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# An academic nomad?: Identity formation of iSchool students

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## Abstract

Students come to an iSchool program with a passion for exciting and novel research which they perceive as being rare in traditional disciplinary areas. However, the range of freedom allowed in conducting research at iSchools sometimes poses unexpected difficulties for students. This study aims to identify the unique problems that graduate students in an interdisciplinary iSchool program encounter when designing a research project. A qualitative content analysis method is used to analyze students' responses regarding the difficulties they have experienced. The findings indicate that the difficulties, which range from a paradox of choice in determining a research topic to communicating the implications of their research outcomes, generally point to a problem of identity formation. This study argues that students' identity problems have been overshadowed by the hype of interdisciplinary studies and that helping students establish a solid identity within iSchool programs is necessary to produce healthy and confident researchers.

**Keywords:** identity formation, interdisciplinary programs, iSchools, graduate students, research, academic identity

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## 1 Introduction

iSchool programs are characterized by diversity: openness to a wide range of research topics, an array of related areas, and various backgrounds of the members in the research community. Faced with assorted choices, graduate students in iSchools often run into difficulties that are less seriously experienced within typical disciplinary areas. This study aims to identify the unique problems that graduate students in an iSchool program experience in conducting their research. As iSchool programs focus on ordinary users instead of technological experts, and information instead of technology, research ideas often come from practical problems in everyday life. As long as researchers intend to work on these practical problems within an academic setting, they should address them upon strong academic grounds. Graduate students in an early stage of their study usually do not have a firm grasp of their area of expertise, and are not familiar with discussions from diverse academic disciplines. For them, the process of developing a research plan is full of uncertainty, and can even feel daunting. This poster presents a preliminary study that examines what the difficulties are, and whether those difficulties point to more fundamental problems.

## 2 Background

As the iSchool organization homepage asserts, iSchools promote an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the opportunities and challenges of information management. Realizing the core vision of bringing information, technology, and people together and producing meaningful synthesis necessarily requires an interdisciplinary approach. The interdisciplinary nature is apparent in the fact that the information component comes from information science, technology comes from computer science and related engineering fields, and people from psychology, sociology, anthropology and management (Olson & Grudin, 2009).

The multiple interest areas and diverse perspectives allowed in iSchools suggest a high degree of freedom in choosing research topics, as well as the approaches to investigating the chosen topics. Psychologist Schwartz (2005) warned of possible unintended consequences of having too many choices. He argues that having more choices is usually understood as offering better options and greater satisfaction, but the unrealistically high expectations can lead to decision-making paralysis and clinical depression.

Students, who have not achieved a firm academic identity, may be faced with a kind of "identity crisis" in the abundance of choices. Identity means a well-established self-structure (Erikson, 1968). The better developed the structure is, the more aware individuals are of their own uniqueness and similarity to others and of their own strengths and weaknesses in making their way in the world. Individuals who have achieved a sense of identity are open to change and act with confidence. Failing to form an identity leads to identity confusion in which one cannot keep a stable and well-incorporated view of the self. This can result in feelings of alienation and maladjustment (Marcia, 1980). Identity formation issues are typically

considered to be problems encountered in adolescence, but answering the “who am I?” question matters over the course of one’s whole life, especially when going through a significant transition period or a period that requires a number of choices and decisions ((Marcia, 1994).

The circumstances described in the above psychological studies have many commonalities with situations faced by iSchool students. Looking at the problems iSchool students face through the lens of psychological research will be helpful in understanding students’ difficulties and figuring out ways to help them with those problems.

### 3 Methodology

The research setting of this study is an iSchool program in Korea. The program was built on a pure startup model, without any historical connection to the traditional information science discipline. 18 graduate students who were taking a required introductory class in the iSchool program were the informants of this study. Most of them were in their first or second year of graduate study. They were asked to brainstorm the difficulties they had experienced or were expecting when designing a research project. A qualitative content analysis method was used to analyze students’ responses. In qualitative content analysis, codes are both analytically developed and inductively identified in the data (Berg & Lune, 2004). Categorizing students’ responses was based on the stages of a research process introduced by Case (2012). As the analysis progressed, more meaningful categories emerged, which were used to finally sort students’ responses.

### 4 Findings

Students’ concerns were distributed across the range of research stages, but their concerns were mostly clustered around the stages of determining a research topic and communicating the implications of the research outcomes. It is worth noting that all those difficulties generally point to one fundamental problem: establishing their academic identity. They said they frequently run into a fundamental question of “who am I?” and referred to themselves as “an academic nomad” or “a lonely pioneer who tries to break new ground.”

#### 4.1 A “paradox of choice” in deciding a research topic and methodologies

Students reported that they find it challenging to select and concentrate on a research topic because possible research topics are so widely dispersed. They also understand that there are many different methodologies to investigate those research topics. At the same time, they said that they may be bound to their own disciplinary background and previous training, and experience difficulties in going beyond their own ways of thinking, assumptions, and perspectives. These sound like a “paradox of choice,” which indicates a dilemma people experience when they have to make a choice among many alternatives. More choice alternatives should feel good, but the abundance of options makes it difficult to choose at all (Schwartz, 2005).

#### 4.2 “Obsession to the new”

Some students reported that they are obsessed with keeping up with the most recent technological trend and are anxious that their research might fall behind the trend. As research processes take a lot of time and effort, they fear that their research might lose timeliness very quickly and become out of context. Technologies advance very rapidly, while human attributes do not change as such. Also, pursuing the depth required for academic research and the speed of technological advancement do not match easily. These discrepancies create conflicts that make students question their identity in pursuing an academic endeavor.

#### 4.3 Integrating multiple perspectives

Most research topics are compound problems that are not solved from a single perspective. Students found that it is hard to find theoretical backgrounds that are well-aligned with the problems in their hands. Also, they deal with newly arising problems, and it is often the case that previous studies have not been accumulated enough. The range of literature to review and then gauge what is the most up-to-date outcome regarding a given topic feels overwhelming. If a chosen topic is one that has been heavily researched in other disciplinary areas, they have to pick up the necessary knowledge starting at a 100

level, which requires a lot of time and effort. Sometimes different terms from the disciplinary background are used to indicate the same thing, which adds to the perceived difficulty of determining which academic area their research fits into.

#### 4.4 Communicating implications of research outcomes

Students find that reaching a consensus regarding the value of their research from people with different backgrounds is extremely challenging, because different people understand the implications of the research very differently. They question the extent to which they should listen to and incorporate opinions from other people who have different backgrounds. Also, they feel that it is onerous to explain how their own research differs from other studies in related areas. Even finding an appropriate venue to present their research outcomes feels difficult. These problems are related to a serious challenge to one's identity: "What is my uniqueness and similarities to others?"

### 5 Discussion and Conclusion

Students come to an iSchool program because they expect interesting and novel research, which they perceive is not being produced well within typical disciplinary boundaries. However, passion alone is not enough to become a successful researcher. Solid identity is critical for successful performance and emotional well-being. Furthermore, it is the basis upon which to evolve into a mature and independent researcher who is open to changes and flexible in dealing with challenges.

With the advancement of IT, the hope of creating exciting and valuable new ideas by integrating previously separate pieces has been boosted. Many good ideas are constructed out of already existing ones, becoming new answers to old problems (Murray, 2009). This amplifies the hype of interdisciplinary research in iSchools. In this hype, students' unique difficulties have been more or less overshadowed in discussions. We, as educators, want our students to find researching in iSchools exciting and rewarding and to pursue their careers with confidence and positive prospects. We hope that this study facilitates conversation about the ways in which we can help students secure their own identity and develop into confident researchers.

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