Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Guest Editorial

Meet ESiLS—The Empirical Studies in Libraries Summit

Logan Rath
Librarian
SUNY Brockport
Brockport, New York, United States of America
Email: lrath@brockport.edu

Laureen P. Cantwell-Jurkovic
Humanities & Multidisciplinary Librarian
Vassar College
Poughkeepsie, New York, United States of America
Email: lcantwelljurkovic@vassar.edu

The inaugural Empirical Studies in Libraries Summit (ESiLS) occurred this past March, culminating months of careful—and fun—brainstorming and planning. As its founders, we want to share the story of how this conference came to be in this editorial, while also making space to express our excitement about the articles in this *EBLIP* issue resulting from ESiLS sessions and posters.

At its heart, what became "ESiLS" could have begun when we met through our respective doctoral programs at the University at Buffalo (Logan's in Learning and Instruction; Laureen's in Information Science). But first we became friends and colleagues, individuals who respected each other's experiences, skills, and personalities. We are both practitioner-scholars working in academic library settings, roughly at the mid-career stage. We are both individuals choosing to pursue doctoral degrees as part of our own professional advancement and hoping to make contributions not only in our daily work as practitioners but also through our scholarly endeavors.

Logan graduated in 2022. Laureen graduated in 2024. Then, on June 16, 2024, Laureen received the following text message:

> Want to co-found a conference for empirical research in libraries?

After Laureen caught up with Logan's text from two hours earlier, about whether she had a copy of Saldaña's 2021 coding manual (she didn't), their conversation proceeded as follows:

> Maybe? What're you thinking?

> An online conference where people can present their research that takes place in libraries. For people like us who do research but didn't move to an R1 teaching gig.

> Ok cool. I dig.

> No ALA membership required.

> Thank god.

> I'm thinking January 2025 for the first one. Something super grass roots.

> Cool!

That's really how it all began. Over that day's text message thread, we verbalized a variety of important reasons why this concept resonated so powerfully for us both. Neither of us had plans to leave the field of academic librarianship, but we also identify as researchers *and* practitioners. We had graduated from our "cohort" and were now post-docs, immersed in our practitioner settings once more. As a result, we were struggling to stay connected to that "researcher" identity and find a space where we could engage with others in similar circumstances. We wanted our research agendas and interests to remain alive and thriving—no easy task for librarians like us who do not have faculty positions where research and

publication is an expectation with support mechanisms to facilitate. We needed a new "cohort" and understood we might have to build it ourselves.

And we were building a name. We wanted something that could be pronounced as a word, rather than as an acronym, even though it would be an acronym—sort of like ALISE or ASIS&T. We wanted the conference name to be self-explanatory, though we weren't sure we wanted to term it a conference. Eventually, we came across the term "summit" and liked its association with high-level meetings of individuals with common ground—and the Empirical Studies in Libraries Summit, or "ESiLS," was born.

We had shared many conference sessions at ASIS&T and ALISE conferences and appreciated their explorations of the latest frontiers of information science research. But we also noticed how much library science-focused research at these conferences was a step removed from the practitioners and that research was rarely presented by practitioners. We wanted a conference-like space for researchers like us. Further, we asked ourselves what would attract "us" to a grassroots, online conference dedicated to empirical research in/about the library context, featuring research conducted by librarians rather than iSchool faculty.

We discussed what we liked from other conferences and professional development sessions that we wanted to carry over—and what we wanted to do differently. Among the ideas we decided to pursue for ESiLS: a Teams-based virtual poster session with a dedicated timeslot; healthy (30-minute) breaks between session timeslots so attendees could address their inboxes, connect with colleagues, grab food or coffee, or take a walk; and a seriously reasonable registration fee ($20), with complementary registration to all presenters (and a select number of attendees from any iSchools sponsoring the conference). This last part was particularly important to us so that we could open up peer-reviewed conference opportunities to first-generation scholars and scholars with marginalized identities. The conferences we have been to were often more expensive than our professional development budgets would support, and although we were (at times) privileged enough to be able to make it happen, we wanted to shift the field a bit to show that it was possible to put on a rigorous scholarly event that didn't break the bank.

We debated paying for conference scheduling and networking tools (e.g., Sched) but ultimately decided against it. Synchronous sessions would allow us to mimic in-person conferences, while hosting the conference online would level the playing field and enable participation for scholars and researchers with limited professional development funding. In addition to these goals, we wanted the Summit to be a low-stakes environment for new scholars and researchers to present their work, including research-in-progress.

We also made lists of tasks and divided them according to our skills and available time. Logan drafted a website and created an email address. Laureen worked on a logo and reached out to various iSchools as potential sponsors. We recruited AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT and Photoshop AI) to expedite some of these tasks, particularly the call for proposals and the logo design. Text messages, Zoom calls, and emails. A Google Drive folder with draft documents for promoting the conference and seeking conference sponsors; a Google Form for session proposal submissions; a Google Sheet for our session proposal evaluation rubric; and more.

We began promoting the call for session proposals (CFP) on October 16, 2024, and on October 17th—just a day later—we received an exciting email from the *EBLIP* editor, Ann Medaille, notifying us that our Summit's approach and values seemed to align well with those at *EBLIP*. She wanted to know if we would be interested in an issue of *EBLIP* featuring ESiLS content. We reflected on the "cohort" we

wanted to build and suspected that plenty of those pursuing a session at ESiLS would be interested in bridging that endeavor into a paper for *EBLIP.* Having this conversation early in the CFP process allowed us to build the journal into the conference in a sponsor role and share about the post-Summit opportunity as part of the overall conference concept. Accepted sessions and posters would not be guaranteed a spot and would still go through editorial and/or peer review processes, but they knew they could be intentional about keeping the momentum going from the conference into a publication stage.

All told, on Wednesday, March 26, 2025, between 10:00 am and 5:15 pm Eastern, ESiLS showcased 13 presentation sessions (including the keynote) and 17 posters (see the schedule online). Among the CFP submissions, six were doctoral students, 13 identified as part of a marginalized community/ies, and 14 identified as first-generation scholars. Including presenters, the Summit had 103 registrants. While the goal was not to make money, we made $1233 between registrations and sponsorships. As the Summit itself uses institutional and/or open tools (e.g., Teams, Google Forms, etc.), we hope to avoid needing to dedicate registration costs to software or other similar needs. Instead, we hope to be able to use a portion of funds from the previous conference year to facilitate a keynoter honorarium, keep the conference low-fee-or-free to attend, and to prepare for growth-driven needs (e.g., storing archived recordings, software expenses related to increased attendance, etc.).

This issue of *EBLIP* features nine articles (one review article, two using evidence in practice pieces, and six research articles) resulting from four ESiLS presentations and five posters. In order of their appearance on the ESiLS conference schedule:

Content Matters: How Information Literacy Workshops Tailored for Marginalized Groups Can Impact Student Performance: Ball's research article reports on her exploration of the potential impact of information literacy sessions tailored to the needs of marginalized groups. As the first publication of her doctoral research, the article shares her methodology and design approach as well as the theoretical framework underlying her research. She applied participatory action research and critical race theory to a multi-session instructional series, conducted outside the traditional classroom environment, and her results may encourage practitioners to explore such approaches at their own institutions as the study found positive impacts on students' performance and competence.

LibGuides or Bust? Usability Testing Platforms for Research Guides: Higgins and Cumbo, based out of Auburn University, investigate whether Springshare's LibGuides (as a library-first platform) actually facilitates students' successful navigation of a "research guide"-type resource. They conduct this exploration by comparing how (and how well) students go about various task assignments in a LibGuides-based research guide and, for comparison, within an Adobe Express-built website-style research guide layout. Their findings support the ease of use for both research guide styles, though readers will appreciate that participants reported the research guide built in Adobe Express was less confusing for them. Additionally, participants were more successful in task assignments in the guide built with Adobe Express—and were more easily able to differentiate between the guide and library resources. This article might very well inspire readers to study this further with their own constituents and make useful guide revisions—including at their template levels—and could even be useful for vendors like Springshare to consider in their product enhancements and development efforts.

Library Workers' Perceptions of Immigrant Acculturation: Renewed Understandings for Changing Contexts: Ndumu, Park, and Siebold's article has only grown in relevance since it was featured as an ESiLS presentation. Their study seeks to address the gap in understanding how immigrant individuals within the library and information science field acculturate to U.S. society, and is a segment of a multipart

research project. As a mixed methods study, their survey and interview findings illuminate that, while library workers have some familiarity with the acculturation process for immigrants to the U.S., professional development that is both specific and evidence based would help enhance their understanding. Deepened awareness of this process may then lead to a greater ability for library workers to be responsive to the nuances and realities of immigrants' circumstances, as well as to gain (and/or retain) a humanized lens on the lived experiences of immigrants. Arguably, this has always been an important consideration for library workers as information and resource providers—the concept of cultural fusion in the United States dates back to the 18th century and the U.S.'s "melting pot" image to the early 1900s—readers will find value in this article's considerations and findings, including how they interact with current social, political, and economic debates in the U.S.

Plotting Your Job Hunt: The Use of Visual Timeline for Investigating the Job Search Process: Estrada's research article was initially a poster at ESiLS and reports on a qualitative study, based on over twenty in-depth interviews, investigating individual's processes of applying for academic librarian jobs. Like Ndumu, Park, and Siebold's piece, Estrada's work is also part of a larger project. In this phase of the project, Estrada incorporated a visual timeline into the interviews—essentially a worksheet where participants could chronologically illustrate their search process. Uniquely, this approach allowed Estrada to thematically analyze not only the interview transcripts but also the participant-drawn timelines. In turn, this allowed the coding to function across the two data-gathering mechanisms. Readers will find both the text and the visual elements of the article compelling. We suspect readers will reflect upon how this approach might be replicated in other research projects too, particularly given that the timeline approach helped participants to recall additional details and to share feeling-based elements in their visualizations.

A Syllabus Review Model for Proactive Ebook Textbook Provisioning: Hosford and Remus's article also began as part of the ESiLS poster session and shares their exploration of provisioning e-book versions of textbooks assigned to courses across multiple subject areas (History, Art, Music, and Computer Science). Many readers will resonate with the authors' observation of the dwindling checkouts for print textbook copies as well as with the authors' curiosity about what would happen if they were to provide unlimited e-book access for students instead. Findings highlight opportunities not only to enhance or prioritize collection development efforts (especially as a means of enhancing equity and access options for students) but also avenues for conversations between subject librarians and their liaison areas.

Cost-Benefit Analysis of Security Gates and Collection Shrink in the Academic Library: Mindell, Hardin, Toth, and Vossler—hailing from Western Kentucky and Chicago State Universities—consider the question of whether to keep the magnetic security gates at their libraries through cost-benefit analyses. While they ran concurrent studies, each library team used different cost-benefit analysis (CBA) models to assess whether the investment in library security gates actually prevents collection shrink. Financial strains and belt-tightening conversations in libraries seem ever-present and readers may find exposure to CBA in this context valuable in application as well as in terms of the decisions made by the institutions involved in this study.

Assessing Formatting Accuracy of APA Style References: A Scoping Review: Scheinfeld et al.'s scoping review, initially shared as a poster at ESiLS, considers how APA citing and formatting is assessed for accuracy within existing studies. Readers may be curious to know their findings on commonly reported formatting errors as well as to discover whether any standard assessment tools have been proposed and developed within the literature. The authors' lens on DEI-related issues associated with scoping review

variables may also be of interest to readers. Their conclusions highlight the fragmented nature of research related to APA style formatting accuracy and suggest an opportunity for standardized, source-specific assessment tools—an opportunity perhaps uniquely well-suited for collaboration between librarians and educators.

Understanding the Information Needs of Students Conducting Multidisciplinary Capstone Projects in Engineering Education: Verdines' article, the last in this issue drawn from the ESiLS poster session, is a Using Evidence in Practice piece focused on the capstone work of engineering students at Ohio State University. Verdines notes that capstone courses are designed to be culminating experiences for students, deliverables that apply and showcase students' knowledge and skills—highlighting an important moment in students' undergraduate experiences for their thoughtful and deft application of information exploration, access, and incorporation competencies. As a librarian new in their role and its engineering liaison responsibilities, Verdines seizes that newness as an opportunity to learn about faculty and student needs within that program. Readers taking on new liaison areas, or mentoring librarians through such adjustments, will benefit from learning about Verdines' approach to this scenario.

Back to Normal? Perspectives of Faculty and Teaching Librarians on Information Literacy Instruction after the Lockdowns: Baird, Berg, Joachim, and Wallace's research article is based on their 45-minute presentation at ESiLS. Their work explores an important topic in the post-pandemic environment: How information literacy instruction has changed in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Their exploratory approach surveyed both librarians and teaching faculty about several topics of interest, including past and current session scheduling practices, the evaluation of student research skills, and considerations for how students may gain research skills. Notably, teaching faculty and librarians differed in their perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 on faculty use of library instruction, faculty reasons for scheduling that instruction, and faculty's conceptions of students' research skills. The authors indicate (ongoing) misperceptions of librarian expertise and suggest librarians and teaching faculty may not agree on how librarians should teach information literacy. While their findings may comfort readers—the pandemic does not seem to have significantly altered how faculty approach information literacy instruction—readers will appreciate the additional context for how the post-pandemic environment highlights (ongoing) issues with one-shot library sessions.

As the ESiLS co-founders, we are excited and honored to see this issue of *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* come to fruition. While we may have initially conceived of the Summit as a means to meet our own professional, post-doc development needs and desires, the concept clearly resonated among others in our field—we even created a Discord channel to continue connecting over empirical research, and more, beyond the conference itself. We aim for this community of practice to persist between Summits, and want the Summit to be a valuable opportunity for our community to look forward to and plan on each year. We hope ESiLS can serve as an affordable home for researcher-practitioners looking to share about their work and invite readers to reach out to ESiLS organizers to join our Discord, too.

So readers may be wondering: When's the next ESiLS?

Don't worry, we have been up to our usual planning…

Thoughts on ESiLS 2026?

Let's do it. Virtual again? Also, we should form a 501c3.

Yay! Sure! I'm down w that.

CFP out after Thanksgiving, due 1/12?

Sure! That's plenty of time.

Peer review by 2/1, schedule by 2/12, conference 3/26?

Registration open same date schedule goes up?

Sure!

We hope to see you at the 2nd Empirical Studies in Libraries Summit on Thursday, March 26, 2026!