

# The LIS Virtual Library: A case study of library support for an iSchool

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## ABSTRACT

What impact has the iSchool movement had on the collections and service programs of the libraries at universities that are homes to iSchools? How are academic libraries meeting the information needs of iSchool faculty and students? At the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (UI), the expansion of the curriculum and research agenda of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) to encompass the far-reaching perspectives of an interdisciplinary iSchool influenced the development of a new service model for library support. The library was also challenged to support GSLIS's very successful online MLIS and Certificate of Advanced Study degree programs.

At the UI, a system of distributed, departmental libraries has been in place since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A separate Library & Information Science (LIS) Library was housed in the Main Library facility from the 1920s until May 2009, when its collections were merged into other libraries. The new model for LIS library services combines a more robust virtual presence with an intensified human presence in the GSLIS building. These changes are part of a much larger initiative to create a more flexible organizational structure for the University Library overall – a structure that recognizes the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of academic inquiry, the critical importance of digital information resources, and the opportunities for collaborative approaches to the provision of library services and collections using information technology. [1] Over the past decade, these themes have been echoed repeatedly in studies of library use, scholarly information-seeking, and the future of the academic library. [2] Recent writings have also affirmed the value of subject specialist librarians and library services targeted to communities of scholarship and practice. [3]

This case study of a change process that is still in progress highlights the tensions and opportunities that are created for the library system when an academic unit shifts and enlarges it

scholarly focus. At the UI, evidence (both quantitative and qualitative) about library user behavior and needs was brought to bear on the decision-making and planning processes. Members of the UI's iSchool community were involved, as well as members of the University Library's faculty and staff, in charting a future for library collections and services for LIS and related fields. For example, the School's Associate Dean served on the planning team, and cataloging instructors advised on the retention and relocation of reference sources for teaching and performing cataloging.

Most notably, a team consisting of the LIS Librarian and two students, within the traditional framework of an independent study course, spearheaded the transformation of the LIS Library's former web site into a "virtual library" and portal to disciplinary information. [4] The enrolled students had individual learning goals which were met by readings, consultations with experts, and hands-on design and problem-solving work. The team conducted a round of usability testing, using Morae software, which led to significant design revisions before the site went live. Since the launch of the website in August 2009, further valuable critiques have been offered by students in the online GSLIS course, Interfaces to Information Systems.

While the site design is constrained by the limitations of the Library's content management system (OpenCMS) and locally mandated design templates, the University Library places almost no restrictions on content or organization of subject-specific websites within its domain. Therefore, the design team was able to organize the information in ways helpful to the UI iSchool community and the wider audience of information professionals on campus. The CMS structure permits easy updating and modification of the site. The site itself provides opportunities for users to suggest additional content and/or comment on the design. The site incorporates newly-acquired resources and tools, such as the "LIS Easy Search," a federated search across three major LIS journal indexes, local and consortial online catalogs, ebook sources, and the UI's institutional repository. This new feature was developed after the planning team undertook a survey of LIS Library users, which revealed that the virtual service most valued by students is access to LIS-specific databases. In contrast, the same survey showed that faculty users of the LIS Library online valued most highly its virtual new books shelf. Because new LIS books were no longer directed to a single physical location after the closure of the LIS Library, the new virtual library incorporates a complex search of the University Library's database of new books, in order to gather together records for LIS titles. Other

services of the LIS Virtual Library include a news section and an expanded, subject-categorized set of links to e-resources, both licensed and open access. Some new content aims to bridge the gap between the user's experience of the old physical library and the new virtual one--for example, pages explaining where LIS printed books and journals may now be found in the UI's vast library system.

Like most academic libraries, the LIS Library at UI has been shifting from mostly print to mostly digital collections over the past several years. On the one hand, the closing of the physical library was simply an inevitable evolutionary stage, responsive to increasing digital publishing and changing modes of scholarly information-seeking. On the other hand, many users experienced the closure as a decisive and even tectonic shift in their personal information worlds. Relevant print materials are still collected and housed in appropriate campus libraries, but the LIS Virtual Library is now, for most purposes, the library for the iSchool. The increased presence of the LIS Librarian in the GSLIS building helps to keep users connected with the resources of the University Library and bridges the gap between the old service model and the new.

The transformation of the LIS Library demonstrates how a successful transition from a traditional information service model to a new one must be grounded in knowledge of the unique needs and customs of the library, university, and population of users. Further, it demonstrated that the University Library can involve iSchool students in meaningful projects that both further their learning and contribute to the improvement of information services. The evolution of library services is a noticeable impact of the iSchool movement, as the UI example proves.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.3.5 [On-line information services]: Web-based services.

H.3.7 [Digital libraries].

K.3.2 [Computer and information science education]

## General Terms

Management

## Keywords

User-centered design; digital library; federated search; usability; information behavior; content management system; academic libraries; embedded librarians; evidence-based librarianship; iSchools; library and information science.

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