

iSchool Academic Structures as Boundary Objects to Inform the Interdisciplinary State of the Information Field

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OVERVIEW and METHODS

The academic hierarchical placement of an iSchool and the words or terms in iSchool names and the departments, schools, or colleges in which the iSchool resides, serve as boundary objects and provide evidence of the evolution of interdisciplinarity. This study uses term frequency to examine the names of the current 48 iSchools in the United States in 2005 and 2023. This period represents the founding of the iSchool Organization until today.

The 2023 list of the 48 U.S. iSchool names and position in the university structure was confirmed by visiting the institution websites. The same process was repeated but the Wayback Machine (<https://web.archive.org>) was used to capture the data from 2005. Word or term frequency was utilized to develop a data matrix to represent iSchool names and the names of the academic units which house iSchools.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How can an examination of boundary objects across iSchool academic structures and names provide evidence of the evolution of interdisciplinarity?

Definitions:

Boundary Objects inhabit several intersecting social worlds and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them. Boundary objects are objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites.....They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation. (Star & Griesemer, 1989 p. 393)

Interdisciplinary: an adjective describing the interaction among two or more different disciplines. This interaction may range from simple communication of ideas to the mutual integration of organizing concepts, methodology, procedures, epistemology, terminology, data, and organization of research and education in a fairly large field. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 1972, p 25).

DATA ANALYSIS

Terms in Name of College or School HOUSING an iSchool	# of iSchools	% of iSchools	# of iSchools	% of iSchools	Difference	
	2005	2005	2023	2023	#	%
Information, Information Studies, Information Science	4	36.4%	8	38.1%	4	1.7%
Education	2	18.2%	7	33.3%	5	15.1%
Computing, Computer Science, Computational Science	1	9.1%	4	19.0%	3	9.9%
Communication, Media	4	36.4%	5	23.8%	1	-12.6%
Engineering	1	9.1%	2	9.5%	1	0.4%
Arts & Sciences	3	27.3%	3	14.3%	0	-13.0%
Technology, Information Technology (IT)	1	9.1%	2	9.5%	1	0.4%
Total # Secondary Schools	11		21			

2005: 35 iSchools (76% or 35 of 46) were primary schools and 11 were secondary. 2 of the iSchool did not exist in 2005.

2023: 27 iSchools (56% or 27 of 48) were primary schools and 21 were secondary.

FINDINGS

Hierarchy of Higher Education Institutions	Positioning of iSchool in university	iSchool Count
	2005 Primary and 2023 Primary	27
	2005 Primary and 2023 Secondary	8
	2005 Secondary and 2023 Primary	0
	2005 Secondary and 2023 Secondary	13

DISCUSSION

Of the 35 iSchools at the primary level in 2005, only 27 remained at the primary level of their institution in 2023, a decrease of 22.9%. Terms in the academic unit names in which iSchools reside changed significantly with a growth of 15.1% for 'education' and 9.9% for terms related to 'computing'. These findings provide evidence of changes in the academic community of the iSchools and the boundaries indicating an evolution in interdisciplinarity.

The term, 'Library' was present in 18 (39.1%) of iSchools in 2005 and only 5 (10.4%) of iSchools in 2023. Of these 13 iSchools, all continue to have ALA accredited programs in Library Science, so this finding is *not* due to closures of library programs. Further studies, like surveys or interviews of the iSchools, who have changed names or organizational hierarchy, would provide valuable detail on the changing boundaries and the impact on the iSchool.

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