During the ASIS&T Board of Directors retreat this past July in Montreal, the ASIS&T McGill Student Chapter and France Bouthillier, director of McGill’s School of Information Studies, invited six board members to participate in a symposium on current and future trends in information science research. The board members generously agreed to provide a panel discussion to an overflowing room of 50 attendees, reviewing definitions of what the field is really about, warnings about current research practices in the field, and anticipated future directions in LIS research.

The panel was composed of past president Diane Sonnenwald, current president Andrew Dillon and president-elect, Harry Bruce. Three directors-at-large completed the panel: Katriina Byström, Sanda Erdelez and Diane Rasmussen Pennington. Panelists were not all in agreement on each point; for example, some were more pessimistic about the current state of LIS research than others. A summary of key points made during the two hours of presentation and discussion is provided here.

Defining the Field
Panelists presented three ways of defining our field and the work we do. Andrew Dillon argued that the role of our field today is to address the problems presented by our information society by tackling the human and policy solutions that are largely ignored in favor of technological or financial priorities by other fields and/or

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organizations. He commented, “We are not doing enough to draw students and new researchers into this area. Social questions are... important and may not be addressed if we are not involved.”

Dillon defined the core basics of our field as being about 1) information, 2) information organization through time and 3) designing information that matches user needs, stating that our field is not about context. The big research questions of our field are about whether we can empirically demonstrate issues and solutions related to those three core basics.

Harry Bruce stated that he takes an iSchool approach to defining our field, which is that our field is positioned where technology and information meet. New technical innovations trigger new questions and interest in how people deal with information in areas such as personal information management.

Interestingly, a third approach was provided by both Diane Sonnenwald and Katriina Byström. Sonnenwald described the role of LIS researchers and practitioners as infrastructure, using metaphors of midfield soccer/football players who support the front lines, and social networks to describe the essential connecting role we play. Byström suggested that the core idea in our field is facilitation. She gave the example that we in LIS could do more for the user in system design, as she sees great research potential in developing information systems for organizations and looking at how information can support decision-making.

**Warnings and Exhortations to Researchers**

Many in attendance at the symposium were students. As a result, the panel thoughtfully spoke to those in attendance about research practices to be avoided and practices to be cultivated. While some panel members emphasized certain items more than others, the overall discussion generated the following insights:

- Abandon navel-gazing for big questions
- Give careful consideration to ethics
- Consider the application of research
- Promote interdisciplinarity
- Develop good practices and valuable skills.

**Abandon navel-gazing for big questions.**

At the start of the symposium, Dillon defined navel-gazing research as the obsessive refinement of past questions while ignoring big research questions and called for an end to it. Other panel members forcefully echoed this call, including Bruce, who related it to the need for increased interdisciplinary work in building a “more dynamic research space” in our field, and Sandra Erdelez, who suggested that research questions should be more closely related to core issues of the field and that researchers should be quicker at figuring out research connections to social needs and trends.

**Give careful consideration to ethics.**

Sonnenwald took time to eloquently emphasize the need for ethics in all research endeavors, pointing out that brilliant research can be undermined or become meaningless without sufficient care for ethical issues. She highlighted the following areas where LIS researchers need to be aware of ethical challenges and practices:

- plagiarism
- dropping authors on papers in the journey from conferences to journal publications
- idea appropriation
- providing constructive and informative reviews
- treatment of colleagues
- honoring commitments made
- generosity in mentorship.

**Consider the application of research.**

Diane Rasmussen Pennington described how successful grant-writing in Canada relies on demonstrating in applications for funding how research has the potential to positively impact the lives of Canadians. She commented that we are advantageously positioned in LIS when making those arguments. She argued for an increase in industry-academic partnerships and their usefulness in translating research to practice, while acknowledging the challenges and tensions of those partnerships. She pointed out that the current valuation of faculty and researchers by universities can sometimes restrict or defeat such partnerships when, for example, the researcher needs a line item for a CV and as a result needs to be careful about research process, while the industry partner wants quick action.

She suggested that there are three things that should change in the future in order
to promote LIS research: 1) researchers being open to industry partnerships and 2) working with other fields to disseminate research while 3) faculty and universities reconsider what is important when reviewing applications for tenure and promotion.

Sonnenwald suggested that researchers consider what problems their research will address, then ask questions such as, What does a solution to this problem mean to people? What does it mean to societies?

Erdelez described how drawing connections between research and application is complicated by a moving social and technological landscape and commented that LIS has this challenge in common with other fields. She pointed out that the problem of translating findings into research is an information process and is potentially an area of research for our field that could help other fields.

In response to the panel members who spoke about the need to connect research to practical applications and social benefits, Byström argued that there is a flip side, which is to consider how research will help you, as a researcher, learn about yourself. Questions you might ask yourself include: How else could I have addressed this problem? What did I do wrong? How is my thinking affected? These insights are also valuable benefits that result from research.

In response to arguments for industry-academic partnerships, Dillon warned against danger of tailoring research and programs too much in order to respond to commercial pressures.

Promote interdisciplinarity. Bruce made an argument for an increase in interdisciplinary work and interdisciplinary representation in our faculties, in order to pull down research silos and facilitate entry into what he termed “dynamic research space.”

Byström pointed out that in an era of university department amalgamations, interdisciplinarity is sometimes forced upon us. The most pressing problem she perceives for interdisciplinarity is the potential conflict in philosophy behind theoretical issues and goals of research questions. She cautioned attendees to be flexible in their approach to this conflict, while maintaining respect for our field and our point of view, as well as that of other fields.

Develop good practices and valuable skills. Erdelez gave a hot-and-not list of research practices for attendees that included sage counsel for students as prospective and developing researchers. This counsel included encouragement to do the following:

- Sharpen skills and research methods
- Study well and do well
- Work on writing. Receive criticism well, ask questions and be willing to extensively re-write.
- Use personal information management tools now available to you as a researcher
- Try to lay a foundation of interpersonal and work skills by being the member of a research team.

Future Directions for LIS Research

In discussing the current state of LIS research, Dillon sees causes for optimism and pessimism. There is an unparalleled interest outside our field in information and information problems. At the same time, a weak research tradition has left us unable to respond to that interest (that need) in a compelling way, although he notes that LIS is not alone in this dilemma; other fields have the same problem.

In order to help resolve this problem, his suggestion is that the field needs to move beyond demanding respect or worrying about respect. Instead we need to go to our strength, which is that we are user-centered, that is, we regard information as a common good. He called for researchers to find big pressing information questions related to information, its organization over time and the design of information services to respond to user needs while taking into account policy issues and responding to those questions empirically.

Erdelez recommended to students looking for research topics that they “see where it hurts and where it hurts most.” Examples she gave of painful areas were personal-level information management or information security at a national level.

Bruce identified for the audience five topics that he believes will be the future of LIS research:

- Big data (although he dislikes this term)
- Information assurance and cybersecurity
- Digital youth
- The role of information in creativity and innovation
- Personal information management.

Pennington argued that in LIS programs there currently exist too many divisions, according to work context – for example, those master’s students intending to work in public libraries are often separated by curriculum, interest groups and so forth from students intending to pursue a PhD. One significant artificial divide that concerns her deeply is a technological divide, which allows some students to avoid technology in their schooling. She argues that technology should be better integrated into our study and practice and should not be a basis for divisions in the field as we go forward.

It should be noted that the event was held in a heritage building, which meant there was no air conditioning for our good-natured panel, whose members got to witness Montreal summer humidity during their presentations and then a Montreal summer thunderstorm during the social hour that followed. Our thanks go to the panel members for a wonderful event and to the moderator and originator of the event, France Bouthillier in her dual roles as the director of the School of Information Studies at McGill and the faculty advisor to the McGill ASIS&T Student Chapter.