

# “Unity in Diversity”: A Conversation around the Interdisciplinary Identity of Information Science

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## ABSTRACT

As a dynamic and interdisciplinary field of study, information science has a diverse set of methods, theoretical frameworks, tools and processes that continue to be developed, adopted, and extended through further research, teaching, and practice. Some of the methods and frameworks have origins in other disciplines. The interdisciplinary nature of information science may have enabled the field to grow in stature but it may have also contributed to it being perceived, often unfairly and mistakenly, as lacking a strong identity, brand, and reputation, leading to a possible fragmentation of the field. Continued conversations around factors that may help and/or hinder the field from fulfilling its full potential and how it can position itself to build an identity on a strong track record are necessary. The panel has two main goals: (1) to engage researchers and educators in an interactive discussion on the contributing factors and ways in which information science can remain a diverse and interdisciplinary field, realize its full potential, and build a strong identity as well as identify potential barriers it needs to overcome; and (2) to delineate the roles its stakeholders and allies need to play to achieve that goal of a field with “Unity in diversity”.

## KEYWORDS

Information science; Identity; Diversity; Interdisciplinary field; Unity in diversity.

## INTRODUCTION

Information science is a dynamic, continuously evolving, diverse, and interdisciplinary field of study. This is, in part, due to the fact that we live in an information society where information pervades every aspect of our lives and information is increasingly becoming both an input and output of economic activities. The field has a diverse set of methods, theoretical frameworks, tools and processes that have been formulated over several decades and that continue to be developed and extended through further research, teaching, and practice. However, some of the methods, theoretical frameworks, tools, and processes often have origins in other disciplines such as computer science, behavioral science, communications, philosophy, sociology, and linguistics (Cronin, 2008). As such, they are shared among multiple, but often overlapping, fields (Bates, 1999). Naturally, the more intertwined one or more fields are, the more likely that they will share more of the same elements. That sometimes helps sustain each of the fields and they may thrive as a result of their shared methods, frameworks, tools, and processes. That is why some argue that the interdisciplinary nature of information science with its diverse sub-disciplines better represents the field’s reality and enables it to attract more talent and fresh perspectives, making it a more rigorous field. These characteristics may have enabled the field to grow in stature, size, and scope. It has also allowed researchers and practitioners in the field to address grand challenges in society by bringing interdisciplinary teams together to solve complex problems. However, this may have also contributed to the field being perceived, often unfairly, as lacking a strong identity, brand, and reputation, and leading to fragmentation of the field (see Albright, 2010; Bonnici, Subramaniam, and Burnett, 2009; Buckland, 2012; Raju, 2020; Robinson, 2009; Zins, 2007).

An interdisciplinary field such as information science allows researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders a relative degree of flexibility and freedom to pursue a variety of research projects or practical initiatives. As a result, it could potentially appear to suffer from lack of identity. It is imperative that researchers, educators, and practitioners regularly come together at fora such as the ASIS&T Annual Meeting and engage in discussions to identify roles that each stakeholder needs to play to help chart a way forward for the field as well as keep its “Unity in diversity”. Hence, the need for this interactive panel proposal.

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Our panel addresses diversity from the perspective of research topics, teaching, and practice as well as the various methods, theories, models, and tools used and/or applied in the field of information science. The two main goals of the panel are:

1. to engage researchers and educators in an interactive discussion on the contributing factors and ways in which information science can remain a diverse and interdisciplinary field, realize its full potential, and build a strong identity as well as identify potential barriers it needs to overcome; and
2. to delineate the roles its stakeholders and allies need to play to achieve that goal of a field with “Unity in diversity”.

The following questions will serve as starting points for the interactive discussions and activities:

1. How do you characterize the diversity in information science in terms of areas or topics for research and teaching, its defining features, as well as the various methods, theories, models, and tools used and/or applied? How are the multiple identities of the field shaping it overall? What positive and/or negative impacts have they had?
2. What are the contributing factors and ways in which information science can remain a diverse and interdisciplinary field while building a strong identity (or multiple identities) and stature and distinguishing itself from other allied fields (or reframe and reimagine its multiple identities)?
3. What are the three most pressing barriers or potential hurdles it needs to overcome to remain an interdisciplinary and diverse field with a strong identity and a field with “Unity in diversity”?
4. What role does each stakeholder and/or ally (educators, researchers, practitioners, groups such as the iSchools Caucus, professional associations, standard and accreditation bodies, etc.) need to play for information science to achieve the ultimate goal of an interdisciplinary and diverse field with a strong identity and a field with “Unity in diversity”?

The format for the panel session is as follows: Initially, the six (6) panelists will each share their thoughts and viewpoints on the above four questions with a special emphasis on ways to keep the field diverse and interdisciplinary while building it to have a clear and strong identity (20 minutes). Then, the interactive discussion of small breakout groups with the help of the above discussion questions will follow (50 minutes). It will involve participants sharing their views on this topic while panelists facilitate the breakout groups’ discussions. Finally, the last 20 minutes will be dedicated to summarizing the main takeaways of the interactive discussions, reports from each breakout group, and action items generated. The summaries will be shared with ASIS&T and the broader information science community via a blog post. The eventual outcome of the panel discussions will be a journal article.

## PANELISTS

**Abebe Rorissa** is Professor and Director of the iSchool (School of Information Sciences) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Before his current position, he was Associate Professor and Associate Dean for Faculty Development at the University at Albany, State University of New York (SUNY). He also worked in four countries as an educator and practitioner. He has consulted for academic institutions, national governments, and international organizations, including the United Nations. His research interests include multimedia information organization and retrieval, scaling of users’ information needs/perceptions, use/acceptance/adoption and impact of information and communication technologies, and data analytics. Dr. Rorissa was a Member-at-Large on the ASIS&T Board of Directors and a member of its Executive Committee. He will be the moderator for this panel session.

**Hemalata Iyer** is an associate professor at the University at Albany, State University of New York (SUNY). She teaches in the MSIS program and in the interdisciplinary doctoral program in information science. Her research interests include knowledge organization and representation; metadata; human information behavior; health information user needs and access; organization and representation of complementary systems of medicine (CAM); culture and representation of information; visual resources management.

**Kendra Albright** is the Goodyear Endowed Professor in Knowledge Management in the School of Information at Kent State University. She has taught graduate and undergraduate level courses in knowledge management, including Business Intelligence, Information Economics, and the Knowledge Economy across four institutions in three countries, including the University of South Carolina and the University of Tennessee, the University of Sheffield in the UK, and the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs in Tbilisi, Georgia. Dr. Albright’s research interests focus on the ways in which users understand and use information to facilitate positive change and solve organizational problems within the knowledge economy. Dr. Albright serves as a consultant to corporations, government agencies, and non-profit organizations and has been invited to speak at numerous conferences including the Henley Knowledge Forum

in the UK. Dr. Albright is widely published and currently serves as Editor-in-Chief for *Libri*, the international journal of libraries and information studies. She holds a Ph.D. in Communications, a Master of Science in Library Science, and a B.S. in Human Development.

**Devendra Potnis** is an Associate Professor at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. His research focuses on the adoption of information tools, resources, and services by students, marginalized communities, libraries, microfinance, and governments. He has published his research in *Communications of the AIS*, *First Monday*, *Government Information Quarterly*, *Information Development*, *Information Processing & Management*, *IT and Libraries*, *IT for Development*, *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, *Journal of Library & Information Science*, *LIS Research*, *Telematics and Informatics*, *The Information Society*, *JASIS&T*, *Journal of Information Science*, *The Library Quarterly*, and other reputed journals. He has received funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, OCLC, and ALISE.

**Nadia Caidi** is a Professor at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, Canada. Her research and scholarship have focused on human information behavior and global migration. Her recent work has examined the changing conceptions of diversity, equity and inclusion in our fields. Her book, "Humanizing LIS Education and Practice: Diversity by Design" (co-edited with Keren Dali), was published by Routledge in 2021. Dr. Caidi was the 2011 President of the Canadian Association for Information Science (CAIS) and the 2016 President of ASIS&T. In 2019, ALISE awarded her the Pratt-Severn Faculty Innovation Award. Dr. Caidi is the Director of International Student Engagement at the Toronto iSchool, and the 2020 recipient of ASIS&T's Watson Davis Award for Service.

**Daniel Alemneh** is head of Digital Curation Unit at the University of North Texas Libraries and teaching at the College of Information. For the past 20 years, Dr. Alemneh has been actively involved in various professional activities including member of ASIS&T Board of Directors. He was a 2019-2020 Fulbright Scholar at Addis Ababa University's College of Natural Science, School of Information Science. Dr. Alemneh will offer his views on the evolving roles of information professionals in navigating the emerging challenges and opportunities, while managing competing priorities in the current open access, cyber threat susceptible, and big data era.

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