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Tradition and Transition: The Journey of an iSchoolDeep in the Heart of Texas

Loriene Roy* and Rachel N. Simons**

The University of Texas at Austin-78712
*E-mail:*loriene@ischool.utexas.edu;**rnsimons@utexas.edu*

ABSTRACT

The School of Information at the University of Texas at Austin (iSchool at UT-Austin) has evolved to be a unique program within the larger discipline of Library and Information Studies by incorporating traditional educational delivery while expanding the interdisciplinary nature of its faculty and curriculum. This article places our iSchool's experiences within the narrative of the iSchool movement and points to various aspects of change, loss, and opportunity within the school's history. The past and present status of both the graduate and undergraduate curricula at the iSchool at UT-Austin is described. We offer this story of the UT-Austin iSchool's development as an example that helps deepen an understanding of the impact of such programs and their transformations on their students and faculty, as well as on the field of Library and Information Science (LIS).

Keywords: LIS education, united states, graduate LIS curriculum, undergraduate LIS curriculum, ischools, LIS faculty

1. INTRODUCTION

Founded at the University of Texas (UT) in 1948, the program that we now call 'The iSchool at UT-Austin' was first known as The Graduate School of Library Science (GSLS). Students graduating from UT-Austin's GSLS received a Master of Library Science (MLS) degree. By the late 1960s, the GSLS added the option of a Certificate of Advanced Study (CAS), as well as a Doctoral program.

In 1980, the school's name was changed to the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) as its curriculum expanded to include more Information Science courses. Accordingly, the awarded degree for the program also changed in name, to the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS). Twenty years later, the name of the degree changed again, to the Master of Science in Information Studies (MSIS); three years after that, in 2003, the name of the program itself was changed to the School of Information (abbreviated as 'iSchool').[1] This new iSchool at the University of Texas at Austin joined the programs at both The University of Michigan and The University of Washington, becoming the third official iSchool.[2]

Today, the UT-Austin iSchool has a steady enrollment of some 300 graduate students and is a school, department, and college unto itself. The iSchool's primary degree remains the MSIS degree, which is accredited by the American Library Association (ALA) as a terminal professional degree for librarian positions. In addition, the iSchool officially began enrolling students in a new executive Master's program on Security and Identity Management (MSIMS) in January 2016. This degree is offered in cooperation with the UT-Austin Center for Identity. Additionally, the iSchool includes approximately 30 students in its PhD in Information Studies program.

To understand iSchools and the iSchool movement, a general literature search was performed in ScoUT(the discover tool on the webpage of the University Libraries at UT-Austin) and in the Library & Information Science Source specific database, using the search term 'iSchool' in both. Second, content was taken from the UT-Austin iSchool's website (https://www.ischool.utexas.edu) and course syllabi. Finally, the experiences of both authors were also taken into account.

Although this paper tells a story about one particular iSchool, this case can help deepen our understanding of the impact of such programs on their students and faculty, as well as on the field of LIS as a whole. We have chosen to focus primarily on the most tangible feature of an academic program: its curriculum. The paper is presented in five segments: A brief history of the iSchool at UT-Austin; Background on the iSchool movement; An explanation of the past and present Master's program requirements within the iSchool at UT-Austin; An overview of undergraduate education within the iSchool at UT-Austin; and, finally, Some reflections and conclusions.

2. THE iSCHOOL MOVEMENT

Much has been written about the iSchool movement in articles that cover its history and purpose,[2, 3] compare it with library-focused schools (sometimes called 'L-schools' or 'LIS schools'),[4, 5] track the overlap and collaboration of interdisciplinary research publications within and between iSchools,[6, 7] or interview individuals involved with the movement.[8, 9] Other articles analyse the different

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specialties that may be found within an iSchool, such as data curation, archives, eScience, or usability.[10] A special issue of the *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* covered iSchools specifically,[11] as did a special section of the *Bulletin of the Association of Information Science and Technology.* In comparison to these analyses of the iSchool movement as a whole, the current activities of those participating within iSchools may be presented in the proceedings of the annual iConference, now an international conference.

According to Bias, Marty, and Douglas, iSchools emerged from several needs, including 'the need for Library and Information Studies (LIS) pedagogy to embrace new technologies, and the need for an integrated approach to the study and practice of information use by human beings.'[12] While some articles point to the first meeting of the 'iCaucus' and its official founding of the iSchools organisation in 2005 as the beginning of the iSchools movement, other authors trace the origins of the iSchool movement further back to discussions in 1988 among a 'Gang of Three' that, by 2003, had expanded to an acknowledged 'Gang of Ten.'[13]

Now an official non-profit organisation, the iCaucushas its own bylaws, board of directors, nominating committee, membership committee, executive committee, and member schools. The criteria for membership in the iCaucus are both qualitative and quantitative: A potential iCaucus member must reflect strong external funding for research, support a doctoral program that graduates students over at least three years, and carry a strong reputation for both research and teaching.[14] Currently, there are over 65 iSchools, more than half of which are outside the U.S.[9]

Many people affiliated with an iSchool today feel that these programs are critical sites for innovation and interdisciplinary research within LIS and beyond.[15, 16] Yet the establishment and presence of iSchools has not been completely without conflict or examination, particularly around the appropriateness of programs' curriculum. Many individuals had voiced differing opinions about the correct balance of theory and practice-with LIS faculty sometimes perceived to be sacrificing training within the program for a theory-based education, or overly focusing on concepts over skills.[17]

With the advent of the iSchool movement, much dissent focused on the changing brand or identity of these new iSchools, particularly as the concept of information became more prominent and the word library was dropped from program names and degrees.[18] For example, Jaeger, *et al*., summarise the non-supportive iSchool sentiments within the LIS community as follows:'The iSchool movement is not universally celebrated by all scholars in LIS. Some have asserted that iSchools embody a discipline without definable content, a branding exercise, a corporatisation of LIS, and even a drift away from the library tradition, among other criticisms.'[19] Despite these changes (or perhaps because of them), data show that enrollment in iSchool programs did not decrease as these programs shifted from their traditional groundings as L-schools and transitioned into the iSchool identity.[20]

Like many of these programs, the iSchool at UT-Austin descended from a traditional L-school program that focused specifically on librarianship. Even before the shift to the 'iSchool' identity, however, students and alumni had voiced their desire for changes within the program's curriculum. Students had already questioned the necessity of taking the core introductory course and often viewed adjuncts as their bridge to the 'current' work environment. In contrast to a lack of curriculum addressing contemporary technology in the LIS workplace, employers expected new graduates to be technology experts and guides for their institutions. Additionally, a few years after graduation, many alumni would question why they had not been offered more coursework on management skills, especially dealing with personnel or human resources.

Such complaints, in addition to the changing atmosphere of the iSchool movement, contributed to the eventual re-design of the Master's degree program and curriculum at UT-Austin as the degree shifted from the MLIS to the MSIS.

3. CHANGING MASTER'S PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

Traditional L-schools were known both for producing graduates who were generalists and for cultivating graduates with specific specialty strengths. Students in the UT-Austin GSLIS selected their 36 hours of coursework (12 three-credit courses, minimum) to demonstrate that they would satisfy the entry-level requirements for working in their chosen area of school, public, academic, or special libraries. Students built their individual programs by completing their core courses-with one type of library course as their central elective, and then with other electives selected to illustrate their personal workforce orientation. In this way, students started to 'specialise' in the UT-Austin program within their electives.

The emergence of archival education significantly changed the direction of LIS programs and, eventually, iSchools.[21] Universities (including the UT-Austin GSLIS) began hiring full-time tenure-track faculty in the 1980s to teach archival courses. At UT-Austin, this focus also particularly included the arrival of faculty, equipment, and funding for a conservation/preservation program. However, the later departure of grant funding greatly diminished this focus, although preservation courses are still offered today as electives taught by a senior lecturer and several adjuncts.

While the iSchool at UT-Austin was an L-school (the GSLIS), Master's students took core required classes intended to teach a balance of skills and theory. These courses originally represented nearly half of the 12 classes needed for graduation and included a general introductory course, along with courses in management, reference,

descriptive cataloging, and research.The number and focus of the core courses changed over time and as the degree changed from the MLIS to the MSIS, often in response to new faculty hires, retirements, and in consideration of the changing job market. Many traditional subject areas (including cataloging, reference, and management) left the MSIS core, although they sometimes remained as elective courses. Significantly, the UT-Austin iSchool administration has decided, throughout all of these changes, that all MSIS instruction must be conducted in a face-to-face environment. Unlike many other L-Schools and iSchools, the iSchool at UT-Austin does not offer any online or distance-delivery course options for the MSIS program.

In 2002, the number of allowable electives toward the MSIS increased. This change was the direct result of decreasing the number of required classes while simultaneously increasing the total number of courses needed to complete the degree (from 36 to 40 credit hours). Students seeking an MSIS at UT-Austin now needed to complete 13 three-credit courses and a single one-credit 'readings'course that, soon, was converted into an electronic portfolio requirement. Today, the four core courses for the MSIS program are 'Information in Social and Cultural Context,' 'Perspectives on Information,' 'Understanding Research' and the 'Capstone Experience Class.' Students have four options for their capstone: A Master's thesis, A Master's report, A Professional experienceor project, or A Practicum in school libraries.[22] Students can enroll in electives within the iSchool at UT-Austin and in other UT-Austin departments, or can transfer credit from other ALA-accredited Master's programs for the remaining 27 elective credit hours toward their degree.

Since 2003, the iSchool at UT-Austin has added the new executive MSIMS degree, a new bachelor of science in computer science/MSIS degree (BSCS/MSIS), and several new dual Master's degrees. The new MSIMS, the joint BSCS/MSIS, and the dual Master's in English and MSIS were all added since Fall 2015. This collaboration with the Department of English brings the total number of graduate dual degree options to seven (along with Latin American Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, Global Policy Studies, Public Affairs, and a Juris Doctorate in Law).[23] Some specialisations may still have occurred even if the UT-Austin iSchool had remained an L-School, but others have clearly evolved from the interests of new faculty (such as the BSCS/MSIS) and from an eye toward financial opportunities in the broader information workfield (as with the MSIMS).

The introduction of the MSIMS degree has also brought new courses and a new type of student into the iSchool at UT-Austin. Currently, the required courses for the MSIMS represent a fixed set of nine required three-credit courses, plus a Master's report.[24] These courses are designed to examine different aspects of identity within the contemporary information world; all nine are currently open only to students enrolled in the MSIMS program. Unlike the courses of the MSIS program, the MSIMS courses are designed specifically for working professionals and meet over two consecutive days once every three weeks.[24] Additionally, unlike the MSIS program, MSIMS classes usually include a mixture of in-person students (many of whom travel to Austin for the weekend) and remote students (who use a web conferencing software to participate).

In contrast to the focus on working professionals within the MSIMS program, the combined BSCS/MSIS program is designed to enroll more undergraduate students from the Computer Science department into the MSIS program by allowing these students to take graduate-level courses in the iSchool before completing their Bachelor's degree.[23] Students must take the same required core as (and with) other MSIS students, plus meeting the requirements of the Computer Science program.

4. UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION WITHIN THE iSCHOOL AT UT-AUSTIN

The UT-Austin GSLS began offering an undergraduate 'Children's Literature' course in the 1970s' that was primarily intended for students who were preparing for teaching careers. Based on the continuing success of that course, the GSLIS later began testing other undergraduate classes during the late 1980s'.[24, 25]

In 2002, iSchool faculty started offering classes for undergraduates as part of a 19-credit certificate through an interdisciplinary Bridging Disciplines Program. This coincided with the renaming of the GSLIS to the iSchool; these undergraduate courses accordingly reflected both an increasing attention to cross-disciplinary interests and the iSchool'sparticular grasp of information technology.[25] Thus, undergraduates who might not have heard of an 'iSchool' started enrolling in iSchool-sponsored classes on topics such as 'Technology and the Global Community' and 'Tech Tools for Academic Success.'

Starting in the Spring 2005 semester, the UT-Austin iSchool began offering undergraduatesthe option to work toward a minor degree in Information Studies; however, the minor did not become 'transcriptable' (i.e., visible on a printed undergraduate diploma or transcript) until Fall 2016, when UT-Austin introduced transcriptable minors across campus. In order to receive the minor, undergraduate students must currently take four three-credit courses within the iSchool: A single required course ('Introduction to Information Studies'), one lower-division (freshman/sophomore) elective, and two higher-division (junior/senior) electives.[26] Currently, the UT-Austin iSchool typically logs 4,000-5,000 undergraduate semester hours per year.

The increased number of undergraduate courses also provide iSchool doctoral students with valuable teaching positions, once they have completed a required 'Supervised Practice of Teaching' course and met other University requirements. UT-Austin generally only permits doctoral

students to instruct lower-division undergraduate courses, so offering multiple sections of these courses is crucial for building doctoral teaching experience. In addition to receiving a semester-based stipend and insurance benefits, these students receive the title of 'Assistant Instructor' and are permitted to pay their tuition at the rate of Texas residents.

Undergraduate course titles at the UT-Austin iSchool are often somewhat (intentionally) broad and/or general, particularly the Information and Culture, Information and People, Information in Society, and Information and Technology courses.[25] Different sections of Information and Culture typically explore topics such as young adult literature or an introduction to digital cultures, while individual sections of Information and People might cover competitive intelligence or examine comics and graphic novels. Additionally, undergraduate versions of some graduate-level courses are offered, such as Introduction to Audio Preservation and Reformatting, Data Wrangling, and Historical Museums. Several iSchool faculty have also taught 'one-off' undergraduate 'signature' courses designed to provide freshmen or first-year studentswith the experience of learning under some of UT-Austin's best educators.[25]

Additional undergraduate courses were offered over time, with titles such as We Like to Watch: Surveillance & Society and the recently-added 'Academic Success in the Digital University. The most-attended iSchool undergraduate courses today are the Information in Cyberspace course (which evolved from an earlier 'Internet Resources and Services' course launched in 1993 and was likely the first completely online course at UT-Austin) and the longstanding Children's Literature course (which offers some online sections and some in-person sections). Although many of the undergraduate courses are designed and taught by a single instructor, several courses (especially the most-attended) are taught as consistent offerings with relatively fixed-although often collaborative-course content and formats.

In particular, the new 'Academic Success in the Digital University' course was designed to further increase undergraduate enrollment in the iSchool and to support UT's goal of successful four-year undergraduate graduation by offering more course sections (particularly online) and by appealing to a wider range of students from different majors. Like 'Information in Cyberspace,' this course is offered exclusively online and operates completely through the Canvas platform (the primary digital Learning Management System at UT-Austin). Conceptual development first began in Fall 2015, when a group of iSchool administrative staff, faculty, instructors, and Teaching Assistants (TAs) discussed ideal curriculum goals for preparing incoming undergraduate students (especially transfer, non-traditional, first-generation, and other underprivileged students) for studying at a contemporary 'digital' research university like UT-Austin.

Led primarily by one doctorate student (with support from other faculty and staff), a development team of MSIS and PhD. TAs' worked over the next year to develop this new lower-division course. Additionally, the iSchool development team approached the UT-Austin Libraries for contributions that provide students with an overview of the Libraries' resources and services. Thus, in addition to the iSchool collaboration, two individuals working at the main UT-Austin library-including the Information Studies subject area librarian-contributed content. Finally, the development team was also responsible for creating all learning assessments.

Academic Success in the Digital University officially launched in Fall 2016 with a single section and the intention to expand enrollment to potentially over 100 students. The final course covers seven topic areas (Introduction to the Course and to Online Learning, The UT Libraries and Introduction to Scholarly Communication, Academic Honesty, Copyright and Creative Commons, and Academic Publishing, The Internet and Networking Basics, Basic Website Design and Usability, Information Security and Privacy Basics, and Digital Citizenship and Information Ethics) and is expected to be offered every future semester, including summers. The core learning material and assessments will be maintained by the iSchool, with content updates provided by instructors and TAs.

Thus, although the UT-Austin iSchool does not currently offer (or plan to offer) a major for undergraduate students, undergraduate course offerings have expanded. UT-Austin iSchool undergraduate courses offer a striking contrast to MSIS courses in that many undergraduate classes are taught entirely online, without any required face-to-face meetings. These online courses appeal to many students because of their flexibility and ease of access; they additionally reflect an increasing interest of UT-Austin administration in offering quality online education, especially for undergraduate students.We may expect current trends in undergraduate education within the iSchool to continue.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the curriculum at the iSchool at UT-Austin has followed what Bonicci, *et al*., refer to as 'an inverted fractal cycle': a broadening in focus, but with the nuances of skills-orientation.[27] Curricular focus has stepped away from an allegiance to particular settings-especially libraries-and moved towards the broader perspectives of key values and significant information tools. The evolution of the UT-Austin iSchool has brought changes in the curriculum, the faculty, and even the demographics of the student body. These changes have also come with some amount of loss, through the somewhat unacknowledged shifting of the program away from more traditional L-school areas into areas more supported by the current information workfield and marketplace.

Offering a central program (the MSIS) that is delivered only through in-person classes has kept graduate student enrollment relatively flat (partly because there is a

maximum capacity to the physical infrastructure of the program) and means that students enrolling in the MSIS program often do not seek to stay in current positions, but are instead seeking new careers. As a result, the student body of the UT-Austin iSchoolis overwhelmingly young, with many students under the age of twenty-five (except for the MSIMS program, which currently enrolls around 25 students).

MSIS students preparing for positions in libraries are no longer the norm; these students might even have difficulty being matched with a faculty advisor with similar interests. In some cases, such students leave the UT-Austin program to enroll in another program that offers more library- and/or youth-centered coursework. Just as when the earlier shifting focus of the program to highlight archives, preservation, and conservation resulted in a shifting of interests among students, the focus of the current MSIS program is now attracting students who are particularly interested in design, user experience, and digital humanities. Even within those interest areas, however, students often overlook more 'library-focused' courses that might assist them-such as the basic reference course. In fact, the 'Library Instruction and Information Literacy'course (the last course at the iSchoolwith the word 'library' still in its title) was offered for the final time in Spring 2016 and will be replaced with an undergraduate course.

The iSchool at UT-Austin continues teaching for the future of information technology, research, and work through its course offerings.[28] Courses on usability, digital design, and health informatics continue to be added to the MSIS offerings, and the undergraduate minor added a specific 'HCI and UX' focus with a tailored track of coursework in 2016. The most traditional aspect of the iSchool, though, is that it still delivers its Master's- and doctoral-level courses only in face-to-face format. Although, students may request the transfer of up to two online graduate courses from another program, or may request enrollment in an online course offered through the Web-based Information Science Education (WISE) consortium, the majority of UT-Austin iSchool graduate students do not take a single distance-delivery course.

Additionally, while MSIS students may specialise their studies through dual degrees, portfolios, or endorsements of specialisations, students enrolled in the Ph.D. program or the MSIMS program do not have similar options. Increasingly, the iSchool at UT-Austin is focusing on strengthening its doctoral program. Although enrollment has remained low, a greater emphasis on the doctoral program (and the quality of research that it represents) is more in line with how iSchools identify themselves and define their membership in the iCaucus. Suchan emphasis at UT-Austin is certainly desirable; however, any program of only about 30 PhD students will struggle to survive with today's demand for greater educational accountability.

Wiggins and Sawyer describe the public image of iSchools, saying that 'iSchools present themselves as a thriving, heterogeneous, and inter- or multidisciplinary scholarly community who focus on the convergence of information, computing, and their roles in human and social experience.'[29] Somewhat in contrast, most iSchools (including at UT-Austin) do not particularly have a reputation of increasing diversity within the field.[30] The UT-Austin iSchool needs to continually strive to remain a strong and 'heterogeneous' partner within its campus and across the globe. Situated in a U.S. state that borders Mexico and with faculty with diverse interests and backgrounds, the iSchool at UT-Austin has the potential to build a greater reputation for innovative approaches to better addressing diversity within its student body, coursework, and research.

Throughout its shifting journey from the 1948 GSLS to the iSchool of 2016, the UT-Austin iSchool has remained independent; it has never been merged into other colleges. The UT-Austin programhas grown into an iSchoolprimarily through garnering more external funding and by increasing attention on its doctoral program. However, it has yet to fully achieve the third criterion of an iSchool: a strong reputation in research and teaching across its campus and throughout the profession. As King notes, 'every I-School finds itself confronting the catch-22 situation of wanting to look similar to established disciplines in order to legitimate itself in the academy, yet different [enough] from established disciplines to warrant new school status.'[31] Perhaps this 'catch-22' difficulty is the one universal element that all iSchools share.

Regardless of these changes and challenges, the UT-Austin iSchool remains strong and steady and isbuilding anelevated research presence. Many Master's students still graduate to take positions in libraries; only now, the curricular emphasis is on students' acquisition and understanding of information tools to locate, manage, curate, and deliver information wherever needed. This curricular focus also prepares students to take positions in other information work fields. Thus, while change is inevitable, we can also anticipate and respond to it. Communal efforts among the faculty, students, alumni, and workforce surrounding an iSchool can ensure that traditional areas continue to feel respected while emerging information work settings, skills, and studies are simultaneously welcomed.

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Contributors

Dr Loriene Roy is a Professor in the School of Information at the University of Texas at Austin.

Mr Rachel N. Simons is a Doctoral student and Assistant Instructor in the School of Information at the University of Texas at Austin.