LIS Faculty Research and Expectations of the Academic Culture versus the Needs of the Practitioner

Daniel O'Connor and J. Philip Mulvaney

Library and information studies (LIS) education may be misreading the academic community's expectations. A program's viability may hinge on a counterintuitive premise, where the academic culture allows each discipline to create its own criteria for its own evaluation. LIS programs may have unwittingly assumed that adopting the scientific mode might gain them currency in the academic realm; yet there is little evidence that LIS programs had the prerequisite infrastructure to compete with a science discipline in terms of sustained funded research, teaching assistant and postdoctoral assistant services, laboratory equipment, and other resources. There is an irony that many LIS students and faculty do not come from the scientific disciplines, and this further inhibits their ability to compete in that arena. LIS program and faculty evaluators have used criteria from the sciences to measure LIS progress and to determine an individual's suitability for promotion. We contend that this application of inappropriate criteria has done unnecessary harm to LIS and the individuals in it. An examination of selected COA self-study responses and other sources indicates that LIS may misread the academic culture because LIS does not appear to be central to university governance. Finally, the waning of LIS's affiliation with libraries may do LIS irreparable harm. LIS's focus may need to be recentered on educating librarians.

About forty years ago, C. P. Snow gave a brilliant, though controversial, series of lectures at Cambridge in which he defined two cultures: the scientific and the literary, or artistic. Neither culture, he noted, understands, or even wants to understand, the other:

Literary intellectuals at one pole—at the other scientists, and as the most representative, the physical scientists. Between the two a gulf of mutual incom-

prehension—sometimes (particularly among the young) hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding. They have a curious distorted image of each other. Their attitudes are so different that, even on the level of emotion, they can't find much common ground.¹

Library and information science (LIS) faces a similar dilemma today. LIS faculty members, like most professional school faculty, serve two masters: the

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university and the members of their profession. LIS educators and LIS practitioners no longer seem to understand or communicate with each other. Practitioners constantly speak of the many things wrong with LIS education because they feel there has been created within the academic world a system so theory bound as to be irrelevant. Martin addresses some of these concerns:

The quality of library and information science education has for years been a topic of disagreement. Practitioners believe that educators do not understand what characteristics and knowledge are needed by entry level librarians; they also believe that educators are too far removed from the library to be able to convey relevant information to future librarians.²

Educators, on the other hand, have developed a defensive script that points to the standards present in the academic culture, which must be attended to if M.L.S. programs are to survive. Research in this area demonstrates a number of inconsistencies in the assumptions made by the LIS educators, and this research is offered to help reassess what is occurring. It should also be noted that there are inconsistencies in

the assumptions that practitioners make for LIS education.

An interesting and counterintuitive principle appears to hold in academia: *Each discipline identifies those criteria that will be used in its own evaluation.* The notions of self-governance, accreditation, and peer review are all hallmarks of an evaluation process in which the criteria for success are created by those who are to be evaluated. Consider the physics department, with its emphasis on funded research, where the teaching loads might be considerably lower than those found in modern languages. Likewise, the criteria for success in history might hinge on writing certain kinds of books, while biochemistry might be focusing on patents and a particular type of journal article. Or the theater arts department, or dance department, where their academic cultures—like LIS's—are unknown to many; in these cases it is clear that the department and the individuals in it are measured by the criteria that the field itself establishes.

Extreme examples of this notion of creating the criteria by which an individual is to be evaluated result in some strange activities. Institutes, research labs filled with research scientists and postdoctoral fellows, and special cen-

ters are present on many of our campuses, and these bring some measure of prestige to the university—but they revolve around money, not students. At the other extreme are departments that are valued for the teaching they do. Sometimes, an academic unit, such as education, gets its criteria confused, and some individuals place priority on research, while others emphasize preparing teachers. Because this field is identified with an institution, there is external pressure that education faculties be accountable for the quality of our nation's schools. Other departments often confuse the rest of the academic world by having no clear priorities. Nursing, pharmacy, and electrical engineering often send out mixed messages. Nationally, each discipline must be clear as to what its criteria are; locally, each department in that discipline at different universities must then adhere to that priority assessment.

These criteria become articulated in several ways: through external reviews, where outside experts from that field evaluate an academic department; through the use of external referees for tenure and promotion packets, where individuals in that discipline at other institutions evaluate a candidate; and through accreditation. This self-regulatory model is found in most major professions. The assessment, then, is that LIS has selected inappropriate criteria for evaluating its place in the academy.

LIS faculty and deans who serve as external reviewers, who evaluate other LIS programs, or who evaluate individuals through their promotion packets often apply the standards applicable to social science or science cultures. Meanwhile, library practitioners are bewildered over what is occurring, since many of them still identify with a humanities orientation. With the advent of new technologies, more and more LIS faculty eschew the library connection

and claim a much broader affiliation with the information professions. LIS departments change their names, removing all connection with libraries, but libraries are still libraries, and people, including practitioners and university administrators and faculty, have certain expectations of them.

A small cadre of senior LIS faculty and deans writes the majority of tenure and promotion letters, and their agendas exert undue influence over how our field gets defined. This influences faculty expectations, since individual faculty members are aware that they need certain letters if they are to get tenure and/or promotion. The irony is that all of this occurs independent of the needs of our practitioners. University administrators may not have a preconceived bias against LIS, but the deans and directors of LIS programs may be responsible for creating suspicion by criticizing LIS faculty members who are closely aligned with library practitioners or by making statements such as that by Nancy Van House:

If we focus as "library schools" on the library, then we are tied to an institution that is changing and that could disappear. It is not our role to determine where libraries are going or whether they will continue to exist. It is our role to determine the functions that need to be performed and that library and information professionals need to understand in order to be educated.³

Or Blaise Cronin:

Someone once asked something like, "There is no jailhouse science, there is no hospital science, how can there be a library science?" How can you construct a discipline upon a narrow, institutionally focused study?⁴

Or Leigh Estabrook:

People that worry about transitions taking place in our programs—what they

call the "abandonment" of libraries—reflect a romantic view of what libraries are and what they are becoming.⁵

There is also a long history within the profession of criticizing both the Committee on Accreditation (COA) and the accreditation standards. Tefko Saracevic, the latest in this long line, blames library school closings on the accreditation standards and the "iron grip" of the COA.⁶

These thoughts lead directly to a second principle: *LIS programs are unclear about the criteria to be used for their own evaluation because they are unsure of where they belong in academic culture.* McClure and Hert identify an aspect of this issue:

The nature of the LIS program as a professional school or as a discipline continues to confound our perception of ourselves as well as the institution's perception of us. Such confusion raises questions regarding the intellectual integrity of the LIS program. A professional school is a decidedly different animal than a discipline, and many LIS programs find themselves unable to articulate the difference and develop strategies or programs to position themselves appropriately within the institution.⁷

At its core, LIS is uncertain as to whether it is an academic discipline (and, if so, where in the arts and sciences it belongs) or a professional school. This confusion is exacerbated by the realization that a majority of master's in library science (M.L.S.) students come from a background in literature, while increasing numbers of LIS faculty have no background or interest in librarianship and act as though LIS were a science.

Thirty years ago LIS was viewed as a proud member of the arts and sciences. It dealt with unique topics on

campus, such as cataloging, bibliography, collection development, and library technical services. There was no confusion over what LIS was all about or what its research agenda was. Library practitioners looked to LIS educators to help them develop standards, improve operations, and evaluate library effectiveness. No one else within the university dealt with these topics or wanted to deal with them.

Then something happened. People realized the importance of what library education was doing and could accomplish. Money and men came into the field, as did doctoral programs and information science.⁸ Doctoral programs, however, have a research-based ethos that differs from that of a first professional degree program. This new research ethos filtered downward and, taught to our students along with "information science," helped fuel this change. Library educators, as noted above, no longer view themselves as linked to libraries. The methodology of librarianship had always included a wide range of possibilities. Journals thirty and forty years ago included historical accounts, bibliographic analyses, case studies, surveys, reasoned position papers, and a good mix of other methodologies. At some point there was a movement against LIS faculty using methodologies of the humanities, especially historical methodologies. This did not occur at all schools, but it was present at several influential schools with doctoral programs. As LIS research methods changed, so too did the culture of the field; yet cataloging, bibliography, and collection development all remain important subjects, worthy of additional study. In eschewing the core, LIS educators were reinvented as social scientists or even scientists.

Yet LIS lacked the culture of those fields. The faculty did not have a tradition of working in teams or have access

to lots of outside money through funded research or lucrative consulting. They did not have expensive labs, nor were they surrounded by graduate students who taught undergraduates and post-doctoral fellows who helped further the funded research agenda. Yet LIS faculty allowed others to believe that LIS was part of those cultures. Thus, LIS changed its culture without setting in place an infrastructure to support that perspective.

Viable fields create mechanisms to be productive while they help their field develop, advance, and prosper. The history of public library development gives adequate examples. LIS is no longer a leader in carving out the original concerns of early library education: new ways to help libraries develop themselves, new ways to generate more money for libraries, new ways to serve existing users and new users, even new ways to educate users. When information science was folded into LIS programs there developed confusion over what ultimate purposes should be served, and this confusion continues today to its own detriment. White expands on this theme in discussing the fundamental difference between a focus on science information versus information science.⁹

Colleagues working in libraries feel in many ways that LIS has abandoned them. The fact that a common core curriculum is lacking across LIS programs is an important indicator to any constituency that LIS educators lack a clear identity of who they are and what the core content of the field is. Logically, it is at the heart of the profession's longstanding dissatisfaction with COA and accreditation standards. "Ultimately, the absence of agreement on the knowledge base of librarianship means that to a considerable extent each individual practitioner must define it anew."¹⁰ Without a clear identity, LIS will be

defined differently by its faculty, its program chair, and its dean, and this becomes especially important when those individuals interact with administrators in the university.

Most LIS programs have suffered the tension between information science and librarianship where each camp assumes that academic respectability lies only at its particular doorstep. Hannigan adds to this a feminist perspective that threatens to further exacerbate the tensions already present in LIS.¹¹ It is axiomatic to note that *the LIS "library versus information science" tension irritates practitioners and confuses the university community. Furthermore, this dilemma is related to the lack of a common core curriculum across LIS programs.* The quest—the elusive search for theory, the sine qua non of academic respectability—continues to overshadow both extremes, while potentially demeaning LIS educators in the eyes of other university faculty and marginalizing them in the eyes of practitioners.

LIS seems unaware of the importance of the university's opinion leaders and their perception of LIS. Colleagues in the sciences relate that they have a high regard for libraries. Some say they would value research that helps the libraries do a better job. Yet these professors also say they do not value social science theory (quantitative or qualitative), since the predictive validity for such models is low enough to be meaningless. They actually laugh when it is pointed out that LIS often uses the methodology of sociology, calling it the methodology of a "failed discipline." They point out that their wife or sister or child or friend has an M.L.S. degree and that this person usually has a humanities background. It should not be surprising to learn that distinguished university professors know students LIS faculty have taught and have heard

about the content of LIS courses. This is important, since these science faculty members bring money and prestige into the university and are very powerful in defining future directions the institution may take. They often serve as opinion leaders in the university for central administration. LIS needs to find out more about these opinion leaders and how they view LIS. It might be surprising to learn that their view of LIS is similar to that of LIS practitioners. It might be interesting to discover what various university opinion leaders expect of LIS faculty research and teaching and to compare this to the standards the field sets for itself.

Two additional principles merit mention, since they bear directly upon the long-term survival of LIS programs:

1. Duplication of other academic programs puts LIS at serious risk.
2. Funded research can work to the detriment of LIS when university expectations place LIS in the wrong academic culture.

If practitioners and the rest of the campus community feel that as a result of the move to information science there is no library connection or only a weak one within the LIS department, then LIS and its curriculum are in direct competition with the following: electrical engineering, computer science, educational technology, management information systems, and business. The "niche" approach recommended by McClure and Hert, wherein LIS is called upon to train people for work in systems analysis and design, strategic management, data communications, network analysis, software systems, database design, and office systems, among others, puts LIS in such competition.¹² In electrical engineering and computer science there is great emphasis on funded research, and if LIS defines itself in that domain, then the benchmark for success

becomes the number of dollars it can bring into the university. In short, funded research becomes the expectation established for others to use in evaluation.

If an LIS department lets the university believe that it can get outside research funding, it sets up the expectation that the money will come in *year after year after year*. It is not expected that English professors bring in substantial outside funding, and, in the past, it was not expected of LIS departments either. But as LIS wavers over its definition, it can inadvertently succeed in bringing in outside money work to its own long-term detriment. If money does not come in, then LIS falls short of the university's expectations. When a humanities scholar captures a large grant, it is viewed as a notable but unusual event. LIS may need to be viewed in the same way, since there are not available sufficient and reliable sources of outside funding for all LIS programs for the next five to ten years. Related to this issue of self-imposed competition is Paris' warning: "Library schools lost turf battles when educators could not effectively explain, for example, how and why their course offerings did not overlap with business or computer science curricula."¹³

LIS faculty again may misread the academic culture because *LIS does not appear to be central to university governance*. Stieg also dealt with this issue:

Universities look at programs using concepts of status and centrality. A program central to the mission of the university, that is, making an essential contribution, does not have to be of high quality. . . . Centrality may also be established by the services that a unit performs for other units of the university. . . . Schools of library and information science unfortunately have never been associated with the oft-heard cliché, "the library is the

heart of the university," nor have they convinced the university community of their centrality in any other way.¹⁴

LIS programs were surveyed in an attempt to measure how central they were to the university and to the profession. COA posed two questions dealing with this issue:

1. To what extent and with what effect upon the graduate program do the library school faculty participate as teachers, researchers, advisers, consultants, and the like in other programs within the library school, the parent institution, professional associations, or the community at large?
2. How closely is the library school integrated with the goals, policies, and activities of the parent institution?

Deans and directors were asked to supply the answers they gave to those two questions in preparation for their last accreditation visit, and responses were received from thirty-nine schools; only one school denied permission to review its responses to these questions in its self-study.

In the responses, LIS seems to view service to the community and the profession as just as important as service to the university. Among all respondents, an approximately equal number of lines discussed internal and external service. Internal service included service on university committees, doctoral committees, and teaching in other programs. Most commonly, "other programs" were other programs of the school: doctoral programs, specialist programs, other degrees, etc. A good number mentioned continuing education programs in which faculty taught. Interdisciplinary work—namely, joint-degree programs, cross-listed courses, teaching in other schools, and research projects with fac-

ulty from other schools—was less frequently mentioned. Responses rarely included mention of service courses offered by LIS that students in other schools or departments must take. Surprisingly, few LIS programs mentioned cooperative ventures with the university library.

Uniformly, question 2 was answered in a very abbreviated, straightforward fashion: LIS is in the position it is in because it is so closely allied with the mission and goals of the parent institution. A sense was not obtained from these responses that the LIS programs were in the university "loop" for important decisions. Nor was it perceived that LIS faculty or administrators were opinion leaders within the university, although, in all fairness, this might not be evident from the responses to COA program presentation questions. Still, it is hard to imagine that LIS would know how to position itself within the university culture.

Indeed, LIS would have difficulty knowing how others in the university community perceive LIS or how LIS might fare if it changed its image. From these responses, it is felt that LIS confronts an uncertain future when it alters its image without knowing how this would influence the importance of LIS's position within the university. Only individuals within the university "loop" would be able to assess what the impact might be if LIS changed its objectives and goals.

The COA questions dealt with how outgoing the LIS program sees itself and how connected it is to the university. Unfortunately, the old COA questions did not deal with the intellectual or academic value of the library school; responses focused on LIS's service or personnel value, understandable since LIS has long prided itself on being a "service" profession. This is all the more surprising given the all-inclusive

definition of library and information studies found in the 1993 *Standards* and toward which LIS had been moving all this time. With LIS involved in all aspects of the creation, distribution, etc., of recorded knowledge, it should follow that LIS courses might be expected to be at the core of most undergraduate general education experiences. It is at this point that LIS and bibliographic instruction coincide, and yet, as indicated above, there seems to be little contact between LIS schools and their own university libraries.

Given the discussion above on the retrenchments of the 1980s and 1990s, it can readily be seen how futile it is to make appeals to the mission of the university, and, as Stieg has noted and as reflected above, LIS is not central nor is it seen to be. But who is central? Ashar and Shapiro suggest the right direction.¹⁵ Centrality does not pertain to mission but to workflow: How involved are LIS faculty in teaching collaboration with faculty in other schools or departments? How involved are they in research collaborations with faculty in other schools? How many broad classes does the school offer? How many non-LIS students take LIS courses? Obviously, with no undergraduate base it is difficult for others to know what LIS does, and thus it is difficult to be seen as central. LIS has made important steps in this direction, especially since Paris' study: Interdisciplinary teaching and research are encouraged, and undergraduate programs have begun in a number of schools.

Lack of centrality and isolation are frequently given as reasons that LIS programs have closed. Numerous commentators, after it has been announced that a particular program is in trouble or is going to close, devise elaborate models that list the many reasons. The closure of an LIS program presents a fine opportunity to criticize LIS education, both

from within and from without. The within group often claims the closure is due to the program's inability to be more information science or information professions oriented, more theory oriented, more (grant) funded, or more like other university departments. Some criticism is rendered in apocalyptic tones:

Library/Information Science (LIS) education currently faces a turning point in its existence: either it becomes absolutely essential to and inextricably intertwined with the education of the evolving information professions, or it becomes obsolete and dies a slow, painful death. Indeed, some LIS education has been judged "inappropriate" and, as we know, a number of programs have been discontinued. Our response to this challenge affects not only LIS education; it affects the fabric of the information professions, the manner in which we define ourselves, what we do, who we serve, and the role that LIS plays in today's and tomorrow's society.¹⁶

The without group claims the closure is due to the program's lack of contact with and commitment to librarianship, its obsessive concern with vacuous theory, or its production of M.L.S. graduates who were taught little that is relevant to the "real world."

Both groups seemingly ignore that in the 1980s and 1990s retrenchment has become a fact of life throughout higher education and that closings might have had not so much to do with LIS shortcomings as with national and local politics. Librarianship shares several characteristics with the fields that suffered cutbacks: It is not closely allied with any major funding agency (for example, the Department of Defense or the National Institutes of Health); it does not have any powerful external constituencies (for example, the American Medical Association or the entire mili-

tary-industrial complex); it is not a route to highly paid careers (for example, law or medicine, whose graduates contribute heavily to universities); nor does librarianship normally provide careers for men.¹⁷ Local issues, on the other hand, have been spelled out in large part by Paris, and LIS has begun reacting to her findings; this paper is an attempt to focus these reactions in productive ways.¹⁸ Because the number of ALA-accredited M.L.S. programs is so small and the number of schools that have closed even smaller, the reasons behind such decisions may be unrelated to many of the stated reasons in library literature.

Research indicates that it is easy to create reasons that a program fails after it has been in trouble and after it has failed. However, it is difficult to predict, well in advance, which programs will prosper, which programs will be in trouble, and which ones will be closed. Analysis models and multiple regression models based on ALISE statistical data and other factors have been developed in an attempt to predict library school closings. The predictor variables were, however, mostly a function of school size or budget and whether the school was private or public. Seven of the fifteen (and seven of the last eight) schools that closed since 1978 were private; schools that survived had student bodies 50 percent larger, on average, than schools that closed. While these data are certainly indicative, they were not satisfactorily predictive of which schools would prosper and which would not. LIS needs to become more politically astute and more coherent in the messages it sends, both on and off campus. Colleagues in arts and sciences state that they know what LIS is, since they are in regular contact with the university's academic librarians. It is reasonable to assume that faculty opinion leaders and university administrators

are in contact with librarians. It is important, therefore, that those librarians and, indeed, all of LIS not trash LIS programs or belittle LIS research.

James Benson, director of the LIS program at St. John's University, noted that one of the most important university officers is the university librarian. That individual often controls the most money for a single category in the university's line-item budget. The university librarian often reports to the highest levels within the university and has access to key decision makers. If the university librarian is antagonistic to the campus' LIS program, then that program has a serious problem. In the early 1980s, Patricia Battin, director of Columbia University Libraries, during a talk at Rutgers lashed out against M.L.S. programs, M.L.S. faculty members, and the graduates of M.L.S. programs.¹⁹ She extolled the virtues of M.B.A. programs and indicated that she would prefer to hire those individuals rather than M.L.S. graduates. Not long after, there was word that Columbia's LIS program had problems, but this was no surprise to those who had heard her presentation. Columbia seemed to overcome these difficulties, but a few years later its problems resurfaced. If the university librarian or any major university administrative officer condemns an LIS program or seriously questions its purpose, then it starts to be "watched" to see if it is, indeed, a troubled program. That same program without the wrath of the university librarian is far less likely to be placed "on watch." A similar though reverse situation may have occurred at the University of Minnesota, where the LIS faculty became a convenient place to put superannuated university librarians.

If an LIS program is "on watch," then this becomes a critical incident that can lead—years later—to the closing of a program. Ben Weintraub, a Rut-

gers professor emeritus, has noted that the first time a university administration learns that an LIS program really has a serious problem becomes *the* significant start of its problems. From that beginning point forward, information that might have been ignored starts to cumulate to brand the program and provide an ongoing tally of damaging information. The weight of the negative evidence can do serious damage to the long-term survival of the LIS program. An interesting example of this occurred at Rutgers in the early 1980s, when a controversial proposal was developed to merge the school with the communication and journalism departments. The LIS dean at that time made no secret of the calamity that would occur if the merger did not happen. He constantly berated librarianship and let everyone know that without a merger the unworthy LIS program would become extinct. The program had the misfortune of being under the penumbra of ALA's conditional reaccreditation status, which gave credence to his position. The Rutgers administration heard that message, loud and clear, and remembered it for many years. That storm has been weathered; the Rutgers program no longer lives under a dark cloud. It is still bothersome when older Rutgers faculty, some of whom are former administrators, ask if "the library school is up to par yet."

There are many positive things happening in LIS at present. It is a time of strong intellectual ferment. It is now generally recognized that LIS does not exclusively educate students to work in libraries; rather, LIS gives students the knowledge and skills to work as a librarian in any number of institutions or situations. However, all evidence points to a reaffirmation of LIS's commitment to librarianship and to the deleterious effects of the unfortunate tendency of LIS to be so critical of itself. It appears, thanks to the hard work of

previous generations of LIS educators and practitioners, that libraries are understood by everyone with the possible exception of today's LIS educators. One colleague has noted that the revolutionary position for an LIS program might be to declare its allegiance to librarianship and to focus itself on this objective. Within that framework, all manner of library and information science research can still be accomplished, but it will be done in a way that is understandable to our practitioners and to university faculty and administrators. It might work to reestablish the unifying culture LIS lost some twenty years ago. It might even bridge the gap between our two cultures.

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19. Similar comments have appeared in print. Cf. Patricia Battin, "Developing University and Research Library Professionals: A Director's Perspective," *American Libraries* 14 (1983): 22-25:

Perhaps we have come to believe in our own publicity and have internalized the low esteem accorded by our society. It seems to me the fact of our poor public image has led us to set our sights much too low in defining our professional responsibilities and expectations, in accepting recruits into the profession, and in governing our judgment of adequate standards for graduation from our professional education programs (p. 22).

For those of us in universities which host both a library school and a research library, we can make a concerted, cooperative attempt to enlist the aid and support of our administrations in subsidizing the inevitable initial decline in enrollments during a transition period to higher standards and strengthened academic requirements (p. 24).