

InfoLink

A Community Newsletter of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science

Volume 13, Issue 3

April 2009



Up Front

Methods in Medicine:

The Role of Medical Libraries

by Katharine Dunn, Dean's Editorial Fellow

There are many changes afoot in academic libraries, perhaps in particular in science, engineering, and medicine — fields that have in a short time migrated much of their data and publications online. Practicing science librarians say that despite the economic downturn there are good jobs for people who like fast-paced, interdisciplinary work. In this issue, we explore what some of those jobs look like and how to prepare for them.

David Flynn '06LS explains the case to a dozen first-year Boston University medical students: A 15-year-old girl riding her bicycle gets hit by a car. She's rushed to the emergency room where they, the students, work as physicians. When the girl's parents arrive, they're offended by her treatment so far because she's a Christian Scientist. What's the best way to treat her? Flynn says to the group. What does being a Christian Scientist entail? Flynn asks the med students where they can find reliable information to answer these questions.

"Everyone goes to Wikipedia right off the bat," says Flynn, head of library and information management education at BU's Alumni Medical Library. During the first couple weeks of the school year, Flynn and his staff teach two required library sessions to medical students taking the Integrated Problems (IP), in which students first learn to analyze cases like this one. (IP, for which Flynn has been a facilitator, is kind of like the TV show *House*, he says.) One of the library sessions focuses on "evidence-based medicine," a systematic way to solve cases that rely on strong research skills.

Flynn tells the students that Wikipedia may be a good social experiment, but it's not necessarily where a patient and her family would want their doctor researching treatment. He walks them through the process of finding medical information in textbooks, on the library website, and in databases like MedLine. The goal is to teach them not only to find better information, but also to find information better.

"I like to use shock and awe to get people to pay attention," he says. "Sometimes we have people self-survey. We say, 'How good a searcher are you on a scale of 1-5?' Everyone comes back and says, 'I'm a 4.5. I'm fantastic. I'm a Google expert.' But you go to class and start with something like quotes around your search string, and it blows their minds. And if that blows your mind, you're not a 4.5 on the scale. It's a way to show them that what we're doing is important."

BU's medical librarians have become increasingly important. Since Flynn started at BU in 2006, the number of education librarians has grown from three to six, each of whom has reference-desk duties and teaches at least 75 classes and workshops a year across all four schools on the medical campus, including dental medicine and public health. (Flynn teaches about 150 sessions a year.) This year, Flynn estimates his staff will directly teach 3,500 people on a campus of 6,000.

This level of academic library outreach is certainly rare; the BU medical library's education program is one of the few in the United States so tightly integrated with curricula on campus. "It takes time to build up those relationships, to have faculty comfortable inviting you in," says Howard Silver '07DA, co-head of the engineering and science libraries at MIT.



David Flynn at Boston University

But there are many ways librarians can get involved in education. At MIT, Silver and his staff work on outreach with departments, and they teach classes and workshops on subjects like patents and on citation tools like Endnote. And like many libraries, MIT's focus in the last decade has been pushing their educational content onto the Web and making it intuitive so students and faculty can use it easily. At Tufts University in Medford, Regina Raboin '95LS, the science reference and instruction librarian, co-

teaches a half-credit, eight-week course called "Research for Success," in which sophomores through seniors learn advanced research techniques to help them write papers or senior theses. She also helped develop a library research Web tutorial that's a required part of a popular biology class.

When many academic libraries struggle to stay connected and valuable to faculty and students, Flynn and other librarians increasingly practice what he calls active learning. "We hit people where they live," he says. "We have to show that everything we do is going to be relevant and make your life easier."

Flynn credits much of the recent growth of the BU medical library's outreach programs to his predecessor and former GSLIS classmate, Lauren Maggio '05LS, who encouraged him to apply for a job about a year after she arrived in 2005.

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Snapshot

Howard Silver

“If you look at the total package of resources and services, more people [than ever before] are using the library, and people are using the library more than they used to.”

In his *Literature of Science and Technology (LIS 484)* class, GSLIS adjunct professor Howard Silver '07DA helps students learn about what's in store for them in the academic science libraries of the future. Silver, the co-head of the engineering and science libraries at MIT, previously worked as a librarian at Tufts and at Hahnemann University in Philadelphia. He has a master's in zoology from Queensland University in Australia, where he studied sea cucumbers before switching to library science about 25 years ago.

Q: What are some of the changes you've noticed about how people use the library, in your eight years at MIT?

If you look at the total package of resources and services, more people [than ever before] are using the library, and people are using the library more than they used to. If your metrics are based on physical collections and gate count, circulation, in-house shelving, and reference activity — the traditional cornerstones — all of those are having a steady decline. But those are counterbalanced by skyrocketing use of our e-resources and Web-based transactional services.

There are a couple of ways of looking at the reference question. One is that people need help, and we're experts there to serve them. A question can also indicate a failed service model. In other words, if you've made something too hard for people to use on their own, they'll need your help. If you simplify the service, they won't have to ask a question. When they can get to an article and hit a button and print it, as opposed to trying to find it in our labyrinth of a basement, you've lost the question, but that's a good reduction. Some of the decline in reference is that people are getting what they need.

What are some of the skills that a science librarian needs?

Discipline knowledge matters, and certainly comfort with the disciplines. Not everybody who works at MIT has an academic science background; about half of our professional staff do. The other part is understanding the culture of the community. If you work in the science and technology/biomedical areas, your communication style tends to be very brief, succinct, less formal, and fast.

What are some of the big trends in science librarianship?

It's a tremendously exciting time in terms of what we're doing in libraries. When I started at Hahnemann University, we were one of the very first academic libraries in the country to offer CD-ROM databases to the public. That was 1986-87. It was a technological shift that seems quaint now, but it's not to be underestimated because it marks a time when we began giving people unlimited, unfettered access to electronic content. Until that time, their choices were either to work with a librarian or wrestle with print indexes. You can imagine the difference.

Computers themselves were fairly new. So for a lot of people, their first significant experience with a keyboard and working with a computer was working with these tools. A lot of handholding and support was necessary. They'd be stepping through a database, they'd run through a search, they'd get their results, they'd have a list of abstracts there, and they were just thrilled. And then they'd turn to you and say, "So what key do I hit in order to print out the article?" And you'd look at them and say, "Well that's a few years off."

It took less than 10 years. At the time, if you had asked me, I'd have said it would be 20-30. To see that happen in my professional career is really just a phenomenal change. It's a privilege to live through this phase. But it's no less exciting now. Whenever you enter the game, there's going to be equally dramatic changes in the way people interact with information.

If in that era the request was, "I want to press the button and print out the article," what is it we want now?

In the near-term, people have a lot of information, and they need help managing it. So we're helping people organize personal content that rivals a small library collection. And it's not a trivial thing.

Is that something you do at MIT?

We're getting started.

Why didn't you pursue science?

The honest answer is that I wasn't good enough for that line of work. It takes a certain set of abilities to be a good scientist. I had some of them, but I didn't have many of the qualities that you really need. When I was thinking about transition, I realized one of the qualities I had was that I liked to share information; I did it naturally. I'd find articles and think someone would like this, and I'd say, "Did you see that?" I have the utmost respect for the people who are the really good scientists and engineers. But it's a very worthy thing to provide a support system that allows them to be productive and useful.

Are there things you miss about the way librarianship was when you started?

My initial response is no. I think that we are more relevant now to the academic enterprise than we've ever been before, and that doesn't diminish the value that we had 25 years ago. I believe we touch more people, and we allow them to be more productive. The thing I'm nostalgic about is the passing of the traditional reference service, of having people come up to you and ask questions, and giving them answers. People came to you with a problem, you knew how to answer it, you helped them, they were generally gracious and thankful and they showed it. I miss that for selfish reasons. It was a highly rewarding activity.

Interview by Katharine Dunn



Up Front, cont.

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Maggio saw that few people were attending the workshops the library offered. (“We’d talk about what we wanted to talk about, like Boolean operators, and they didn’t care,” says Flynn.) So she decided to stop running them and instead began spreading the word. She talked to people on elevators. When she noticed that students were asking similar questions at the reference desk, she’d call faculty members and offer to create pathfinders for their classes. She fought to get on to curriculum committees, arriving at meetings 15 minutes early to have casual chats with faculty, many of whom, she says, were shy about admitting they had any information troubles. “Those were fruitful exchanges,” says Maggio, who now works as a medical education librarian at Stanford University.

“Lauren’s a fantastic proselytizer for what the library can do. You impress the right person, it leads to something else,” says Flynn. As the librarians became more involved in training medical students in IP classes, other schools at BU began to ask for their help. In 2007, Maggio, Flynn, and other librarians designed an entirely new class for BU’s Division of Graduate Medical Sciences called Introduction to Biomedical Information, the goal of which is to help students prepare to write their required theses. Flynn is the course director, and there are 180 students in the class, which is now in its second year.

Recently, the Boston Medical Center, the teaching hospital affiliated with BU’s medical campus, asked Flynn’s staff to do intervention education with its 1,000 nurses. Flynn says they’re starting with the charge nurses on each floor and participants in the hospital’s journal club, offering search training to about 25 nurses a month. “We’re kind of at the point where we’re victims of our own success,” he says. “Even though our staff is bigger, it’s not as big as it could be.”

Flynn knows he’s lucky to be so appreciated, though that doesn’t mean there aren’t challenges. He routinely runs sessions in which participants say they’ve worked at the medical school for 20 years and didn’t know there was a library on campus. His “lowest hope” for intervention when he teaches, he says, is that people remember the library exists and that they can come in and ask a question “to an actual person.” After all, the BU librarians likely score a 5 on a search scale, knowing as they do that quotation marks work wonders around a search string.

GSLIS CE Workshops, May 2009

Sign up now for a CE Workshop:

Graphic Novels 101, May 2
Book Appraisal, May 3
What’s Good and Not So Good About Library Buildings, May 2
Open Access Content, May 16
Dreamweaver 1 & 2, May 30
Career-Savvy Information Professional, online (special price \$85)
Creative Clubs & Programming for Children’s Services, online
Information Entrepreneurship, online
Isn’t Otaku a Kind of Sushi? Japanese Manga and Anime, online

See the full Spring/Summer schedule on the GSLIS CE website:
<http://www.simmons.edu/gslis/continuinged/workshops>

Staying Relevant Science Librarianship

Science, engineering, and medical librarianship are “great careers for anyone who likes change and isn’t bothered by uncertainty,” says Karen Vagts ’06LS, an engineering, business, and mathematics librarian at Tufts who also monitors emerging technologies. Every few years, technologies shift and database interfaces change, while the lines continue to blur between subjects. “Biology is infiltrating all disciplines,” says GSLIS adjunct professor Howard Silver ’07DA.

Below are some of the ways GSLIS alumni working in these fields are staying relevant, keeping up with change, and thinking about the academic libraries of the future.

Karen Vagts says the proliferation of bibliographic software like RefWorks, EndNote, Zotero, and others is generating a lot of confusion about what tools and citation styles to use. “Some people feel that younger faculty may not, over time, be as adamant about proper formats, that they’ll only want to verify that a source exists,” she says.

Vagts recently went to a conference on the future of e-science, in which participants discussed the fact that the collections at many academic libraries have become homogeneous now that they all subscribe to the same databases. This means librarians should perhaps concentrate on the research, datasets, and services that are unique to their own institutions. “How do you organize it and present it in a way that others can access it?” she says.

Vagts and her colleagues are also looking into how to incorporate library offerings, like the OPAC and online training sessions, into mobile devices.

Regina Raboin ’95LS, also at the Tisch Library at Tufts, has, with her colleagues, been awarded four grants from the Berger Family Technology Transfer Endowment. Raboin is project coordinator for the most recent grant, a partnership between Tisch Library and the Wright Center for Science Education at Tufts. They’re creating climate change tutorials, lesson plans, research methods, and demonstrations — many of which live in the cyber-world Second Life — for 6-12th grade and post-secondary teachers.

For his doctor of arts degree at GSLIS, **Howard Silver** conducted a field study at Bryant University in Rhode Island, in which he looked at the use of collaborative spaces in the library. He found the spaces were heavily used by students. Silver’s work has influenced thinking at MIT’s libraries, which plan to change the balance of collections versus user space, adding more of the latter in the coming years.

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Getting Ready for Jobs in the Sciences

Librarians David Flynn '06LS, Regina Raboin '95LS, and Karen Vagts '06LS offer advice on how best to prepare for jobs in science, engineering, and medical librarianship.

What classes did you find most useful?

David Flynn, medical librarian at Boston University:
Reference (LIS 407) and the Role of Research* come to mind, as I field these sorts of questions all day. Medical Librarianship (LIS 434) and Academic Libraries (LIS 451) have been invaluable for they gave me a real sense of what it is like working with students, faculty, and staff at an academic medical library. The single most useful class I took at Simmons was Digital Libraries (LIS 462), the best representation of what life is like as a working librarian. Ours is a collaborative profession, and working with my fellow students in Digital Libraries consisted of reporting to various groups, reading posts and discussions, distributing responsibilities, and keeping an eye on the ever-approaching deadline so that everyone got the resources they needed to get the job done.

Regina Raboin, science reference and instruction librarian at Tufts:
Cataloging [Information Organization (LIS 415)] and Database Management (LIS 458). Even though I'm not a cataloger or indexer, a reference and instruction librarian needs to understand how information is indexed, compiled, and then presented to the public. You cannot be a successful reference librarian without having a solid background in cataloging.

Other useful classes: Literature of Science and Technology,* and Principles of Management (LIS 404).

Karen Vagts, engineering, business, and mathematics reference librarian at Tufts:

Literature of Science and Technology (LIS 484); I think about that class every day. Also, Business Information Sources and Services (LIS 430), Collection Development (LIS 453), and Geospatial Data Librarianship.*

Other ways to prepare

- Read *Science and Nature*, as well as more popular science magazines like *Science News* and *Scientific American*, the *New York Times* or *Boston Globe's* science sections, and periodicals targeted towards librarianship in the field, such as *Science @ Technology Libraries*.
- Science disciplines are aggressive in their use of technology. Learn as much as possible about technologies that affect library services, like complicated information databases, GIS, etc.
- Attend conferences and workshops. Become a student member of the Special Libraries Association and join its various science, technology, and engineering divisions.
- Get internships.
- Get a master's degree in a field like environmental science, bioethics, geology, nature/science writing/literature, etc.
- Publish: Write about what you're doing vis-à-vis librarianship or with a particular faculty/class. And submit articles to present at conferences.

*Editor's Note: 'Role of Research' is the former name of *Evaluation of Information (LIS 403)*; the *Geospatial Librarianship* class has become part of a new class, *LIS 531J - Managing Spatial Information*.

April — May Events

Monday, April 27, Lecture, Michael Gaudio (University of Minnesota): Engraving the Savage. Harvard University, 5 p.m.

Wednesday, May 13, Professional Development Day: Exploring Stem Cell Research — What Does it Mean for Librarians?
Hoagland-Pincus Conference Center, Shrewsbury, MA. 8:30 a.m. - 3 p.m. <http://nmlm.gov/ner/training/material/ProfessionalDevelopmentDayRegistrationForm.pdf>

Friday, May 15, Commencement 2009. The graduate student ceremony takes place at 1 p.m. See the Commencement website for more details: <http://www.simmons.edu/commencement>.

Friday, May 15, ACRL/NE Annual Conference: Are You Being Served? Customer Satisfaction and Library Service. For details, please see: <http://www.acrlnec.org/springconf09/index.html>
College of the Holy Cross, Hogan Center, Worcester, MA. 9 - 3 p.m.

More information about these and other events can be found at <http://my.simmons.edu/gslis/resources/calendars/events.shtml>.

Folks on the Move

Assistant Professor **Danny Joudrey** gave a talk titled "Dan to Mann: A Response to the Report of the Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control" to the Northern California Technical Processes Group in San Francisco earlier this month.

Staff member **Alisa Libby's** book, *The King's Rose*, was nominated for YALSA's annual Best Books for Young Adults list.

Adjunct Prof. **Claudia Morner**, '78LS, served as one of three librarians and three architects on the 2009 AIA/ALA Library Building Awards Jury — the most significant award for a library building or renovation. This jury, which is co-sponsored by the American Institute of Architects and the ALA, reviewed more than 100 library projects from within and outside the US.

Congratulations to Associate Dean **Pat Oyler**, who has just been awarded the John Ames Humphrey/OCLC/Forest Press Award of the International Relations Committee of ALA.

InfoLink

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Copy deadline for the Summer issue is Friday, May 29, 2009.