Kate Williams opening remarks for Why Libraries? event, November 16, 2019

Thank you for being here today and committing to listen and engage. Last night and today is a conversation to learn about and inform library education at Illinois and elsewhere. I'm Kate Williams, co-chair of this Indaba with Clara Chu. Indaba is a South African or Zulu word for a middle size meeting about large size issues. So please help us debate and deliberate!

Over the last decade our school has changed its name, dropping the words library and graduate. Since 2007 it has retained 11 tenure stream faculty, 1 from computer science, engineering, or statistics, and added 23 more, 10 from those fields. It has added two degrees: a master's in information management and a bachelor's in information sciences. Other LIS schools have done similarly. The changes have been in part market driven, as expected in difficult economic times and an expanding digital environment. The changes aim at new professions and new constituencies.

At the same time, the school depends on the MSLIS for its top ranking. Our other programs are not ranked. The MSLIS is ranked #1. And it is our oldest degree. But, arguably, it has not received its share of attention, of budget, even of faculty lines.

Through these changes, we relied heavily on Linda Smith to lead the MSLIS. Her long hours and even longer history and expertise made this possible. Now we have a new dean, Eunice Santos from computer science. We have a new MSLIS program director, Maria Bonn from academic librarianship. As this odd couple reflects, [and thanks to Betsy Hearne for this word] we are seeking **balance**. But a dynamic balance, based in changing reality. This can only happen by airing views and engaging in lively conversation.

The questions before us are on the front of the program:

1. What makes a library?
2. What makes a librarian?
3. How might library education adjust towards what is important in librarianship?

Our sessions begin with history and then professional practice. The first panel is designed for some updated history-telling that can inform the present and future.

Next we will separate the discussions with professionals into two panels, Technology and Democracy. Why? Aren't these two phenomena almost inextricably linked? One example: the standardized catalog card was a technology that helped facilitate the building thousands of Arsenals of Democratic Culture—libraries—nationwide.

But technology is the disruptor, coming from outside, mandated by powerful forces who insist upon adoption. Democracy, defined as the freedom to use and even contribute to our cultural record, has been the concern of US libraries from the start: the freedom to use and even add to our cultural record. So we deal with each in turn.

Then our final session considers library education. Of course we hope all panelists will comment on that Q3 as well.

Before we turn to the historians, I want to mention four ideas from the bibliography that we put together for this event:

1. [from Joacim Hansson] In response to a neoliberal view of information as commodity, as the BSIS and MSIM are primarily focused on, we can recognize the reality of libraries as emancipatory and therefore tied up with pluralism and even conflict.

2. [from Monica Maceli] When it comes to employment, the data tell us that libraries are still hiring. It also tells us (for instance) that while UX (user experience) is in the curriculum, it barely shows up in library job postings. On the other hand, metadata, database, web design all show up in the coursework AND in the job postings.

3. [from Christine Pawley paper on Race] When it comes to guiding paradigms, LIS actually draws a grand total of four. Little known fact! These could complement each other, if we made full use of each in the curriculum:

> Scientific–patrons as searchers
>
> Business—patrons as customers
>
> Service—Patrons as needs
>
> Sociocultural—Patrons as readers (and updating this, viewers, listeners, creators and so on)

(I'd like to sort our courses into these four bins and see where we stand.)

4. [from Smith in Allen and Delzell] Finally, Linda Smith's memoir of the arrival of Information Science at GSLIS included this anecdote: An early computer was installed and named Alexia. This was short for Alexandria, as in, Library of. Then someone observed that alexia also means a brain disorder where one cannot read! So, let's laugh at our accidents and press on—that computer is long, long gone and we're still here.

As in the other sessions, our panelists will each speak for 15 minutes. The respondents (in panels 2 3 4) will speak for 5. Then discussion. And with the full bios in the program, there is no need for lengthy introductions. This panel will proceed in the printed order: First John Wilkin, then Fred Schlipf, who will be speaking by phone due to unavoidable travel, and then Essie Harris.

Thank you all for being here.