Library and Information Science Education at the University of North Texas College of Information: Overview

The University of North Texas is one of the leading public universities in the state of Texas. The history of the Library and Information Science education at the University of North Texas (UNT) goes back to 1939, when the Department of Library Services was established on UNT’s campus in Denton, Texas. The first students received their undergraduate degrees in the 1940–41 academic year. At the end of the 1960s, the department developed into the School of Library of Information Sciences (SLIS), and in 1970, redefined its focus on professional programs at the graduate level. In 2008, the SLIS and the Department of Learning Technologies from the UNT College of Education were combined into the UNT College of Information (COI), and SLIS became the Department of Library and Information Sciences (DLIS). As of the fall 2011 semester, the DLIS enrolled a total of 930 students. From these, 43 were undergraduate, 817 graduate, and 69 doctoral students (UNT 2010–2011 Fact Book, n.d.). The UNT community is a diverse group of students of different ages, countries of citizenship, and ethnicities. The University and DLIS offer the enrolled students financial support in the form of financial aid, scholarships, grants, assistantships, and other. The university welcomes international students. The Intensive English Language Institute (IELI) is one of the largest language programs for learning English in the U.S. It enrolls over 450 students from over 30 countries.

The DLIS offers classes for the degrees of the Bachelor of Science, the Master of Science, the postmaster’s Certificate of Advanced Study, the graduate-level certification in school librarianship, and the
PhD in Information Science. The DLIS website provides information on the application process (http://www.ci.unt.edu/main/ViewPage.php?cid=195). The prospective students must submit the official scores on one of the entrance exams (Graduate Record Examination (GRE), Miller Analogies Test (MAT), or Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT). They have to fill out the e-forms online and pay the application fee. The department’s staff of advisors is available to answer to the prospective students’ questions. Upon admission, each student is assigned to a faculty advisor who helps with orientation in the program and development of the degree plan with the list of courses required to accomplish the program. Each degree plan must include three core/required courses taken at the beginning of the program.

The DLIS offers Master of Science in Library and Information Science (MLIS) degree with a concentration in General Studies, Health Informatics, Digital Image Management, Information Organization, Information Systems, Law and Legal Informatics, School Librarianship, or Youth Librarianship. In 2009, the U.S. News and World Report ranked the UNT MLIS number 17 among the top U.S. schools for a master's degree in library and information studies (US News, 2012). Medical Informatics program is ranked third in the nation and first in Texas; Services for Children and Youth program is ranked thirteenth in the nation; and School Library Media certification is the first online program of its kind in the U.S and is ranked eleventh in the nation. The COI offers the nation’s largest interdisciplinary PhD program.

During the final semester of studies, students must take the End of the Program Examination conducted online for the duration of one week. By the end of this week, students submit their essays on the topics that they choose at the beginning of the exam. The examination’s experience is guided by the special committee appointed from the DLIS faculty. In the course of the PhD program, students have to pass the qualifying exam, prepare and defend the dissertation proposal, get ready and defend the dissertation.

The organization of LIS education at UNT, as well in the U.S. as a whole, is guided by multiple factors. The most important of them are presented in the next section of this paper.

**Important Factors Shaping the LIS Education**

The major trends in the development of the LIS education follow the current changes in the LIS field and other industries’ environments, the requirements of the job market, and the standards and regulations of professional organizations.

**Professional Standards**

The *ALA Core Competences in Librarianship* were approved in 2009 and included details on the basic knowledge and skills required from every graduate of an master’s program accredited by the American Library Association (ALA). These are competences in the foundations of the profession, information resources, organization of recorded knowledge and information, technological knowledge and skills, reference and user services, research, continuing education and lifelong learning, administration and management (ALA, 2009, p. 1). The *Standards for Accreditation of Master’s Programs in Library and Information Studies* were developed by ALA’s Committee on Accreditation (COA) and remain the core document for the LIS colleges and schools presenting the essential characteristics of accredited LIS programs. They ensure the quality of professional education for information specialists and the continuous evaluation of LIS educational programs. The standards are reviewed by the COA on a regular basis and go through continuous changes with adjustments to the current environment and requirements of the field. The last revision to the *Standards* was approved in 2008. The accreditation is a «voluntary, nongovernmental, and collegial process of self-review and peer review,» and in higher education, has two goals: «1) to ensure that postsecondary educational institutions and their units, schools, or programs meet appropriate standards of quality and integrity, and 2) to improve the quality of education these institutions offer» (ALA Committee on Accreditation, 2011, p. I.1).

**Distance Learning and Global Reach**

Since mid-1990s, to meet the needs of the students, higher education institutions in the U.S. have been offering more and more online courses, as well as blended courses – online courses with a face-to-face component. This is an important trend in the LIS education, and the DLIS has been very active in
providing distance education. At the time of this paper, in each fall and spring semester, the DLIS offered 60-65 online and blended courses at the undergraduate and graduate level. At present, together with all the university’s departments, the DLIS organizes migration of the distance learning courses from Blackboard Vista to a new distance learning platform – Blackboard Learn.

In the past two decades, the DLIS offered courses at various in-state and out-of-state locations in partnership with local organizations. The DLIS offers a master’s degree with a mix of face-to-face, online and blended courses in Houston in the south of Texas, where the program started in the early 1990s. A similar program was offered in the West Texas. The grant-based programs were organized in the U.S. states of California, Georgia, Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, South Dakota, Utah, Virginia, Wyoming, and in the US-Affiliated Pacific Islands. The students participating in these out-of-state regional programs complete their programs of study taking courses online. At the beginning of their first semester in the program, they meet with the faculty and classmates for the Web Institutes that are organized either in Denton or Houston in Texas or in the other states. The Web Institutes give students the basics for completion of the core courses.

Diversity

The DLIS is committed to the diversity of its student body and offers its education to underserved populations. For example, in 2004, the Institute of Museum and Library Services’ (IMLS) awarded the DLIS a grant for the Rio Grande Initiative to recruit 20 bilingual (English-Spanish) students to complete a master’s degree online. The Rio Grande Initiative graduates occupy professional positions at the public and academic libraries along the Texas and New Mexico border.

In 2010, the DLIS received a grant of $1,599,222 from the Robert and Ruby Priddy Charitable Trust to support a three-year project, Promoting & Enhancing the Advancement of Rural Libraries (PEARL), and to boost the role of public libraries in the targeted rural communities in Texas.

In August of 2011, thirty-four students started their graduate studies based on the LEAP (Library Education for US-Affiliated Pacific) grant from IMLS. The grant finances the collaboration of three institutions: The Pacific Resources for Education and Learning, the University of North Texas Libraries, and the UNT Department of Library and Information Sciences. Twenty-three students from Guam, American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Pohnpei, Chuuk, Palau, and Yap received full tuition scholarships.

Cooperation and iSchools Movement

The COI cooperates with the local Dallas-Fort Worth area educational institutions. For instance, students can take courses at Texas Woman’s University, and have them added to the degree plan. Furthermore, the DLIS is a member of Web-based Information Science Education (WISE) Consortium, and DLIS students can take specialized online courses from the leading schools in Library and Information Science (LIS) around the nation.

Additionally, the UNT COI is a member of the iSchools Organization (iSchools Organization, 2012) that was created in 2005 by the leading schools, focusing their education and research efforts on information technology, LIS, and informatics fields. In 2013, in Fort Worth, TX, the COI will host the eighth iConference, the annual event of the iSchools movement.

Interdisciplinarity

The LIS field is an interdisciplinary field that is supported by the evolution of the current information technologies. In 1992, the COI established the Interdisciplinary PhD program in Information Science. The following UNT units participate in the program: Behavioral Analysis, Communication Studies, Computer Science & Engineering, Criminal Justice, Information Technology & Decision Sciences, Journalism, Learning Technologies, Library and Information Sciences, and Visual Arts & Design. The program offers courses in a variety of disciplines. This program’s graduates work in administration, education, and research in different industries. The Texas Center for Digital Knowledge serves as another example of an interdisciplinary approach in cooperation and research in the area of digital information. The center assists faculty with obtaining research grants and supports the students traveling to professional events. Another example of interdisciplinary collaboration is the participation of the DLIS faculty and students in
the UNT research clusters – collaborative «cross-disciplinary teams composed of leading researchers, faculty, students, and institutions engaged in seminal research and the synergistic exchange of ideas and resources» (UNT Office of Research and Economic Development, 2012).

**Meeting the Emerging Needs of the Profession**

To respond to the emerging challenges, the COI and the DLIS offer new certificates and develop new programs of study. In 2011, the UNT COI and Mayborn School of Journalism teamed in an interdisciplinary certificate program in Interactive and Virtual Digital Communication. Furthermore, in 2011, the IMLS Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program that funds library education research and recruits librarians and faculty, provided funding to support the development of four new graduate courses for a Graduate Academic Certificate in Digital Curation and Data Management. The first two pilot courses for the certificate will be taught in the summer of 2012. Finally, the Knowledge Management program of study is at the stage of development and will be launched in 2013.

**Incorporation of Research and Technology in Curriculum**

To keep the course materials up to date, the DLIS faculty members also constantly revise the existing course materials. For example, they include in the course readings the most recent professional literature published in LIS journals and conference proceedings and incorporate relevant results of their own research. The faculty also make regular additions and revisions to the course assignments, for instance to incorporate in them more hands-on experiences, that help students build a professional portfolio. The faculty is in a permanent search for new technologies and software to include into the course practical experience. For example, the Introduction to Information Organization course provides hands-on experience with building a database using InMagic database software, the Metadata course provides practical experience with DSpace digital content management system and NoteTab Light open-source tool for building metadata records, the Digital Libraries course provides practical experience with Omeka open source digital content management system, the Database Management course provides hands-on training with the MySQL open source database, the Information Architecture course provides hands-on experience in using Drupal website building and content management tool, the Managing Library Automation Projects course offers students a practical experience setting up and using open source cataloging software such as Evergreen and Koha, the Cataloging and Classification courses provide hands-on training in using the OCLC Connexion, Web Dewey, Classification Web, Cataloger’s Desktop and Resource Description and Access (RDA) Toolkit.

**Students’ Professional Development**

Following the requirements of the LIS filed education standards, the DLIS curriculum supports students’ professional development. A significant part of the DLIS curriculum is devoted to practical experience in the field. Following the requirements of the programs of study, students without prior industry-related experience must complete a faculty-approved internship or practicum.

Students are encouraged to participate and present their work at professional events (state, national, and international level conferences, COI colloquiaums, Lazerow lecture series, etc.). The COI and DLIS provide students with scholarships and travel grants to cover conference registration and travel expenses. Through research and teaching assistantships, students participate in the research projects conducted by the faculty and publish the results of their scholarly research. The DLIS listservs regularly post announcements about professional events, research and practice opportunities, and upcoming free or commercial webinars. Students also participate in the DLIS student association and the student chapters of professional LIS associations: American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T), ALA, and Texas Library Association (TLA).

The DLIS takes pride of its students’ academic, research, and professional achievements, which are highlighted in the news section of the DLIS website (http://www.lis.unt.edu) and COI website (http://www.ci.unt.edu), as well as in the COI semiannual publication *Call Number* and two UNT semiannual publications – *North Texan* and *UNT Research* –, on COI Facebook and Twitter pages. Students with a grade point average of 3.75 and higher are invited to the nation-wide LIS honor society Betha Phi Mu; since 2011, the North Texas Chapter of Betha Phi Mu exists at UNT.
The DLIS students receive active support in the job search process. The job search orientation begins with the explanation of the profession during the core courses (SLIS 5000, SLIS 5200, and SLIS 5600). The DLIS listservs place job ads; the UNT Career Center helps with resume and cover letters, provides consultations, organizes career fairs and invites guest speakers. The DLIS faculty members provide recommendations and reference letters to the graduates.

Quality Assurance

To ensure and improve the quality of the offered education, the DLIS collects and analyses feedback from the students about the program quality and areas in need of improvement through the Student Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness survey administered every semester for each of the courses and through the End of Program Questionnaire administered to the students in their final semester in the program. The students are also encouraged to attend presentations made by LIS researchers and educators who are interviewing for DLIS faculty positions, and their feedback on the faculty candidates is taken into account in hiring decisions, among other factors.

The DLIS cooperates with its alumni and other LIS practitioners in the program quality assurance. The DLIS collects and analyses feedback from the alumni through the Recent Graduate Questionnaire. There is a DLIS Alumni Society offering annual and lifelong memberships. Some of the most distinguished alumni serve on DLIS Board of Advisors – a committee of well-known professionals in the LIS field, representatives of the top managements of academic, public, school, and special libraries and information centers, and professional associations. The DLIS collects feedback from the members of its Board of Advisors on the new trends and needs of the LIS field, the quality of the graduates arriving to the field, and the skills that they must possess to be successful in their future careers: for example, the graduates’ teamwork, presentation, and analytical skills, the skills in the use of professional tools and software, as well as time management and leadership skills. These recommendations inform revisions of course materials and curriculum as a whole.

Conclusion

Because of the dynamic information landscape, challenging environment, emerging information and communications technologies, and evolution of the profession, the LIS higher education institutions follow the industry standards and regulations and re-evaluate their curricula to expand the supply of students with the highly demanded core competencies and skills that answer the needs of the professional job market. Therefore, the introduction of new programs of study and up-to-date certification, the expansion of distance learning, the establishment of new locations, the rising cooperation with the university’s community and other LIS organizations, the integration of research and technology into the curriculum, the emergence of interdisciplinary strategies, the commitment to increasing diversity and needs of various populations, the development of different forms of support for student professional progress, and other measures will continue to stay the major focal points of LIS higher education in the current decade.

References