

Observations by the LIS Program Chair
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Key concerns for LIS faculty in 2012-13 have been the reaccreditation of the MLIS program, transition to PittOnline, a fundamental review of the curriculum, and faculty recruitment.

ALA reaccreditation

Reaccreditation of the MLIS program by the American Library Association (ALA) has been the priority task for the LIS faculty over the past year. The ALA Committee on Accreditation (COA) rejected our request to postpone the exercise for one year and instead brought forward the due date for submitting our self-evaluation and supporting documents by one month to November 26, 2012. An accreditation sub-committee of SIS Council (chaired by Martin Weiss until July 2012, thereafter by Sheila Corrall) was formed to manage the process, with membership drawn from LIS faculty and doctoral students, and excellent professional support provided by Kelly Shaffer, with assistance from Debbie Day and other staff.

We held a full-day retreat involving all LIS faculty in September 2012 to kick-start the process of identifying examples of good practice to demonstrate how the MLIS program meets the 36 COA standards and sub-standards. The sub-committee met weekly until submission of the draft program presentation in November, with additional discussion at monthly LIS faculty meetings. The support from Shaffer and others substantially reduced the administrative burden on faculty and allowed us to focus on the academic and pedagogical aspects of the report. We had another busy period from January through March 2013, responding to queries from the External Review Panel (ERP) and preparing for the ERP site visit on March 24-26. The visit was widely viewed as highly successful, which was confirmed in the largely positive exit briefing.

The subsequent draft report from the ERP was similarly positive, commending LIS faculty on efforts to enhance the program, develop the curriculum, introduce new specializations, transition to PittOnline, expand placement opportunities, and pursue diversity initiatives, in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. The report also noted challenges requiring our attention, including assessment of learning outcomes at program level, and within the Partners program, and the sustainability of several specializations in view of likely faculty retirements. Overall, despite the considerable costs involved, the reaccreditation exercise has proved beneficial in encouraging faculty to reflect collectively on strengths and weaknesses, and particularly in helping to orientate new faculty and familiarize them with the program unusually quickly. We are due to receive and respond to the final ERP report by May 7. Dean Larsen will then meet the COA at the ALA Conference on June 29, with final notification of the outcome due on July 6.

PittOnline transition

Transition from the MLIS FastTrack delivery mode to the University's PittOnline infrastructure began at a practical level in Summer 2012, with two core courses converted by faculty with support from the Center for Instructional Development & Distance Education (CIDDE) for delivery in Fall 2012. Other core and elective courses are being scheduled for conversion at a similar rate in line with our transition plan, now coordinated by Jeff Lawson (Director of Distance Education, eLearning Partnerships and Outreach). The gradual migration of courses at a steady pace has enabled us to identify problems early and resolve them before large numbers of faculty and students get involved. However, the fixed timetable of two courses per term (determined by the availability of CIDDE support) is already proving difficult to manage, given the different working patterns and other commitments of program faculty. The transition is thus set to be a multi-year project and will require the continuing use of the old delivery mode for several years to give students taking the online program a reasonable choice of courses.

Costs for the new mode of delivery are front-loaded, requiring significant investment of time and effort to design and record sessions before the beginning of the term, but there should be savings in the longer term from the re-use of pre-recorded material that in many cases will need relatively minor updating for each iteration. Although formal enrollment in the online program currently accounts for a relatively small proportion of MLIS students, we expect the LIS online market to grow in line with general trends. Students enrolled in our on-campus program also appreciate the flexibility of being able to take courses online, especially when trying to balance study with employment, internships or other field experiences.

The move to PittOnline has wider potential benefits for the LIS program as the redesign of courses for the new platform is encouraging faculty to think more deeply about their teaching styles, methods, and philosophies, with expert help from CIDDE, which fits well with our current curriculum review. We plan to exploit this strategic opportunity more deliberately next term by holding a workshop with CIDDE for interested LIS faculty and PhD teaching assistants to explore approaches to learning and teaching in the digital environment. In addition, technological change and emerging specialties in the field are creating opportunities for continuing education courses for practitioners needing to update or develop their professional knowledge and skills. Feedback from alumni indicates significant interest in online delivery of modular offerings at affordable prices. We are not currently well placed to meet such demand (at program, school, or institutional level), but we need to consider our position moving forward, as our presence in the professional development marketplace has implications for our profile, standing and external relations more generally.

Curriculum developments

In tandem with ALA reaccreditation, reflecting the stated focus of our COA submission on *transformational change*, we were committed to a fundamental review of the MLIS curriculum during 2012-13. The work involved in compiling our program presentation meant that we were not able to give significant time to this until after submitting our draft to the COA in November, though we continued to discuss curriculum issues and proposals at our faculty meetings, notably in October. We launched the review more formally in December, when we replaced our regular meeting with a free rein discussion on the direction of the program and the process for the review. We decided to focus first on the four core courses of the MLIS program, which were then scheduled for review at monthly intervals in special meetings. All faculty acted as the review group for this process.

As part of our regular meeting In October, we discussed a proposal from the Archives faculty for a revised configuration of required and elective courses for the Archives, Preservation and Records Management specialization and a name change to Archives and Information Science (which was later formally approved), intended to strengthen the focus on digital curation and stewardship in line with trends in the field. The revision combines the previously separate subjects of archival representation and access into one core course mirroring the earlier integration of information organization and retrieval in a core course for other MLIS students. The changes also include reworking of other courses and development of a new elective on community knowledge and archives practices.

In October, we also completed our annual review of the MLIS course catalog to identify non-current courses for deletion, and consider migration to regular courses of electives originally introduced as “special topics.” Special topics courses are an established mechanism enabling us to launch new courses quickly and to experiment with emerging subjects or topics proposed by new faculty. Examples of such courses and seminars introduced since Fall 2012 are:

- Citizen Science (Beaton, Spring 2013 and 2014)
- Digital Scholarship (Griffin, Fall 2012 and 2013)
- Histories and Theories of Information (Beaton, Fall 2013)
- Research Methods in Library and Information Science (Corrall, Spring 2013 and 2014)
- Social Media and Information Behavior (Oh, Fall 2013).

One-credit courses are a recent variant of special topics courses (introduced in Summer 2012), which enable us to extend the range of subjects available to students as electives, and are proving a useful way of offering courses on “hot topics” and/or very short introductions to specialist subjects for students unable to include course with fuller treatment in their schedule.

Examples of one-credit courses being offered in Summer 2013, by LIS faculty or adjuncts are:

- Digital Scholarship (Griffin)
- Early Literacy Practices (Bowler)
- Maker Spaces Library Exploration (Bowler)
- Open Access and institutional Repositories (Deliyannides)
- Resources for Genealogy (Holt)

In January we started our review of the MLIS core curriculum. Discussions to date have proved fruitful in not only suggesting revisions and amendments to specific course syllabi, but also raising more general issues for debate, including:

- variations between different sections of the same course;
- potential gaps and overlaps among the core courses;
- sequencing of core and elective courses;
- opportunities for new electives building on components of core courses.

We have also discussed and approved proposals for specializations in Academic Libraries (including a new foundational course on academic libraries in the Fall term) and Public Libraries, which are both being offered afresh from Fall 2013.

Faculty recruitment

Two new LIS faculty started in Fall 2012: Sheila Corral (full professor and program chair) and Brian Beaton (assistant professor in the Archives area). In addition, Elizabeth Mahoney moved from her IS library position to non-tenure stream LIS faculty. However, the LIS faculty remains under strength and over stretched following the death of Bernadette Callery in Summer 2012, and other deaths and departures of recent years. Faculty recruitment thus continues to be a priority for the LIS program. An attempt to recruit a non-tenure stream faculty member in the Archives area (to replace Callery) was unsuccessful.

This search and recruitment of a tenured full professor for the Boyce chair will be restarted in the Fall term of 2013, but will probably still leave us short of specialist expertise in core areas of the discipline (such as information organization), and may inhibit our efforts to move the program in the directions desired, including the development of our Information Technology and Digital Libraries specializations. The age profile of the faculty is another strategic concern threatening the sustainability of some traditional areas of strength (archives, health information, school libraries). Succession planning is thus also a priority for LIS.

Student recruitment

The MLIS intake for 2012-13 dropped by 17.5% (from 154 new students in Fall 2011 to 127 in Fall 2012), as a result of a slight drop in applications and some tightening of entry requirements, which is in line with the School's commitment to right size the intake to match available faculty. Intake for the online program remained stable (37 in 2012, compared with 36 in 2011), but represents an upward trend as a proportion of the total MLIS intake. Recruitment for Fall 2013 is ongoing, but likely to result in further reductions, as we experienced a fall in applications for the on-campus program of 35.7% (from 277 for Fall 2012 to 178 for 2013). Applications to the online program have also dropped significantly, to around half the number received for 2012 at the same stage, but it is too early to make firm predictions about the outcome as recruitment for the online program will continue through the summer.

Three new LIS PhD students started during 2012. We continue to attract good applicants for the PhD program and will have five new students starting in Fall 2013 (3 full-time, 2 part-time), with a wide range of research interests, including digital scholarship, human information interaction, and taxonomy development.