.S. but including schools in Australia, the UK, Canada, China, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, and Singapore. In sum, the idea of an ‘iSchool’ has evolved to the point where a significant number of universities, including those hosting 14 of the top 15 LIS programs from the most recent
US News and World Reports Rankings, support an ‘iSchool’, and new schools are being created, formed from mergers, or renamed continually.

The history of the iSchool movement is covered in detail in Larsen (2009), while Olson and Grudin (2009) offer an overview of the phenomenal rise of information schools in leading research universities in the US, with emphasis on the role of the annual iConference (first held in 2005 at Penn State) in cementing identity and common purpose. The latter authors asked if the emergence of iSchools was permanent or a passing fad, concluding that most likely, the serious and scholarly study of information was only in its infancy. In the present article I will take a different tack, seeking to outline what makes a school an ‘iSchool’ in order to shed light on the realities and aspirations of what some of us regard as a unique form of academic unit. Of necessity, I will base my review on US schools with which I have some experience, with particular emphasis on my own school at the University of Texas, Austin, but I do claim that the comments made here apply in part or whole to all information schools, both within and outside the US. I argue that iSchools are distinctive from other LIS programs less for their subject emphasis or methodological approaches than for their orientation to the study of information beyond agencies, their commitment to multidisciplinary work, and formal emphasis on research productivity. Further, I argue that these distinctions are more than labels or re-badging of a degree title, they represent tangible and formal commitments to creating a distinct type of academic environment that presents challenges as well as opportunities.

The Coverage and Concerns of iSchools: From Agencies to Contexts

Most academic units are identified at the disciplinary level, expressed in terms of subject coverage, and at face value, it appears that we all understand what schools and departments with such names as ‘history’ ‘computer science’ or ‘engineering’ are doing. However, there is considerably less shared understanding when it comes to schools of information. Unlike equally inclusive (some might say ‘vague’) disciplinary names such as ‘education’ and ‘communication,’ information schools have lacked the necessary familiarity born from decades of existence on campus with which to build recognition. In the second half of the 20th century, as an add-on to existing academic studies in computing and library science, the term information was taken to represent either a greater emphasis on people (in the case of computer science) or on technology (in the case of librarianship) but as a self-contained label, ‘school of information’ often raises questions about content and purpose. In a very practical way, the early formation of the iCaucus was driven by the desire of iSchool deans to share experiences and suggestions for handling these discussions within their own universities, particularly with their upper administrations.

Most descriptions of iSchools reference intellectual focus on the dynamic interaction of people, information and technology (see e.g., Larsen, 2009) with particular emphasis on leveraging the power of technology and information to enhance human and organizational potential. While there are limitations with this operational representation, it is both sufficiently satisfactory for most people who recognize the major impact of IT on all our lives, and sufficiently open to allow for variation in application to any one school. Should one interpret ‘technology’ broadly, and also fold all manner of human activities in as legitimate areas of study, then the triumvirate of people, information, and technology can work well, legitimizing the study of reference services as much as the study of data mining, digital preservation strategies, cybersecurity, or user interface design, all of which represent meaningful
crossings of these axes. More importantly, by placing emphasis on human activities mediated by information and technology, this articulation shifts the field’s focus from agencies of collection such as libraries or archives, which more typically are invoked when describing subject coverage in schools of library and information science, to the contexts in which people, information and technology interact.

The invocation of technology within coverage has some downsides, however. As far back as the work of Shera (1967) and Machlup and Mansfield (1983) there were doubts expressed about how the field of librarianship was embracing technology, with particular concern that technology was being treated only as a tool for demonstrating academic relevance rather than as a genuine basis for disciplinary identity. These concerns are not out of place now when new tools arrive at a breakneck pace and each can become a focus of research study divorced from broader contexts of human behavior, but it is reasonable to claim that information schools have largely avoided this technological trap by emphasizing human and social processes enabled through technology and by allowing faculty interest to draw natural boundaries around areas of research concern. Like most distinctions drawn in comparing disciplines however, one would be advised not to treat the line as always clearly drawn.

In my view, this distinguisher of iSchools in terms of coverage is real but subtle, and one has to dig below to surface to recognize it, particularly at the curricular level, though it is a thesis waiting to be conducted. From one viewpoint, LIS curricula are more focused on services and functions within the information lifecycle, with some emphasis on roles and responsibilities for professionals in these specific areas. Technology, in this educational orientation, is conceived more as supportive or supplementary to the skills and practices of the profession. Such an orientation is less obviously found in iSchools curricula where the move away from an agency-focused model of information has led to coursework treating information in more contextual terms e.g., through the social, cultural or individual dynamics of creation and use, often coupled with deeper computational content within the coursework. In theory, this approach serves the student well, no matter their final career trajectory, but it can prove difficult to determine the direct impact of coursework on careers, and this opens the door to some critics who portray such a curriculum as divorced from current or traditional professional roles (Gorman, 2004).

This shift of emphasis also has consequences for those iSchools seeking ALA-accreditation (currently 17 of the 33 members of the iCaucus) and even within the general framing of coverage under the people, information, and technology axes, there are alternative or complementary articulations of disciplinary coverage reflected in various iSchool web pages and publications. At the University of Texas, we consider information to be a means of accelerating discovery through three core processes: curation of important resources, organization of information for management and use, and understanding and enabling interactions with information in technologically-appropriate ways that work best for real people. Within this framing, libraries can provide one context of study, but they are not privileged as more important than many other possible contexts. Other iSchools have their own interpretations and expressions of coverage too. To be clear, more traditional schools also cover technology and people. However they often do so within a narrower context, placing particular emphasis on this organizational setting in which the practices occur, and in so doing emphasizing particular organizations (libraries and archives, for example) as more important to their focus than others. To be an iSchool is to place greater emphasis on broader human activities over these concerns with the specific agency or organizational form
wherein the information practices occur. This can lead to very different curricula offerings, distinct research studies, different funding sources and requirements for research, and very different publication trajectories for faculty in iSchools, all of which can increase tensions between faculty and some professional constituencies. Though subtle, I would argue that this distinction in emphasis is sufficiently real, at both research and curricular levels, to have consequences across the life of the academic program as described below.

The Significant Interdisciplinary Practices of iSchools

In recent decades, most university administrations have made positive noises about the need for interdisciplinary collaboration across traditional academic disciplines, and the term ‘interdisciplinary’ has become ‘a mantra of science policy’ according to Metzger and Zare (1999). Cluster hires or cross-departmental appointments, joint degrees and research collaborations are considered signs of intellectual diversity and vigor. The push in part comes from the recognition, at the heart of the iSchool movement, that pressing intellectual problems by their nature will cross existing disciplinary boundaries, and the best chance of progress is yielded by collective and interdisciplinary efforts.

Interdisciplinary activity within universities comes at a cost. At the faculty level, joint or cross appointments can be problematic for junior faculty who need to satisfy sometimes competing requirements in two or more units. Where recognition of this results in the appointee committing to one unit for tenure purposes, the very interdisciplinary work one is hired to deliver can suffer. For this reason, it is often argued that only senior hires, brought in with tenure, should pursue this path, a strategy which itself comes with costs and limitations for changing academic culture. Professional schools in particular have been cited as especially vulnerable in establishing credibility in interdisciplinary efforts (Brewer, 1999).

To be direct, iSchools recognize that pressing problems of information access, use, storage, and exploitation in our world are beyond the purview of one single discipline. In the parlance of interdisciplinary advocates, universities are organized around disciplines, while problems are not. No matter the claims for authority from one field or another, seriously tackling the information concerns of privacy, security, quality, accessibility and usability, to name but a few, requires knowledge beyond any single extant field. This recognition has given rise to faculty hiring in information schools that is diverse by typical academic disciplinary standards. At the University of Texas iSchool, there are 12 different PhDs on a faculty of 23, a rate that is not out of the norm for iSchools across the U.S. Coupled with the commitment to study information broadly across human and social contexts, iSchools practice a form of multi and interdisciplinary work that highlights the challenges and rewards of such efforts. This is a model that might serve as a useful guide for upper administrations if examined broadly.

There is a price to such committed interdisciplinarity, however. True discipline-spanning collaboration is complex, and what the iSchools provide—rather uniquely among contemporary academic units—is a shared research and education space within which this diverse faculty must operate together. This embrace of interdisciplinarity has many practical impacts that further characterize the iSchools. Promotion and tenure committees for example, must learn to recognize the distinct publication emphases of faculty trained in, say, the monograph rather than conference paper or journal article traditions. Funding programs for iSchool faculty can involve different expectations or needs for support by equally productive faculty at similar ranks. Furthermore, setting up interdisciplinary work involves an extra layer of articulation that can slow
down productivity, and it is important that such processes and efforts are recognized and considered in reviews of faculty productivity and scholarship. As Mansilla and Gardner (2003) established in their review of interdisciplinary research efforts across several problem areas, understanding what constitutes productivity is itself a challenge to be negotiated. To make interdisciplinary research and teaching work requires a commitment to the ongoing support and discussion of important though sometimes indirect aspects of faculty work.

It is conceivable that iSchools serve as contemporary academic experiments on their respective campuses. While LIS programs have historically drawn faculty from beyond the ranks of LIS doctoral graduates, there are few recent examples in the academy of whole schools intentionally created by drawing together faculty from the humanities, the natural sciences, and the social sciences to work collectively under the same disciplinary heading on shared problems. The challenges associated with doing this are thorny and ongoing but the quick growth of many information programs suggests that the efforts have met with some success as measured by typical academic metrics of faculty hiring, external support, and student demand.

**The Research Values of iSchools**

In some respects, the intellectual values of librarianship have survived (and perhaps even prospered) through the emergence of iSchools, and the true legacy concerns of access, information as a social resource, and the importance of privacy and security of information are as deeply embedded in most iSchools as they are in traditional librarianship programs. This is actually one characteristic of iSchools that places them in alignment rather than opposition to LIS departments, especially when both are compared to academic programs in Computer Science, Business, or Communications. While the term ‘user-centered’ has become more of a marketing slogan than a meaningful methodological descriptor, iSchools and LIS programs remain distinguishable from other types of programs claiming interest in information by recognizing and promoting a treatment of humans in the information cycle as more than customers, clients, or consumers. That is not to say there is no business or economic assessment of use and information value in LIS or iSchools, but such considerations are only part, not all that is deemed of interest when focusing on users.

A discrimination that can be made between typical iSchools and many LIS programs, however, is tied to the emphasis each places on research, and more importantly, how the productivity and promotion of faculty is tied to research output rather than teaching or service activities. There has always been a tension in the LIS community between the academic role and professional role (or identity) of the program. Gorman (2004) among others singles out the commitment to research over teaching for particular criticism in his attack on LIS education. This commitment to research productivity, however, is a genuine mark of identity among iSchools, and is manifest in the recruitment, evaluation, and promotion of faculty, and in the expected contribution each school makes to the intellectual life of their host university.

It is important to recognize that other schools within the LIS fold also have a research focus, and a longstanding one, but the emphasis on researching fundamental information problems in society is key to the iSchool identity and a main criterion for membership of the iSchool caucus. In intellectual terms, iSchools have been placed by some such as Olson and Grudin (2009) in Pasteur’s Quadrant, as exemplifying use-inspired basic research as opposed to pure basic or applied research characterized by Bohr or Edison’s quadrants. In theory this distinguishes iSchools from programs less concerned with solving real-world problems, while extend-
the research focus of iSchools to any problem space impacting information. In more measurable terms, early membership of the iCaucus was based on meeting certain external funding levels for research, as evidence of the seriousness of a unit’s commitment to research endeavors. Such an index is less meaningful now that many LIS programs started to secure funding through a rejuvenated IMLS during the early part of the century, even while remaining primarily committed to professional preparation. In practical terms, this commitment to a research program has tangible consequences on publication venue and intellectual identity, which again takes the faculty beyond the usual outlets for LIS research and requires iSchools to demonstrate value in comparable ways to other academic units in a research university. Similarly, such a commitment has impacted faculty hiring, the nature of doctoral, masters, and undergraduate education in information, and the placement of graduates from such schools. In as much as we seek to outline the distinguishing characteristics of iSchools, this research orientation comes into relief, though I freely acknowledge that such a claim raises justifiable questions about the indices of research emphasis, quality, and impact we might use to measure such commitments beyond funding levels.

The Dynamics of Division: No Neat Boundaries

In considering the identity and meaning of the iSchool label, the argument I make here is that formal distinctions and clear delineations are less appropriate or observable than might have imagined. There are differences between iSchools and other types of programs, most noticeably traditional LIS programs, but they are largely differences of emphasis and commitment than of subject matter and method. iSchools have moved their focus on information beyond an agency-based orientation with its emphasis on the library, archive, or collection-owning organization towards a more contextual analysis of information use in the lives of people, organizations and cultures. They have done so with an embrace of the technological and computational infrastructures mediating contemporary information practices. Further, iSchools have necessarily had to seek out faculty from a variety of disciplines in a conscious act to grapple constructively with the types of intellectual problems they seek to explore. This deliberate mixing of intellectual strengths focused on broad information problems forces iSchools to address, both within their own units and more broadly within their own campuses, the nature of productive academic research outside of an established disciplinary model. By shifting discourse also more directly toward research rather than professional education, iSchools have engaged in a dynamic that has potential to shape universities more broadly than was ever the case with schools more firmly identified with professional education.

It is important to recognize then that being an iSchool is less about the name and more about the orientation. Consequently, there is no formal division between those schools that have chosen to change their name and become paid-up members of the iSchools caucus and those who have not. At best, any such division is fuzzy. It is more accurate to view the iSchools as those with a formal commitment to research and the interdisciplinary study of information in the life of people, society and culture. This commitment manifests itself in tangible ways that force a level of self-assessment, articulation of expectations, curricula, and faculty hiring patterns, which are distinctive. The challenges faced in becoming an iSchool are significant on any campus but the emergence of the iSchools, now in its second decade at least, is both a recognition of the importance of information in our world and a chance to ensure the values of user-centeredness and context for information studies are promoted within
a larger intellectual realm. In one sense, this is a realization of the vision of Shera, Machlup, Borko and others; testimony to the belief that information as a component of human culture warrants study by the best minds, regardless of intellectual origins or alliances.

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References


