

# The Audacious Vision of Information Schools

## ISchools 的創新視野

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Keywords (關鍵詞) : iSchools (資訊學校聯盟) ; Library and Information Science (圖書資訊學) ; Information Education (資訊教育)

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### 【Abstract】

In recent years the emergence of iSchools in North America and the spread of this phenomenon to other parts of the world has attracted a great deal of attention. To be numbered among the iSchools has become an aspirational goal for schools and colleges engaged in information education and research. The definition of an iSchool has remained abstract and general - relying upon an overarching statement of intent - the study of interactions between information, technology and people. Member iSchools have broad curricula, diverse academic programs and interdisciplinary research enterprises. This paper explores what they have in common by answering three questions: (1) What are Information Schools? (2) What is Information? and (3) How do researchers in the information field study information? The iSchools also share a vision of the future for information education and research. The process followed by iCaucus members for articulating this vision is described.

### 【摘要】

近年來，iSchools 聯盟在北美地區快速成長，已經引起世界各地的注意。資訊科學領域的教育與研究相關學院多以能夠成為 iSchools 成員為目標。iSchools 的定義是抽象或概括的，根據其意向聲明的框架，iSchools 所關切的是對資訊、科技與人之間的互動。iSchools 的成員提供多元的課程、多樣化的學術研究計畫，和跨學科整合的研究範疇。本文藉由三個問題探討 iSchools 的相似之處：(1) 什麼是 Information Schools？(2) 什麼是資訊？(3) 在資訊領域中研究者如何研究資訊？iSchools 對於未來的資訊教育與研究追求著共同的願景，本文中也將呈現 iCaucus 成員對於該願景的闡述以及追求願景的歷程。

### Introduction

In February 2011, The University of Washington Information School will be hosting the 6<sup>th</sup> annual iConference. The first iConference was held in 2005 at Pennsylvania State University. Subsequent iConferences have been held at the University of Michigan (2006); at the University of California, Los Angeles (2008); at the University of North Carolina,

Chapel Hill (2009); and at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (2010). Past iConferences have had approximately 300 faculty, students, and information professionals in attendance and have been successful in building a sense of community around the information field, bringing together people who might not otherwise engage with one another and helping people share and exchange their views associated with interdisciplinary research. The iConference in Seattle is likely to be the largest gathering of iSchool researchers ever. It has been designed to attract scholars, teachers and professionals from around the world. As we finalize the program for this conference, I am drawn to reflect on how far the iSchool movement has progressed since the first iConference held at Pennsylvania State University (PSU) in 2005.

Early in 2006, I was asked by the editor of the ASIS&T Bulletin to prepare a short article reporting on the iConference at PSU. My co-authors were Debra Richardson, Dean of the iSchool (the School of Information and Computer Sciences) at the University of California Irvine; and Mike Eisenberg, Dean Emeritus and Professor at the University of Washington Information School. We described the purpose of this first gathering of iSchool faculty and students as an open discourse whereby all participants might engage in identifying the baseline attributes and qualities that define their affiliation as “information schools.” The focus was to be on essentials - on trying to articulate the essence of an “information school” and the “information field.”

This goal was ambitious. For more than forty years, the information field has attempted to articulate clear statements of identity, core values, and distinctive qualities. We have learned that such a discourse risks the exclusion of voices, the alienation of important partners, and the creation of barriers that can threaten future collaboration. If our formula for identifying what is essential to being an information school is too

narrow, we risk drawing artificial boundaries that may have long-lasting impact. Alternatively, too broad a definition runs the risk of becoming too abstract and mostly meaningless, thus trivializing the Information School movement (or iSchool movement). It is important to strike the right balance; to address the most serious and important questions.

Not surprisingly, this first collective engagement with the question of iSchool identity did not succeed in forging clear, agreed-upon, and enduring statements describing the value and purpose of Information Schools. In the years since, the iSchool movement (later known as the iSchool Project and then the iSchool Caucus) has made several attempts at strategic communications and marketing. Much of this effort has been channeled through the iSchools.org website and through the annual iConference. The clarity of messaging an iSchool value proposition has also become a factor of the success of individual iSchools. The 28 iSchools that are currently members of the iSchool movement are top-ranked schools internationally. They collectively and individually set an aspirational standard against which other schools offering information education and research might measure their performance. The work of member iSchools therefore provides an ambitious goal for schools that seek an affiliation with this movement. The work of communication is therefore paramount. The iSchool Caucus (or iCaucus) has employed a half-time communications coordinator to assist with this effort.

It is true to say that the iSchool movement over recent years has continued to gain momentum and to add new members. The movement is now global, including schools from thirteen of the United States as well as Canada, China, Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland and Singapore. Schools across the world that focus upon information education and research are now seeking an affiliation with the iSchool movement as a statement about their own

identity and the quality and impact of their work. The Consortium of iSchools of the Asia Pacific (CiSAP) is an example. This effort to promote the establishment of iSchools in the Asia-Pacific Region and to foster collaboration and exchange of new ideas is, in my view, an indicator of the success of the iSchool movement overall.

While the iSchool movement can certainly claim success in terms of momentum, broader acceptance, and deeper understanding among key constituencies and stakeholders, a number of fundamental questions remain. Perhaps the answers to these questions will always be contested and controversial. Nonetheless, it is in my opinion important to continue our attempts to be clearer with our response to four questions that are fundamental for Information Schools: (1) what are Information Schools, (2) what is the information field, (3) what is information, and (4) how does the field study information? Let me begin with a brief disclaimer. The answers presented briefly and incompletely in this paper are my answers to these key questions. They might be used to explain, somewhat, my approach to building and leading the University of Washington Information School. These views should not be regarded as representative of the iCaucus; they are presented here merely to provoke further discussion by symposium participants.

### ***What are Information Schools?***

Information Schools are intellectual communities made up of researchers and scholars from diverse academic and practice-based contexts, who apply different methods and theories to understand a wide range of Information issues. iSchools are interdisciplinary; including the fields of information science, library science, computer science, engineering, education, history, philosophy, sociology, management and others. Broadly, iSchools focus on the relationships among information, technology, and people. They share an interest and commitment to

ensuring that people can find and effectively use the information they need to complete tasks, make decisions, and advance their personal and professional goals. This is characterized by a commitment to learning and understanding the role that information plays in human activities. Information Schools believe that expertise in all forms of information is required for advances in science, business, education, and culture. This expertise must include understanding the uses and users of information as well as the various contexts in which information is exchanged, including those facilitated by technology. The iSchools do not regard themselves as the only home for this sort of research. Rather, their aim is to create a welcoming venue for embracing the opportunities and challenges of interdisciplinary research in the information field.

### ***What is the Information Field?***

The information field draws on an interdisciplinary community of scholars, researchers, educators and practitioners to study information, information provision and information use. The goal of the field is to enhance the use of information by people in individual, social and organizational contexts.

The primary object of study for the field is information - but what is information? Attempts to answer this question have been debated so thoroughly in the literature that some critics have claimed that the field cannot define or even agree on a definition of its primary concept. This is not the case. It is true that there are a number of views on the definition of information but this makes perfect sense - the concept is complex; the more we pursue it through scholarship, research and professional practice, the more thorough and far-reaching our conceptual and operational definitions are likely to become. The unraveling of the complexity of the concept through study by researchers in the information field does not mean that we cannot reach agreement on the way the term information is viewed by the field at any point in time or for a particular context. The success of the Information

School movement and the presence of iSchools in colleges and universities world-wide is evidence of a broader acceptance that information can be an object of study, a focus for academic programs and professional practice. The goal of research, scholarship, creative work and professional practice in this field is to support and enhance human engagements with information and technology. When we consider those activities most closely associated with human flourishing - learning, discovery, innovation, problem solving, decision making and recreation - the value of work in the information field is clear. For humans to flourish, they depend upon, and are supported by the effective use of information. This is what practitioners and researchers in the information field do. At the University of Washington we sum this up in our mission statement with the phrase “**We make information work.**”

### ***What is Information?***

Information is a “thing” (content, document, form) with potential value and application that becomes apparent with its use by an individual (Buckland, 1991). As an object or thing, information can be owned and shared. It can be private, public, open or secure. Information can be represented, catalogued, classified, organized, and stored. It can be enhanced by re-structuring, packaging, abstracting and indexing. Information has value. It is needed by organizations and by individuals. When it is used, information can alter an individual’s knowledge structures and facilitate discovery, decision making, and the completion of tasks and projects.

### ***How do researchers in the information field study information?***

Researchers in the information field study information as an object or thing. They also study information as a process - the use of this object or

thing by people. They study how the use of information by people can be enhanced through professional intervention, and the design and development of services, systems and technologies. Information researchers study information behaviors, processes, technologies, systems, services and resources. They study behaviors such as information needing, seeking and use. They are interested in processes like knowledge organization, cataloging, information management, information literacy and problem solving. They assess the need for, and design, build and evaluate information systems, services, and technologies. They are interested in information issues and policies and they study information contexts such as libraries or information use in organizations and companies. The information researcher is interested in specific components and a blending of all things that ultimately facilitate the effective connection of people with the information that they need and use in their daily professional and personal lives.

To achieve this goal, information researchers apply an amalgam of perspectives, approaches and techniques assembled from constituent subfields and disciplines [1]. Information researchers generally acknowledge the need to use a range of methods, analytical approaches, theoretical and conceptual frameworks and orientations when examining complex information problems. Information researchers may work solo, but they have a history of seeking and accepting input from other disciplines and fields of study (both formal and informal) as a key to enhancing the rigor and quality of their research, scholarship, creative work and professional action. In this way, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary collaboration is a hallmark and a mindset of this intellectual community where individual researchers accept that their original way of thinking about information phenomena may morph, through collaboration, into something else - an intellectual artifact of the collision and synthesis of alternative viewpoints. It is within this overlap and intersection that novel approaches to the study of information are occurring. It is here that we find the source and the momentum for the iSchool movement.

## *Setting a vision for iSchools*

At the iCaucus meeting in February, 2010, concerns were expressed by iCaucus members that the iSchool movement was in need of a clear statement of intent - a vision and goals - against which its priorities, future investments and the relevance of initiatives being proposed could be evaluated. This statement should articulate where iCaucus members see the iSchool movement heading in the next ten years and describe how these goals will be achieved. As the chair of the iSchools Caucus, I have, therefore, been working for the past six months on a Vision Statement for iSchools. All members of the iCaucus have been actively engaged in this process.

Our process began with a small working group comprised of myself, Liz Liddy, Dean of the iSchool at Syracuse, and Andrew Dillon, Dean of the iSchool at the University of Texas. We developed a draft statement. This included a vision statement and a set of goals which were distributed to members of the iCaucus. The first step was to reach agreement on the vision statement. Our initial draft incorporated the following key statements:

By 2020:

1. The iSchool Movement will have spread around the world.
2. There will be a high-quality, highly visible and influential iSchool on every major campus.
3. The identity and purpose of Information Schools will be widely understood and valued.
4. The information field will be recognized as a core academic discipline underpinning a vital profession.
5. Large and small companies will give preference to Information School graduates when recruiting future employees.

6. Funding agencies will run programs specifically designed to support the research activity and academic programs of Information Schools.
7. Policy makers will turn to Information Schools for data and advice on how to improve or develop information services for the community.

Each statement was revised through discussion with members of the Caucus. The revised statements were then reassembled into a vision statement by the iCaucus chair and the iCaucus communications coordinator. This new version was distributed to members of the iSchool movement via E-mail for further discussion and feedback. The result was the formulation of three alternative versions of the vision statement which were once again scrutinized and discussed. Finally, a vote was taken. Members were asked to indicate (1) I prefer this version (2) I can live with this version (3) I cannot live with this version. Through this process the iCaucus developed its new Vision Statement:

*The iSchool Caucus seeks to maximize the visibility and influence of its member schools, and their interdisciplinary approaches to harnessing the power of information and technology, and maximizing the potential of humans. We envision a future in which the iSchool movement has spread around the world, and the information field is widely recognized for creating innovative systems and designing information solutions that benefit individuals, organizations, and society. iSchool graduates will fill the personnel and leadership needs of organizations of all types and sizes; and our areas of research and inquiry will attract strong support and have profound impacts on society and on the formulation of policy from local to international levels.*

We are now embarking on the next step which is to articulate iCaucus goals. A drafted set of goals has

been distributed to iCaucus members for revision and for augmentation with additional goals. The first draft of the goals was as follows:

The goals of the iSchool Caucus are to:

1. Lead and promote the Information Field—Member schools are committed to collective efforts that will shape the information field, communicate its purpose and value and enhance its visibility.
2. Create agile and more effective responses to strategic research and academic initiatives—Member schools work together to develop research and academic partnerships
3. Provide support for, and solutions to shared challenges—Member schools provide one another with mutual support and a collective identity; helping constituent schools to face local challenges and to solve problems.

When this set of goals has been resolved, members will be asked to develop a set of actions that support each goal. The aim here is to make each goal concrete in its intention and outcome. For example, actions that support the draft goal 3 might include:

1. Data sharing and benchmarking,
2. Regular meetings of the iSchool Deans (face to face at least annually, and preferably semi-annually; via telephone every two months), and
3. Shared access to the iSchool brand and use of iSchool communication tools.

The resulting set of goals and actions will provide a framework for decisions on where the iCaucus will invest its resources and move the organization towards achieving its audacious vision.

## Conclusion

The iSchool movement can claim many successes. I am regularly asked by leaders of schools that focus upon information education and research how they can

become an iSchool. Affiliation with the iSchool movement is considered a positive affirmation of the quality and impact of the creative work, scholarship, research and academic programs of a member school. It is important that we maintain standards for member schools as we continue to encourage new members and to motivate and support those schools that aspire to membership. We do need to continually revisit the issue of identity, value and purpose. As the movement grows and becomes even more visible we will be asked by well-meaning potential stakeholders about what we do and why it is important. We should, therefore continue to refine our message about the information field and the impact of information research and educational programs. We can do this most effectively through a clearly articulated vision, supported by goals that have demonstrable actions. My aim as the iCaucus coordinator over the next two years is to establish the framework necessary for achieving an audacious vision for iSchools aspiring towards a future where:

*the iSchool movement has spread around the world, and the information field is widely recognized for creating innovative systems and designing information solutions that benefit individuals, organizations, and society.*

## Notes

[1] The study of information is complex and overarching attracting the interest of researchers with backgrounds in a range of disciplines. There have been numerous attempts to identify the disciplines that contribute to the study of information. Over the years these have been reported to include documentation, library science, computer science, linguistics, mathematics, cognitive science, psychology, communication, logic, operations research, graphic arts, (Borko, 1968), documentation of research and development, abstracting, indexing, behavioral science, micro- and macro-publishing and video and optical science (Herner, 1984), management science, information

theory, electronics, economics, classification science, systems science, artificial intelligence (Saracevic, 1992), Cybernetics, general systems theory (Rayward, 1996), language, ethnography, semiotics, (Buckland, 1999), statistics, communications, law and government (Hawkins, 2001). Those who have reported the composite of disciplines that contribute to the information field claim that the field is proud of its interdisciplinarity (Beghtol, 1995; Saracevic, 1992) and that this interdisciplinary evolution is ongoing (Saracevic, 1999)

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