

On Becoming a Knowledge School; What Does This Mean, and How Can We Make It Happen?

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Abstract: This report chronicles the beginning effort to examine the prospect of becoming a Knowledge School. Curran and Braum, with the support and guidance of SLIS (School of Library and Information Science) Director David Lankes, planned and managed an event that brought together faculty, students, and representatives from academic, public, and state libraries. The purpose was to examine possibilities for creating a program that would equip students to enter the work force with information skills that included helping organizations use information to create change, seize opportunities, and more fully serve their communities, constituents, and clients. Representing their subject and service fields, faculty addressed the program's current strengths and suggested expansion of boundaries. They considered questions to answer and opportunities and initiatives to explore.

Keywords: *knowledge school, boundaries, planning*



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This story begins in the early 1970s when the College of Librarianship was founded at the University of South Carolina (UofSC). Planners designed the program to be fresh and innovative. Their vision was to create a vibrant environment and curriculum, and they met for an entire year, sans students, to design their experiment. They divided a curriculum into two parts: a core offered in a twelve-credit chunk labeled the Professional Seminar (Pro Sem), and a collection of electives arranged in one-, two- and three-credit modules. A student could opt to take all three modules of a three-credit course, or any combination, just modules one and two, or just module three, or just module one. All students enrolled full-time and had to complete the Pro Sem before taking a single elective. They would earn 36 hours to qualify for the master's degree. A people-first, service orientation permeated the curriculum, and the students earned a reputation for valuing and practicing people skills.

By the time the College abandoned the medieval-sounding "Librarianship" and adopted the title, the College of Library and Information Science in 1983, the Pro Sem had been dissolved and merged into six core courses: introduction to the field; bibliographic organization and description; management; reference; introduction to computer applications; and research methods. The College admitted part-time students, became serious about computer applications, folded information science courses into the curriculum, and began an aggressive commitment to distance education. That commitment brought the College national prominence as a leader in providing distributed educational opportunities for cohorts in South Carolina, Georgia, Maine, West Virginia, and Virginia. The faculty made courses available on live, interactive TV, owing largely to support from UofSC's Distance Education arm. Soon the faculty offered an entire MLIS degree online. When the University reorganized, the College joined with the Journalism school to become the School of Library and Information

Science (SLIS) and the School of Journalism and Mass Communication under the College of Information and Communications (CIC).

When David Lankes assumed the Directorship of SLIS in 2016, he floated an idea: *Let's consider becoming a Knowledge School*. The faculty agreed to *consider* this. This faculty had resisted the siren call to abandon the mention of *library* and become an iSchool, which were the wave of the present. Yet some of the faculty, in deference to the command, "Dance with the one what *brung* you," were jealous of the term library, largely because a substantial portion of students were preparing to become school library media specialists, and another large portion was headed for positions in public, academic, and special libraries. This was also a faculty who were committed to survival, *thrival*, and excellence, so they eventually and enthusiastically supported the decision to apply for admission to the iSchool Consortium, and they applauded accepting institutional membership in the International Federation of Libraries and Institutions (IFLA). They had already designed and begun a doctoral program and launched an ambitious bachelor's degree program that admitted majors and minors. They had adopted an interest in service-learning. They had begun serious cooperation ventures with sister departments. Faculty were curious and cautious about this Knowledge School idea, but they embraced the idea and agreed to investigate.

And investigate they did. First, by abandoning petulant nit-picking, a favorite indoor sport among some faculty groups, faculty agreed upon two definitions of information and knowledge that could underpin and guide their investigation. They defined information, as meaningful patterns of organized data determined by an individual or derived from someone else's knowledge. They defined knowledge as that which results from internalizing information, getting it into one's cognitive system, and combining it with already known information and experience. They agreed to accept these

definitions with a minimum of tweaking because they were determined not to allow language to interfere with establishing and maintaining a focus.

The faculty bought into the idea that the program, especially at the master's and bachelor's levels, ought to attract students with both computer skills and people skills, people who could, armed with a UofSC MLIS or BIS, go into information organizations, industrial organizations, government organizations, and service organizations and help them discover, organize, share, and create information and information products. Degree recipients would be schooled in many of the traditional information arts, like discovering, acquiring, digitizing, storing, and disseminating information, but their Knowledge School influences would enable them to aggressively mine an organization's intellectual capital, conduct community analysis, communicate their findings, and enable organizational leadership to make informed choices about opportunities and directions. This program would provide a Knowledge School stamp. This program would forge a new brand for SLIS. The next step was to begin to consider how to make this happen, and how to forge a curriculum for this Knowledge School and this new brand.

In pursuit of these aims, a faculty member, his graduate assistant, and a doctoral student met with the Director to plan an initial discussion, the purpose of which was to identify current strengths, interests, and opportunities for future growth. They selected nine topics/segments:

- Literacy and Workforce Issues
- Interdisciplinary Issues/Opportunities
- Matters of International Import
- Industry/Community
- Libraries Serving in Times of Crisis

- School Library Media Issues/Materials for Specific Audiences
- Student Services
- Access Issues
- How to Achieve Tie in?

The planners selected faculty with expertise in those topics, and they planned an event where those faculty would define topics and state SLIS's current activities and future opportunities related to those topics, after which they would ask for suggestions from the assemblage. They would conduct nine sessions in 15-minute segments. The event would be managed, timed, and filmed to create a record of SLIS's beginning to explore the Knowledge School idea.

Planners invited SLIS faculty and students to join in this preliminary discussion. Because the intention was to keep this initial event within the SLIS family but also to get suggestions from important representatives from the library community, planners invited representatives from the Richland Public Library, the University Library, and the State Library of South Carolina, all of whom attended and participated. A retired school library media district coordinator also attended.

To provide some guidance for the conduct of the event, David Lankes suggested that the faculty consider the following statements, as the conveners called for responses:

Refine & Direct

Here are some statements that may help us direct our comments and questions as the conveners call for responses:

What perspectives do the statements suggest? What structures might they call for?

“In five years, where . . . ?” (5 years is a good milestone):

- In 5 years we will have a full faculty complement.

- In 5 years we will have a thriving undergraduate program.
- In 5 years as other schools are shrinking their school media programs, we will have continued to invest and grow ours.
- In 5 years we will have shown the world that the next step in the evolution of library & information science is the Knowledge School.
- We will have an innovative online program that builds a strong community of current students and ties in our alumni as active members.
- We will shine a spotlight on how a social mission at the core of our work helps not just the citizens of South Carolina, but the world.
- In 5 years we will have our PhD graduates leading the field in the best programs.
- In 5 years our research efforts will be bringing in millions of dollars in funding. In 5 years our international efforts will connect scholars from across the globe.
- In 5 years our mission in literacy will be lifting children out of poverty and providing a strong workforce to industry.
- In 5 years we will have a strong connection to Journalism, and Engineering, and across the campus.

Armed with these guiding statements, the discussion event took place on April 4, 2017. If in becoming a Knowledge School, the SLIS faculty were to develop a curriculum that prepared graduates to help organizations identify and acquire the information they need, manage that information, share intellectual capital, market products to constituents, and evaluate all those efforts, what might SLIS planners take from the information that was exchanged at the April 2017 discussion?

Reviewing the notes and mining the video of the event helped the authors identify four essential ideas or themes from the nine conversations and presentations, including:

1. Community analysis and needs assessment as essential skills, the purposes of which include responding to those needs in ways that help constituents make good decisions.
2. Community support, a concept that includes two-way communication designed to take full advantage of the unique knowledge available in and gathered from those communities.
3. Partnership development.
4. Boundary establishment and opportunity seeking, as differentiated from turf protection.

A brief overview and highlights of the event now follows. Each conversation and presentation name is bolded.

Literacy skills continue to offer citizens their best chances for coping with today's complex world. Responders to the **Literacy and Workforce Issues** presentation noted that improved literacy contributes to the economic well-being of a community and recommended layering literacy programs to assist children and adults.

Interdisciplinary Issues/Opportunities presenters urged the audience to think about the reach of the sciences and critically examine boundaries, both for opportunities to collaborate with other disciplines and for opportunities to create knowledge. This suggestion contained an explicit call for partnerships and collaboration as our faculty, students, and constituents examine, evaluate, and push boundaries. One respondent chose "messiness" as a descriptor for today's complex environments and recommended a curriculum that would prepare information professionals to embrace that messiness and help organizations provide practical solutions to messy problems.

The **Matters of International Import** presenter doubled down on the boundary notion and urged faculty to broaden the outlook from a state/regional one to include an international perspective. Addressing the cooperation and partnership theme, he urged the audience to discover mutually beneficial opportunities to work with international agencies. A respondent urged the faculty to publicize successful efforts to cooperate. As expressed here, the notion of community includes organic properties and strongly suggests that a Knowledge School seeks to learn and respond to needs expressed by a variety of constituents. Empowering those constituents to make decisions should be a major aim of Knowledge School activities, an aim that adds an important component to traditional community analysis and needs assessment measures.

Presenters on the **Industry/Community** topic stressed the roles of values and information as essential ingredients, especially for decision-making. The public library representative asserted that public libraries require new hires with skill sets to make data understandable, a contribution that fits squarely with Knowledge School aspirations. One presenter argued for “messiness” skills, echoing an earlier discussion. Another presenter cautioned against limiting exploration and establishing closure prematurely. He quoted James Baldwin thusly, “The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers.”

Two other recommendations came from the industry/community discussion, including embracing the changes in industry, but avoid chasing ersatz trends. Implicit directives accompany these recommendations. A Knowledge School will be an action school, one that experiments and takes risks, and one that embraces opportunities to deal with complex issues. And, a Knowledge School will demonstrate respect for the challenges of the unknown and will strive to make some of it known—and addressed.

South Carolina had experienced devastating damage and tragic loss of life in recent floods, so the **Libraries in Time of Crisis** presenter urged the faculty to prepare students who can perform in times of crisis. A respondent agreed and argued for a role for the library in times of crisis and stated that libraries can help shape intervention procedure, including the spreading of information. The topic of partnerships emerged again, and the State Library representative observed that partnerships are essential, especially in smaller communities. “Teach people how to develop partnerships,” she urged. SLIS maintains its commitment to prepare school library media (SLM) specialists, and the **SLM Issues/Literature for Specific Audiences** presenters asserted, “K12 lays the foundation for all that we are talking about.” The need to continue to build the SLM program is evident, as SLIS currently cannot produce enough graduates to fill the critical need for SLM specialists. There is a continuing need to educate administrators about the role of the school library. This obligation may fall to SLIS, observed one respondent, who recommended the topic for inclusion in SLIS’s research agenda.

An alumna and former district supervisor of school library media programs urged SLIS to prepare SLM specialists to be leaders and to be able employers of new technologies. “Market our brand to include school librarians,” added another respondent. A Knowledge School will endeavor to monitor and influence the efforts of libraries to grow and respond to changing environments. The “specific audiences” referred to included audiences that many information agencies serve. This includes school library media centers, public libraries, academic libraries, special libraries, entrepreneurial information enterprises, and consultant services. A mission to support those agencies will remain central to Knowledge School aims.

The **Student Services** presenter posed essential and intriguing questions: What will a Knowledge School do for students? How do we incorporate students into it? If this School is to be held

together, it will be the students who do so. A respondent suggested this: Teach students to articulate to prospective employers what they can do as well as what they know. The comment fits squarely with an essential Knowledge School notion, that Knowledge School graduates can help organizations *do things* with information, harvest what is known in the organization, assess opportunity, and use information to its advantage. Make students part of the equation, advised a respondent.

The **Access Issues** presenter gave the Universal Access student definition: “Everyone, Everywhere, Every Time,” and urged the audience to work together to make that ideal happen. This would include building accessible data systems, a respondent observed. Another respondent added that there are international intellectual property issues with accessibility (Marrakesh Treaty). Diversity issues were also identified, and a respondent stated that people who embrace diversity make communities more resilient. Develop a statement about diversity for our website, recommended yet another respondent.

The **Achieve Tie-In** segment was brief and to the point. The presenter observed that SLIS appears committed to move the stakes forward, and he welcomed the comment that we have the power to construct the reality we want. We are preparing people but we are also preparing the world, advised a participant. In summary, the presenter made two points:

1. We must embrace messiness and deal with loose boundaries, with a strong social justice commitment, and,
2. Ours is not a solved answer. The quest shall be what defines us.

Indeed, the purpose of the April 2017 meeting was to begin that quest, to come together to consider how SLIS might undertake an expanded purpose, based upon known and anticipated

opportunities. This chapter has chronicled the beginning effort to investigate possibilities. SLIS faculty continue this exploration.

Postscript: Several faculty held a post-April 2017 conversation aimed at furthering opportunities to explore and adopt a Knowledge School identity. Out of the conversation, Professor Bill Hogue undertook four initiatives:

1. Initiate Science Club at UofSC, an informal opportunity for faculty, students, and staff to come together and build community over beverages and light food. Relationships are currency in higher education. Science Club is a place to initiate and build relationships. Science Club taps the energy of people who are passionate about the world around them and who could feed that energy back into the cultural hive of the SLIS. Possible topics would be research interests, confounding problems, “messiness,” and crazy ideas.
2. Initiate Leadership Dialogues. In spring of 2018, as many as four guest CEOs (chief executive officers) would be hosted by SLIS and the College of Information and Communications. These guests will be asked to share their perspectives on emerging leadership challenges as we invent the 21st century. Each will invite dialogue with students, faculty, and staff from the UofSC community around some of the most compelling current and emerging issues and trends facing our society. Negotiations are underway for co-sponsorship under the organizational umbrella of the President’s Leadership Dialogue, sponsored by the UofSC Office of the President.
3. Engage with NMC (New Media Consortium) in creation of the 2018 Horizon Report. A CIC/SLIS faculty member has secured an invitation to join the Horizon Panel of Experts. He will organize a series of “pizza conversations” with students, faculty, and staff to ask their

assistance in guiding his participation. In short, he will be using a version of crowdsourcing to gather ideas and insights to inform UofSC's contribution to international dialogue about the future of technology and learning. The NMC describes the role of the Panel as providing vision and stimulus to the creation of the next Horizon Report, and the Panel will be asked to identify and describe the important developments in technology that will be influential for higher education institutions worldwide over the next five years. The Panel of Experts is being commissioned to identify the trends that will drive technology adoption; the challenges that will impede the technology options available to institutions unless resolved; and the new developments in technology that the global higher education sector is most likely to consider over the next five years.

4. Partner with BTCM (Beyond the Classroom Matters) to begin to better understand the importance and value of student engagement outside the classroom, including internships. Purposes of the partnership would include exploring possible pilot projects to encourage more intentional engagement by our students in leadership activities outside the classroom. A pilot project may provide an opportunity for CIC and SLIS to engage with the Office of the Provost and the Office of Student Affairs and Academic Support.

These initiatives spring from, advance the content and suggestions of the April 4, 2017 meeting, and squarely mesh with ideas associated with a Knowledge School identity, such as boundary creation, cooperation, international perspective, curricula, student involvement, technological advances, and branding.