

Analysis of Information Organization Curriculum in Library and Information Science Programs at American Universities

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Abstract

Purpose/Significance: As one of the earliest nations to develop information organization education, the United States has established relatively comprehensive and advanced curricula and pedagogical approaches in this domain. Investigating these practices can provide valuable references for curriculum design and educational implementation of information organization courses in Chinese universities. **Process/Method:** This study selects 15 U.S. universities with top-ranked Library and Information Science (LIS) programs as research subjects, conducting web-based surveys and analysis of their information organization courses with respect to curriculum structure, course content, instructional modalities, and assessment methods. **Results/Conclusion:** The study identifies that LIS education in U.S. universities is characterized by strong emphasis on information organization courses, abundant elective offerings, pronounced interdisciplinary features, curricula that align with contemporary demands while emphasizing practical application, diversified teaching methodologies, and multi-dimensional assessment approaches. Building upon these findings, the paper proposes implications for curriculum design and education of information organization courses in China, aiming to provide references for the development of LIS programs in Chinese universities within the context of new liberal arts.

Full Text

An Analysis of Information Organization Course Offerings in American LIS Master' s Programs

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] The United States is among the earliest countries to develop information organization education, with relatively mature and advanced curriculum design and pedagogical approaches. Studying these programs can provide valuable references for curriculum development and educational practices in Chinese universities.

[Methods/Process] This study selected 15 top-ranked American universities with LIS programs as research subjects. Through web-based investigation, we examined their information organization courses with respect to curriculum structure, course content, teaching methods, and assessment approaches.

[Results/Conclusion] The findings reveal that American LIS programs demonstrate strong emphasis on information organization courses, offer numerous electives, exhibit clear interdisciplinary characteristics, align curricula with contemporary needs while emphasizing practical skills, employ diversified teaching methods, and implement multi-dimensional assessment systems. Based on these observations, we propose implications for improving information organization curriculum design in Chinese universities, aiming to provide references for LIS professional development within the context of China's New Liberal Arts initiative.

Keywords: United States; Library and Information Science; Information Organization; Curriculum Design

In November 2020, China's Ministry of Education issued the *Declaration on New Liberal Arts Construction*, which established objectives and tasks for this educational reform and identified promoting integrated development as an essential direction. The guiding principles of emphasizing "interdisciplinary integration," "incorporating modern information technology," and "strengthening curriculum systems" also provide clear direction for advancing information organization course development. As a core component of LIS education, information organization must respond to these policy guidelines. The rapid development of big data, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence has transformed the information organization landscape, presenting new challenges for library and information work in terms of content, models, and workflows.

Information organization courses equip students with knowledge and skills in areas such as information organization, cataloging and classification, indexing, database construction, and retrieval. As a field closely tied to technological development and characterized by interdisciplinary nature, information organization is offered as a core course in numerous universities worldwide. However, significant variations exist across institutions in terms of course offerings, teaching content, and curricular emphasis. Therefore, this study investigates information organization course offerings in 15 American universities' LIS master's programs, focusing on analyzing differences in course types, content, teaching methods, and assessment approaches. By summarizing the characteristics of

American LIS information organization curricula, we aim to provide references for developing more comprehensive course structures in Chinese universities and propose recommendations aligned with China's national context for cultivating interdisciplinary talent in the new era.

1. Literature Review

As the LIS discipline has evolved, academic research on information organization courses has gradually deepened both domestically and internationally. Our review of relevant literature in CNKI reveals that Chinese scholars and institutions have concentrated their research in three main areas: (1) studies focusing on specific courses within information organization, such as metadata courses, information retrieval courses, and data mining courses; (2) research on teaching methodologies, including teaching models, pedagogical approaches, and curriculum reform; and (3) macro-level studies on curriculum development, graduate research directions, knowledge systems, and future trends in the context of New Liberal Arts construction.

In contrast, our examination of literature in the WOS Core Collection shows that foreign scholars focus primarily on course content itself. Their research mainly addresses: (1) learning assessment in information organization curricula, such as using the Kirkpatrick Framework to evaluate student learning outcomes and advocating for effective evaluation methods to ensure graduates' professional competitiveness; and (2) analysis of core content in introductory courses, revealing that traditional bibliographic methods remain central while metadata has become a core component, with information architecture, markup languages, and semantic web technologies gradually being incorporated.

Overall, most existing research examines specific aspects of information organization courses, while systematic studies of curriculum characteristics in American universities remain rare. In-depth investigation of top-ranked American LIS programs and their advanced practices holds significant importance for improving information organization curricula in Chinese universities and promoting sustainable LIS discipline development in the new era.

2. Research Design

2.1 Sample Selection

U.S. News & World Report, the third-largest American news magazine, has published university and departmental rankings since 1983, earning high influence and recognition. To ensure authority and representativeness, this study selected the top 15 universities (including ties) from its 2021 rankings of American LIS programs as research subjects. These institutions are: University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Washington, University of Maryland College Park, University of Texas at Austin, Rutgers University, Syracuse University, University of Michigan, Indi-

ana University Bloomington, University of Tennessee Knoxville, Florida State University, Simmons University, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Drexel University, and University of California, Los Angeles. The information organization courses in these institutions' LIS master' s programs constitute the core focus of this study.

2.2 Research Methods

This study employed web-based investigation, literature review, and content analysis. Based on the U.S. News graduate school rankings, we identified target institutions. Through web investigation, we visited each university' s official website, navigated to LIS master' s programs via "Academic," "Programs," or "Degrees" sections, and accessed course information through "Courses" or similar links. Using literature review and content analysis, we defined the scope of information organization courses based on established criteria from relevant literature, documenting details including course titles, content, delivery methods, and assessment approaches.

2.3 Data Sources

- (1) **Institution Selection:** We accessed the U.S. News website, selected "EDUCATION," then "Grad Schools," and navigated to "library studies" to review the "Best Library and Information Studies Schools" ranking, selecting the top 15 institutions.
- (2) **Program Selection:** By visiting each institution' s website and exploring "Academic" or "Programs" sections, we selected graduate programs related to LIS based on program descriptions (see).
- (3) **Course Information Collection:** We searched for "Courses," "Course Description," or "Course Catalog" sections on each website to obtain graduate course listings for LIS programs. Based on course descriptions, we identified information organization courses and documented relevant details including credits, titles, nature (required/elective), and delivery formats.

2.4 Defining the Scope of Information Organization Courses

Information organization encompasses a broad range of topics. According to the LIS research area classification published by the American Library Association, the field includes eight themes: information organization, descriptive cataloging, archival description, classification and subject analysis, indexing and abstracting, metadata and semantic web, knowledge/information resource management, and archives management. Chinese scholars have similarly identified course categories including records management, information architecture, cataloging and classification, metadata theory and practice, indexing and abstracting, and archives and manuscript management. For this study, we define information organization courses as including: information organization (and related courses),

descriptive cataloging, classification, indexing, metadata, information resource management, information architecture, and archives management.

3. Analysis of Information Organization Course Offerings

3.1.1 Course Quantity and Credits

Based on our defined scope, we identified information organization courses from the 15 institutions' websites and compiled data on total LIS course offerings, total credit requirements, and the number of information organization courses, calculating their proportion of the total curriculum (see).

The number of information organization courses varied significantly across institutions. The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign offered the most with 20 courses, while the University of Maryland College Park offered the fewest with only 3. Eight institutions offered more than 10 information organization courses. Beyond UIUC, these were Indiana University Bloomington (18), Florida State University (12), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (11), UCLA (11), and University of Tennessee Knoxville, Simmons University, and University of Wisconsin-Madison (each with 10).

The proportion of information organization courses within the total LIS curriculum reflects institutional emphasis on the field. Excluding the University of Tennessee Knoxville (7.63%), all institutions devoted more than 10% of their curriculum to information organization, with Drexel University, University of Maryland College Park, and University of Michigan exceeding 20% (28.57%, 27.27%, and 21.95% respectively). These findings demonstrate that all 15 institutions place considerable importance on information organization.

3.1.2 Core and Elective Courses

American universities typically structure curricula around three categories: required core courses, core electives, and general electives. We surveyed and compiled statistics on core and elective offerings across the 15 institutions (see).

All institutions offered required information organization courses, with some also providing core electives. The core curriculum reflects foundational knowledge requirements for LIS students. Except for Drexel University (4 courses) and Florida State University (2 courses), most institutions included only one required information organization course covering topics such as information organization, description and access, and data and digital management.

As digital technologies and the internet evolve, information organization courses continuously adapt to changing technologies and user needs. Courses on digital libraries, web indexing, information architecture, and metadata have become increasingly prevalent. To better equip students with relevant skills, some institutions designate technical skills courses as core electives, requiring students

to select one or two from a designated list. For example, Indiana University Bloomington requires students to choose one from five technical courses: information analysis, web information architecture, search, systems analysis and design, and metadata. Similarly, Florida State University mandates selection of one from four courses: digital libraries, organizational information security, data mining and analysis, and database management systems. These core electives provide students with flexible opportunities to learn information organization technologies and adapt to rapid field developments.

Interdisciplinary integration has become a major trend in academic development, and information organization courses increasingly exhibit interdisciplinary characteristics. In terms of quantity, most institutions offer far more electives than required courses. The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign offers the most electives (19), while the University of Maryland College Park offers the fewest (1). Elective proportions significantly exceed core requirements in most cases. Apart from the University of Maryland College Park (a special case with only 3 total information organization courses) and Drexel University (where electives are fewer than core courses), all other institutions have elective proportions exceeding 50%. Ten institutions exceed 80%, with four surpassing 90%. The highest proportions are at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (95%), followed by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (90.91%), University of Tennessee Knoxville (90%), and Simmons University (90%). This demonstrates that while requiring foundational knowledge through core courses, institutions provide extensive elective options for flexible learning. Students can select courses based on their interests and research directions, enhancing interdisciplinary capabilities and comprehensive qualities while acquiring knowledge and skills across multiple domains to meet diverse student needs.

3.1.3 High-Frequency Information Organization Courses

To analyze curricular emphases across the 15 institutions, we compiled and examined all information organization courses, identifying the 10 most frequently offered courses (see). The number of institutions offering each course reflects its importance within the information organization curriculum and reveals priorities in American LIS education.

Cataloging and classification courses are offered by 12 institutions, making them the most common, followed by information organization and metadata courses (also 12 institutions). Information retrieval and information architecture are each offered by 8 institutions, while archives management is offered by 7. Indexing and data management courses are available at 6 institutions, knowledge/information resource management at 4, and data mining at only 3.

Cataloging and classification have long been fundamental library science courses, while information organization provides foundational theories, methods, and principles for effective resource management, establishing it as a core LIS component. As technology advances, information organization education must keep

pace, incorporating computer technology courses. Consequently, many institutions offer technical courses such as metadata, information retrieval, and information architecture to ensure students acquire cutting-edge knowledge and skills.

3.2.1 Teaching Content and Delivery Methods

We examined teaching emphases and delivery formats across the 15 institutions (see).

American information organization courses typically combine core and elective components, with core curricula showing distinct emphases. US institutions generally emphasize discussion and practical application over theoretical instruction. For example, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill prioritizes discussion, classroom activities, and project work over traditional lectures, with the first half focusing on readings and the second half addressing practical problems. The University of Michigan's core course covers not only bibliographic organization but also practical applications such as museum object organization and biomedical data records.

American information organization curricula encompass cataloging and classification, information organization and metadata, information retrieval and architecture, archives management, indexing and data management, knowledge/information resource management, and data mining. Many institutions offer separate courses on ontologies and metadata, while maintaining emphasis on traditional cataloging and bibliography. The emergence of technology-related courses such as information architecture and retrieval demonstrates information technology's impact on information organization education.

Nine institutions employ both face-to-face and online delivery, providing students with autonomous learning time and space while demonstrating instructional flexibility. This blended approach facilitates teaching arrangements and meets personalized learning needs, enhancing teaching efficiency.

3.2.2 Textbooks

American information organization courses rarely assign designated textbooks, instead emphasizing extensive reading materials. Required readings typically include journal articles, conference papers, book chapters, and video resources, with journal articles being most common, followed by books and book chapters. For instance, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign incorporates journal articles, reference works, books, and online resources. Florida State University assigns texts such as *Foundations of Library and Information Science*, *Management Basics for Information Professionals*, *Introduction to Indexing and Abstracting*, and *Database Management Systems: A Practical Approach to Design, Implementation, and Management*. The absence of fixed textbooks allows students to explore diverse materials autonomously, enhancing the breadth and flexibility of graduate-level reading.

3.3 Assessment Methods in Information Organization Courses

Our investigation reveals several characteristics of assessment practices in American information organization courses: (1) **Diversified assessment methods.** Evaluations include attendance, term papers, reading responses, midterm and final examinations, as well as presentations, online discussions, project reports, and case analyses. For example, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's core information organization course assesses students through four modules: class participation, schema assignments, classification assignments, and comparative organization system analysis, with grades assigned across four levels based on performance. (2) **Dynamic assessment content.** Evaluation content integrates organically with instruction and teaching plans, with assessment weightings adjusted according to course content to ensure learning effectiveness. Components such as presentations, online discussions, project reports, and case analyses are all included in the assessment scope.

4. Characteristics of Information Organization Course Offerings

4.1 Widespread Emphasis on Information Organization Courses

Institutional commitment to information organization is reflected in core course offerings. Our survey found that all 15 institutions include information organization courses in their LIS core curricula, with 14 institutions dedicating more than 10% of their total LIS courses to this area. Some universities even designate information organization as a specialization. For example, Florida State University's LIS program offers an information organization track, recommending courses tailored to this focus to prepare students for careers as metadata or cataloging professionals. The University of Wisconsin-Madison identifies information organization as one of five key information specialization areas, providing personalized learning recommendations and career planning guidance. This emphasis reflects American universities' recognition of information organization's importance and provides students with enhanced development opportunities.

4.2 Abundant Electives with Clear Interdisciplinary Nature

Most surveyed institutions offer information organization courses primarily as electives, with ten universities exceeding 80% elective proportion. These electives provide extensive choices spanning multiple knowledge domains, highlighting information technology and emphasizing interdisciplinary collaborative teaching. Information organization courses incorporate knowledge from computer science, information architecture, and metadata/XML, enabling students to acquire comprehensive skills in classification, cataloging, indexing, abstracting, metadata, and information retrieval. Given information organization's broad applications, students can explore methods and standards across different fields, expanding their knowledge breadth and application capabilities. The extensive elective offerings allow students to select courses based on interests

and career goals, creating opportunities for interdisciplinary learning and development. This approach helps students master comprehensive information organization skills and establishes solid foundations for professional competence.

4.3 Contemporary Relevance and Practical Emphasis

As network information environments evolve and big data technologies permeate all industries, information skills have become essential job requirements. Consequently, American LIS master's programs emphasize contemporary relevance in information organization curricula, adjusting content according to trends and workforce demands. Surveyed institutions have incorporated technical courses such as metadata, digital libraries, and big data retrieval and analysis. Traditional courses in information organization, cataloging and classification, and archival studies have also undergone digital transformation, focusing on developing students' abilities to process, analyze, and apply information while cultivating comprehensive talent for the new era. Additionally, information organization courses emphasize practical instruction, with most institutions offering internships and practicum courses to help students understand real-world information organization work, apply theoretical knowledge effectively, and prepare for future careers.

4.4 Diversified Teaching and Multi-Dimensional Assessment

Beyond traditional classroom instruction, most American universities have established online teaching platforms for different student populations, facilitating real-time communication, online interaction, and group discussions. This enables two-way information flow between instructors and students, allowing convenient completion of systematic course learning while enhancing instructional freedom. The combination of online and face-to-face delivery for the same courses facilitates teaching arrangements and meets personalized learning needs.

American universities implement multi-dimensional assessment systems that extend beyond examinations and term papers to include presentations, online discussions, project reports, and case analyses. Assessment weightings are differentiated according to course level, nature, and content, highlighting key evaluation components. This multi-dimensional approach both motivates students to deepen their understanding and application of knowledge and enables instructors to identify teaching problems and improve pedagogical methods through assessment feedback.

5. Implications for Chinese LIS Information Organization Curriculum

Reviewing Chinese LIS master's education reveals several issues in information organization curriculum design. First, teaching content generally emphasizes

theory over technology, with some institutions offering few information technology courses and neglecting the balance between theory and practice. Second, most textbooks still focus on traditional theories; while some experimental materials address practical aspects, overall curricula lack sufficient practical projects and feature flattened content structures. Third, course content concentrates on traditional document classification/cataloging and digital information organization, largely ignoring applications in enterprise, government, and business information organization. Finally, teaching methods remain monolithic, primarily relying on face-to-face instruction supplemented by online teaching only under special circumstances. Chinese universities also depend heavily on single textbooks without strict requirements for professional literature reading, resulting in significantly less student reading compared to American programs. Assessment practices emphasize attendance, theoretical examinations, and term papers, lacking evaluation of practical abilities.

American information organization curricula offer valuable insights for Chinese LIS programs. Domestic universities should adapt these advantages to China's national context, institutional capacities, and professional development plans. The New Liberal Arts initiative emphasizes multidisciplinary integration—a characteristic inherent to information organization courses, which incorporate diverse knowledge domains and apply to numerous industries. Chinese curricula should emphasize practical education, technological competency, and interdisciplinary knowledge integration to enhance comprehensive student qualities. Beyond increasing technical courses, universities should expand practical platforms, familiarize students with information organization workflows, and integrate social forces with academic instruction to strengthen practical training. Additionally, Chinese universities should develop information organization electives aligned with contemporary and workforce needs, incorporating information technology courses such as metadata, information retrieval, and data mining to enable personalized course selection based on individual interests and career directions, thereby implementing student-centered educational theories and demonstrating graduate education specialization. Furthermore, Chinese institutions should continuously optimize teaching methods by diversifying instruction through seminars, online learning, and lectures; provide extensive reading materials to broaden and deepen students' theoretical foundations for practical education; enrich assessment methods with differentiated weightings based on course characteristics; emphasize practical project evaluation; and align talent cultivation with career planning to prepare students for professional roles as metadata specialists, data analysts, or catalogers, reflecting the breadth and diversity of career pathways in information organization.

6. Conclusion

This paper comprehensively discusses and analyzes information organization course offerings, teaching models, and assessment methods across 15 American institutions, examining curriculum content, course nature, instructional modes,

and evaluation approaches. By summarizing characteristics of American information organization curricula, we explore their implications for Chinese LIS programs.

Currently, information organization as a discipline faces new tasks and challenges. Achieving scientific organization of information collections for effective utilization holds significant importance. Drawing on the strengths of American curriculum design can help improve China's information organization course system under the New Liberal Arts framework and advance LIS education in China.

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