Envisioning our Information Future and How to Educate for It: a Community Conversation

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ABSTRACT
Members and others attending the 2015 Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) conference will be aware of a need to regularly revisit and redefine an information discipline continuously in flux. Constant change likewise demands that we consider new models and approaches to educating professionals equipped with cutting-edge skills in critical thinking and applied best practice responsive to a dynamic information environment. This proposed three-segment interactive panel session will report on action research on, and findings emerging from, a re-visioning of information education. Initial outcomes from pilot projects involving the design and testing of innovative proofs of concept will also be discussed. Attendees will engage in an activity that identifies trends, and debates issues and controversies that are at the core of the dialogue surrounding our information future and how to educate for it.

Keywords  
information future, information curriculum planning, Library and Information Science education, strategic visioning, curriculum redesign

INTRODUCTION
The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Strategic Plan, 2012-2016, observes that, “To succeed in our rapidly changing society and economy, individuals must keep informed of relevant events and trends, develop perspective and judgment, gain new knowledge to maintain currency in their occupation, and continually update their skills” (p. 6). While such requirements are essential for individuals, they are surely critical for information professionals. With advances in information technology, personal and work-related information behaviors are changing rapidly; Library and Information Science (LIS)/Information education is being challenged, not only to keep pace, but to take the lead. Adapting to these changes and creating an iterative process for evaluating and implementing relevant curriculum focused on innovation, continuous learning, and critical engagement within a global and diverse context, will determine the success or failure of LIS/Information education. This is not the first time that LIS Education has recognized the need to rethink and reinvent itself. The Kellogg Foundation provided funding in 1994 to four LIS schools, Drexel, Florida State, Illinois, and Michigan, to test innovative approaches to LIS education. Barber (1996) noted: “New models and approaches must be developed for organizing, searching, retrieving, analyzing, packaging, delivering, and preserving relevant information. And new types of service professionals are needed to develop and implement these new models and approaches.” The results of this effort included new names for some of the schools involved, curriculum expansions, and innovative projects (Marcum, 1997) but did not lead to a widespread rethinking of LIS education. The information landscape of twenty years later, with its continuous, fast-paced changes in information context, content, services, and technologies gives urgency to a need to re-vision LIS/Information education.

What is our information future and how do we engage and design with it, helping pave a path for students to understand the challenges and excel in their abilities to keep pace with the rate of change? How are current roles for information professionals changing? What additional roles could information professionals fill? What skills and abilities continue to be valuable? What do LIS/Information graduates need to succeed in 21st century organizations?
Answers will prove vital to the field’s ability to adapt and promote the development of a knowledge base capable of leading society’s information future. Big questions often benefit from new ways of thinking, and this innovative thinking is fostered best under bold circumstances.

With these big questions and bold approaches in mind, Simmons College, the University of Illinois, and the University of Toronto joined forces to convene a forum with leaders from several different stakeholder groups, with findings to be compiled into a white paper by August 2015. Targeting and securing funds from the IMLS Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian National Forum Planning Grant Program, Professors Eileen G. Abels (Simmons), Linda C. Smith (Illinois), and Lynne C. Howarth (Toronto), hosted the forum, Envisioning our Information Future and How to Educate for It, in January 2015 at Simmons College. The IMLS-sponsored Forum assembled a diverse group—from directors of libraries, museums and archives, to digital humanities scholars, content providers, futurists, and information technology entrepreneurs—into a workshop-style conference that eschewed excessive PowerPoints and keynote speakers. Instead, participants spent most of the three days in breakout groups, and were asked to brainstorm, story-tell, and sense-make in a collaborative environment that incorporated visualization exercises, maker-activities, and “design thinking” methodology. All activities were photographed and documented by the facilitators, including involvement of a visual scribe who summarized group discussions in real-time, producing original representations in the form of vivid word-art. Attendees gave permission for video and photograph images of themselves to be posted on the InfoFuture website.

Topics addressed in the Forum ranged from broad conceptual conversations regarding terminology and an overarching vision of information and information services, to detailed discussions of curriculum and establishment of tangible strategies for improving educational outcomes, and an overview of the employment landscape for information professionals. While the Co-Principal Investigators and facilitators developed topics they deemed fundamental to discussions surrounding society’s information future—issues around nomenclature, self-identity, synergies between the academy and industry, and diversity—the conference’s structure allowed for new insights to emerge via interactive experience.

Articulating key points for inclusion in a post-Forum white paper was one objective; however, a particular emphasis on practical, service-driven solutions emerged as one of the event’s most inspiring takeaways. While macro-level conversations are vital to any field’s self-awareness and strategic planning, the development of initiatives that can be immediately implemented exemplifies the actionable potential of such collaborative endeavors. Consequently, participants co-created tangible, actionable, next steps, to be realized in the design of targeted proofs of concept to determine their feasibility for larger scale application.

With supplemental funding from IMLS, a subset of projects more readily actionable in the shorter term are currently being developed and piloted. By May 2016, the Forum, Envisioning our Information Future and How to Educate for It, will have resulted in a white paper that can serve to frame ongoing curriculum and pedagogical design initiatives in North America, along with findings from pilot projects informative of larger scale implementations. Summaries and photographs from the Forum, along with the future white paper and other documents may be viewed at: InfoFuture.simmons.edu.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION: AN INTERACTIVE PANEL PRESENTATION
This proposed ASIS&T 2015 panel session is designed to be interactive and to provide a forum for extending the conversation around rethinking information curriculum design to a broad constituency of researchers, educators, and professionals. The session will involve three segments. In the first part, panelists will outline key components and activities from the National Planning Forum, Envisioning our Information Future and How to Educate for It. A summary of findings from the August 2015 white paper submitted to IMLS, along with a brief update on proofs of concept that have been launched as pilot projects will be presented as points of discussion. In the second part of this interactive session, participants will engage in a visioning exercise that simulates an activity used in the initial Forum. This “decaying, dominant, emerging” exercise will engage smaller groups in a strategic design process fostering a community conversation among session attendees. The exercise will invite participants to examine a particular theme, for example, information technology curriculum, from perspectives of what is no longer in practice (“decaying”), what is currently in play (“dominant”), and what trends are beginning to appear (“emergent”). Several themes related to information curriculum will be explored in this fashion ensuring a dynamic, broad-based view of past, present, and future. In the third segment, panelists and participants will summarize outcomes from the groups and brainstorm actionable next steps for further informing the redesign of information education. At the end of the session, panelists will seek the permission of participants to post summaries of the discussions to the InfoFuture website without identifying any individual. This community conversation will add to the stakeholder dialogues initiated in January 2015.

PANELISTS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS
Eileen G. Abels, MLS, PhD is Dean and Professor in the School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College. Prior to joining Simmons, she was Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the iSchool at Drexel and she also served as a faculty member at the University of Maryland iSchool. While at Drexel, she helped oversee the Internet
Public Library, a public service resource and an innovative teaching tool. She has served as president of the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) and currently serves on the joint ALA and ALISE Committee on Accreditation Reform for Education (CARE).

Lynne C. Howarth, MLS, PhD is Professor in the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto (iSchool @ Toronto). Lynne has a long association with, and deep appreciation for educating information professionals, having taught, since 1984, full-time and continuing education students at Sheridan, Seneca, and Georgian Colleges in Ontario, at Ryerson University (Toronto), at McGill University (Montreal) and for the past 25 years at the University of Toronto. She has served as president of the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE), and the Canadian Association for Information Science (CAIS/ACSI), and was a member of the ALA Committee on Accreditation from 2008-2012. As a co-investigator on the IMLS project, she brings to the panel a commitment to designing programs in Information that are rich in cutting-edge theory and critical approaches to best practice, thus ensuring a bright, engaging, and highly relevant future for graduates in North America.

Linda C. Smith, MS, PhD is Professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where she has been a member of the faculty since 1977 and Associate Dean for Academic Programs since 1997. She has served as president of the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) and the Association for Information Science & Technology. As a co-investigator on the IMLS project, she brings to the panel an interest in innovative approaches to online education for the information profession as well as preparing future faculty to contribute to LIS/Information education.

CONCLUSION
This three-part interactive session will extend the conversation regarding the future of information and how to educate for it to an important community of information researchers, educators, and professionals. This dialogue will add to that begun in January 2015 by a diverse group of stakeholders. The community conversation will further the original Forum agenda by exploring emerging trends, controversies, and contrasting viewpoints from experts in complementary areas of research and practice. As such, we see the panel session representing the thematic area of Impact on Information Contexts specific to the domain of LIS/information education.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
This project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, grant number RE-65-14-0032-14

REFERENCES
