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## **Forty-Six Years Young: A Checkup for the Canadian Association for Information Science (Paper)**

### **Abstract:**

This paper presents results of a survey to ascertain the value of the Canadian Association for Information Science (CAIS), its annual conference, and its journal. Data suggest that CAIS fulfills some of its stakeholder's expectations, but improvements are recommended particularly for the structure of the conference.

### **Résumé:**

Professional associations in information science abound. General associations with a North American origin which seek to attract members across the discipline include the Association for Information Science and Technology, the Association for Library and Information Science Education, and the iSchools. Each of these associations holds an annual conference, and sponsor additional, more-focused conferences and seminars. In addition, a wide range of information science conferences which focus on specific aspects (e.g., information behaviour, digital libraries), are organized around the globe and draw scholars, practitioners, and students.

In Canada, the Canadian Association for Information Science/L'Association canadienne des sciences de l'information (CAIS/ACSI) seeks to represent the broad discipline within Canada's national boundaries. Founded in 1971 following a meeting that was intended to establish an Ottawa chapter of the American Society for Information Science, CAIS/ACSI has changed in character over time, but has survived 46 years (Nilsen, 2007). The list of CAIS/ACSI Board members and journal editors reads like a "who's who" of Canadian information science; most senior (and many junior) members of the field have taken a turn at keeping CAIS/ACSI functional. Today, CAIS/ACSI is a member of the Federation of the Humanities and Social Sciences, holds its conference along with other Canadian humanities and social sciences associations at the annual Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, and it continues to publish its journal, *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science/ La Revue canadienne des sciences de l'information et de bibliothéconomie* (CJILS/RCSIB). Interestingly, currently both the CAIS/ACSI President (Heidi Julien) and the journal editor (Valerie Nisset), while Canadian by birth and citizenship, are scholars working in the U.S. (both at SUNY at Buffalo). This situation reflects ongoing commitment of Canadian scholars of information science, regardless of where they work, to the welfare of the association and its operations. In addition to Canadians living and working in Canada, the association and annual conference attract expatriate Canadians, as well as attendees from a range of countries outside of Canada, notably the U.S., France, and the U.K.

Despite the efforts of those few academics and practitioners willing to serve on the CAIS/ACSI Board and organize its annual conference, membership has been relatively weak and the annual conference typically attracts typically fewer than 100 attendees (although this varies according to the conference location, since centrally-located conferences attract greater numbers than

conferences located in either the Canadian west or east). Informal speculations about the reasons for this precarious situation have focused on competition—for membership dollars, conference papers and article submissions—and networking opportunities offered by other, larger, information science associations. In addition, some scholars prefer to present their work at more focused disciplinary conferences, such as the biennial Information Seeking in Context (ISIC) conference, or the annual Information Architecture (IA) Summit.

In light of these challenges, the 2015-16 CAIS/ACSI Board decided to undertake a survey of membership, to ascertain what value the membership sees in the organization, the conference, and the journal. For purposes of the survey, “membership” was defined loosely as anybody who responded to the survey. The survey was distributed to the membership (via the CAIS/ACSI Google Group), the 2015 CAIS/ACSI annual conference attendees, and to contacts in the Canadian LIS programs for distribution to their faculty and doctoral students. Since the survey was internal to the association and the only dissemination of these data will be at the annual conference, ethics approval was determined not to be necessary. Nevertheless, the survey respondents were anonymous, and the data have been handled in accordance with normally acceptable ethical principles. The survey was produced in English and French using SurveyMonkey, was distributed in early October, 2015 and closed October 30, 2015. The English survey elicited 70 responses and the French survey elicited 18 responses, for a total of 88. This total represents a sufficient proportion of the potential population of those identifying with Canadian information science (particularly academics and students in Canadian LIS programs) that the results are likely representative, although this is not a probability sample. It is important to note that while some practitioners (e.g., librarians) have contributed to the journal and to the annual conference, served on the Board, and helped to organize the annual conference, the proportion of practitioner members has decreased significantly over time (Nilsen, 2007).

Results of the survey indicate that 45% of respondents were academics in Canadian LIS programs, 18% were doctoral students, and 38% were “other” (mostly faculty members in U.S. LIS programs, and librarians). The largest proportion of respondents indicated that they were CAIS/ACSI members (48%), 42% were not members and 10% did not know their membership status. This uncertainty about membership status reflects an oddity of CAIS/ACSI membership, as members are considered those who have a journal subscription and those who attend the annual conference in any given year; thus, membership status is not always clear and can vary from year to year. Respondents were asked if they were once CAIS/ACSI members but were no longer a member, why that was the case: 29% of the 31 respondents to that question indicated that CAIS/ACSI was not relevant to their career, 61% did not know, 45% thought that it was too expensive, and 35% indicated “other.” Most “other” reasons provided related to membership being tied to conference attendance (when an individual does not attend the conference, their membership lapses), and to competition from other conferences. Indeed, it is common for greater academic credit to be allocated to attendance and presentation at larger information science conferences, which discourages participation in the CAIS/ACSI conference due to its relatively small size. Of current non-members, 55% of respondents thought they would rejoin CAIS/ACSI in the future.

On average, respondents reported having attended two to three CAIS/ACSI conferences in the past 10 years, with a range of 0-10. This suggests that conference attendance is sporadic for most

respondents. Of those who have attended, 52% indicated that they were required or preferred to attend other conferences; 43% cited other reasons for not attending, the most frequent being they did not previously know about the CAIS/ACSI conference. For those who had attended one or more conferences, they rated their experience with the conference as comparable with other conferences. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of previous conference attendees appreciated the opportunity to network, 34% valued the keynote speakers, 57% enjoyed the papers, 13% particularly liked the posters, and 33% appreciated the opportunity to participate in the overall Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, of which the CAIS/ACSI conference is a part. Suggestions for improvement of the conference ranged, but included shortening the conference to two days, from the current three; limiting the number of student papers; shifting the conference to earlier in the Congress schedule; eliminating parallel sessions; and, holding the conference independently of Congress. Respondents who were faculty members were asked whether they recommend the CAIS/ACSI conference to their students; 80% indicated that they did, as they considered the conference to be a friendly venue for students to obtain feedback, and to engage with the information science community. Thirty-four percent (34%) of respondents have published a paper in CJILS/RCSIB, and a full 88% scan the journal for articles of interest.

These data demonstrate that, at least for the respondents of this survey (who admittedly are self-selected), CAIS/ACSI remains an association with some value for its community. The conference provides a hospitable but high quality venue for presentation of a diverse range of information science scholarship and the journal is useful to its readership. Respondents' suggestions for improvement to the conference and the journal (the latter primarily being calls for the journal to become open access, a step that the University of Toronto Press, publisher of CJILS/RCSIB, is taking in 2016), are welcome. This feedback will be considered by the Board and future conference organizers. For those who have stepped forward to provide leadership to this small disciplinary community, the survey results are heartening, affirming the ongoing value of the association and offering some helpful suggestions for moving CAIS/ACSI towards its next forty-six years. The current CAIS/ACSI Board are acting on these data to build a plan to support the needs of its current and potential members more fully in the coming years.

This submission will be of interest to the conference attendees, since these are arguably those most committed to the organization. The submission relates to the conference theme of information science in our communities by focusing on the community of information scientists (scholars, practitioners, and students) in Canada who are supported by CAIS/ACSI. If this community is to retain its Canadian focus, then this organization must respond to the expressed needs of its community. The survey reported here sought to do just that, and its results are expected to inform a strategic plan for the association as it moves into the future.

### **Reference List:**

Nilsen, Kirsty. (2007). The Canadian Association for Information Science: A look at its thirty-five-year history. *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, 31(2), 163-177.