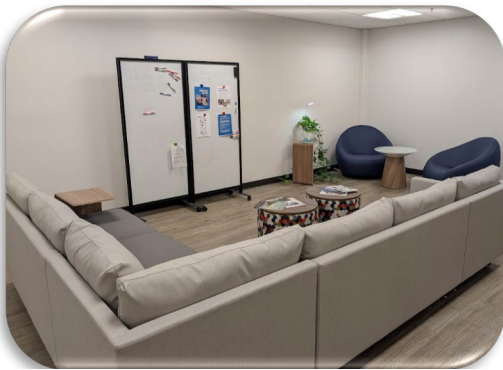


UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY
SCHOOL OF INFORMATION SCIENCE

Annual Year-End Summary Report Academic Year 2025–2026

An Overview of Programmatic Excellence, Faculty Innovations, and Student Success

Highlights and Achievements



Renovated lobby area

The 2025–2026 academic year has been a remarkable period of growth, academic excellence, and community engagement for the School of Information Science (SIS). Through the collaborative dedication of our faculty, staff, students, and alumni network, the School has expanded its scholarly footprint and solidified its reputation as a leading hub for library science, information communication technology, and communication literacy. Our strategic initiatives have yielded prominent milestones in national recognition, external grant funding, state-wide community engagement, and facility enhancements.

Foremost among our major institutional milestones this year was the official visit of the **American Library Association (ALA) External Review Panel on February 23–24, 2026**, a comprehensive evaluation aimed at securing our continued program accreditation. This critical peer-review process highlighted the rigorous standards, curricular innovations, and exceptional student outcomes that define our Master of Science in Library Science (MSLS) program. Complementing this academic milestone, the School successfully hosted the **second annual SIS Showcase**, providing an impactful forum for students, researchers, and professional partners to present cutting-edge solutions to modern data, information, and communication challenges.



2026 SIS Showcase

- In addition to intellectual and programmatic triumphs, the College and School made substantial investments in its physical infrastructure to foster a more modern and



SIS faculty judging student work in Dr. Barfield's class

collaborative environment. During the year, we fully upgraded our primary conference room with updated conferencing and presentation hardware and comprehensively renovated the main lobby area to create an open, inviting space for collaboration and public engagement. To commemorate and share these physical upgrades with the broader university community, the School hosted a highly successful **Little Open House on March 26, 2026**, welcoming faculty, students, staff, and university administrators to explore the revitalized facilities.

- **Dr. Jessica Barfield:** Interviewed alongside co-author Jiangen He by Scientific American to discuss their groundbreaking, highly publicized research exploring [whether human racial biases are unconsciously projected onto autonomous robots](#).
- **Dr. Daniela DiGiacomo:** Featured as an expert voice in the national educational landscape, providing expert commentary and analysis for the high-profile article, "[Five myths about AI and education](#)."
- **Dr. America Edwards:** Honored with the national Outstanding Dissertation Award from the Human Communication and Technology Division of the National Communication Association (NCA) for her work, "Maintaining Ties in the Digital Age: How Self-Disclosure and Co-Rumination Shape Mother-Daughter Communication Amidst the College Transition." Dr. Edwards was also published in [Psychology Today](#), translating her scholarship on dual-earning families and everyday stress for public audiences. Along with Dr. Hannah E. Jones (COM), she also was awarded a CSCA Federation Prize for their project *Families Under Pressure*, which examines how politically divided parent-child dyads use communication and technology to navigate uncertainty, conflict, and resilience in close family relationships.
- **Dr. Luke LeFebvre:** Appointed as the prestigious Reynolds Professor in Engineering, reflecting high cross-disciplinary distinction.
- **Leslie Sweeney:** Earned a highly competitive Top Panel Award at the National Communication Association (NCA) annual convention, exemplifying the exceptional quality of instructional and rhetorical scholarship within the unit.
- **Dr. Jessalyn Vallade & Dr. Fatima Espinoza Vasquez:** Celebrated at the College of Communication and Information (CI) Excellence Awards, where Dr. Vallade won the Faculty Research Excellence Award and Dr. Espinoza Vasquez received the prestigious Faculty Teaching Excellence Award.
- **Dr. Sherali Zeadally:** Recognized globally by being named [among the top 2% of most-cited researchers in the world](#).

Faculty Grants

Securing robust external funding continues to be a central pillar of the School's mission to advance public-facing research and community impact. This past fiscal year, our faculty demonstrated exceptional competitiveness by securing several highly prestigious federal, regional, and institutional grants. These funds actively support community resilience, algorithmic literacy, open access, and ongoing professional development for faculty.

- **Drs. Shannon Crawford Barniskis, Meghan Dowell, and America Edwards:** Each successfully secured Summer Faculty Research Grants from the university to further their specialized research pipelines over the summer term.
- **Drs. Young Choi and Brian Real:** Awarded a highly competitive national grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). [Their project](#) focuses on strengthening social service integration within public libraries, equipping librarians to act as essential community support anchors.
- **Dr. Daniela DiGiacomo** was awarded a UNITE Research Priority Area grant for her study, entitled "Cultivating Civic Classrooms in Elementary Years: Empowering Novice Teachers through Civic Noticing." This grant will enable her to further expand her work to prepare pre-service and novice K-12 teachers to create more civically minded, information-literate classrooms in Kentucky and beyond. She will collaborate with Dr. Laura Darolia from UK's College of Education. They were also awarded one of the inaugural College of Ed SPARK grants to further extend our civically, information literacy minded applied research project within the local school district.
- **Drs. Meghan Dowell and Jessalyn Vallade:** Awarded funding through the 2026 College Research Award Fund, supporting their innovative research collaborations.
- **Dr. Soohyung Joo:** Received a major IMLS grant for an impactful, multi-institutional collaborative project entitled "A comprehensive community-driven approach to algorithmic literacy education in public libraries," aimed at designing educational frameworks that empower citizens to navigate algorithmic and AI systems confidently.
- **Blanca Munoz and Leslie Sweeney:** Received a specialized Open Educational Resources (OER) Textbook Grant. These funds are dedicated to creating a comprehensive digital pressbook designed to span across the foundational CIS 110/111 curriculum, significantly lowering educational cost barriers for undergraduate students.

Professional Development

To ensure that we remain innovative and accessible, faculty and staff engaged in extensive professional development and leadership training throughout the year. These activities included national leadership roles, specialized pedagogical training, and leading cutting-edge discussions on artificial intelligence.

- **Dr. Jessica Barfield** took part in the CELT Institute (AI).
- **Dr. Sean Burns** was elected national president of the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) in 2024. He began his term immediately following the successful 2025 ALISE Annual Conference and has since led preparations for the 2026 Annual Conference in Buffalo, scheduled for November 16–18, 2026.
- **Dr. Maria Cahill:** Successfully completed the intensive, year-long [Emerging Leaders Academy](#). Her capstone leadership project directly focused on developing enhanced faculty mentorship models to support early-career scholars within the university.
- **Dr. Meghan Dowell** was named an Outstanding Faculty Mentor by the UK Office of Undergraduate Research.
- **Drs. Meghan Dowell, Hayley Hoffman, and Joe Martin:** Announced as formal members of the highly selective [TEK 2025–2026 Faculty Fellows](#) cohort, blending technology and technical knowledge into humanistic disciplines.
- **Dr. America Edwards and Dr. Firaz Peer:** Selected to participate in the prestigious [2025-26 Online Course Quality Pilot](#). As part of this pilot, Dr. Edwards extensively revised the online framework for CIS 110, ensuring alignment with top national distance learning and Quality Matters standards.
- **National Leadership & Speaking Engagements:** Additionally, **Dr. Amanda Lawrence** served as the 2025–2026 [Kentucky Communication Association \(KCA\)](#) President, hosting a vibrant conference that drew over 100 regional participants. **Dr. Daniela DiGiacomo** was invited as a featured speaker for the prestigious National Academies Workshop on Media Literacy Education, and **Dr. Joe Martin** lent his expertise to a panel on "AI Use Cases" at the National Science Foundation (NSF) ACCESS Regional Workshop.
- **Symposia and Teaching Presentations:** **Drs. America Edwards, Shannon Crawford Barniskis, and Kody Frey** presented emerging pedagogical strategies at the CELT Teaching Excellence Symposia. **Dr. Brian Real** offered a special



Faculty writing workshop organized by Dr. Espinoza Vasquez



Dr. Burns, President of ALISE

webinar on the economic impact of Kentucky's public libraries' operations, hosted by the Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives, on April 29th. In specialized research, **Dr. Fatima Espinoza Vasquez** organized an impactful, full-day symposium and workshop in conjunction with CAPR titled "The Datafication of the Global South," addressing critical global inequities in information architecture.

Student and Alumni Achievements

The true measure of the School's impact lies in the successes of its students and alumni. This year, members of the SIS community achieved high honors at regional, national, and professional levels.

- **Terry Birdwhistell (MSLS Alumnus):** Posthumously inducted into the [2025 UK Hall of Distinguished Alumni](#), marking a lifetime of extraordinary contribution to the field of library and archival science.
- **Jack Jenkins (MSLS Student):** Received the prestigious 2025 CS/MLA Library and Information Science Student Award at the annual conference of the Southern Chapter of the Medical Library Association.
- **Jordan Obi (MSICT Graduate):** [Recognized for her outstanding ability to master academic excellence](#) while competing at the highest tier on the university basketball court, exemplifying the versatile spirit of our student-athletes.
- **Sarah Viscuso (MSLS Student):** Published a first-authored article in the peer-reviewed Journal of Hospital Librarianship titled "[Front and Center: Creative Approaches and Outreach Opportunities for the New Hospital Librarian](#)," outlining vital contemporary outreach strategies.
- **Professional & Alumni Awards:** Alumnus **Matt Noe** received the [RUSA Isadore Gilbert Mudge 2026 Award](#), a pinnacle national honor in reference librarianship. Alumna **Kelly Lamm** was selected as a prestigious [2026 Library Journal Mover & Shaker](#), and **Kim Fender** was honored with the CI Outstanding Alumnus Award.
- **Undergraduate and Departmental Honors:** **Glenna Saldanha** was selected as the ICT General Scholarship recipient; **Michel Garcia Villasenor** was named the Outstanding Junior in ICT; and **Eliza Hofer** was selected as the Outstanding Senior in ICT.
- **Research Presentations:** **Tennessee Gardner** presented at the California Library Association Annual Conference, and **Kelsey Drifmeyer** presented at the KPLA 2026 Conference. Furthermore, **Candace Van Name, Reinette Jones, and Kopana Terry** all successfully presented at the Kentucky History Awards. Showcasing our vibrant internal research culture, **nine MSLS students and one MSICT student** took part in the SIS Graduate Student Conference, while **Ash Pechon and Brandon Bradley** presented their



SIS graduates

research at the CI Graduate Student Expo. Additionally, Alumnus **Garrett Ringler** visited campus to share his industry insights with current ICT students.

Curriculum

Curricular innovation is at the heart of the School's strategy to stay ahead of the rapidly evolving information landscape. A primary example of this is the thorough revision of our online foundational course, **CIS 110 (Composition and Communication I)**, executed by **Dr. America Edwards** as part of the university's Course Quality Pilot Program. This redesign embeds updated digital literacies and ensures that our undergraduate courses meet rigorous benchmarks for engagement and universal design.

Simultaneously, the development of an Open Educational Resources (OER) digital pressbook by **Leslie Sweeney** and **Blanca Munoz** represents a massive leap forward in curricular equity. By spanning across both CIS 110 and CIS 111, this single, unified resource replaces expensive commercial textbooks, providing students with immediate, zero-cost access to their course materials on day one. These modernizations reflect our broader goal of providing flexible, high-quality, and cost-effective pathways for our students.



Local ICT related professionals conducting mock interviews with ICT students

New Initiatives

The School launched several exciting initiatives this year designed to strengthen community engagement, technical training, and institutional partnerships. In an effort to support regional K-12 systems, **Dr. Daniela DiGiacomo**, in partnership with the Center for Innovation and Education, authored and produced a vital case study report: *Better Together: How inclusive design as a policy process impacts stakeholder understanding, ownership, and engagement in assessment and accountability innovation – Allen County, Kentucky Case Study*. This report serves as a foundational blueprint for reimagining K-12 assessment and accountability structures through inclusive design across the Commonwealth.

Recognizing the critical societal need for data and artificial intelligence literacies, **Dr. Heng Zheng** has designed an innovative AI Literacy Summer Program specifically tailored for middle and high school students, scheduled to run from July 8–10, 2026. This initiative bridges the gap between secondary education and higher education, providing local youth with foundational technical competencies. Furthermore, our community-driven approach was expanded by our new IMLS-funded project to embed algorithmic literacy modules directly into public library systems, establishing the School as a pioneer in public tech education.

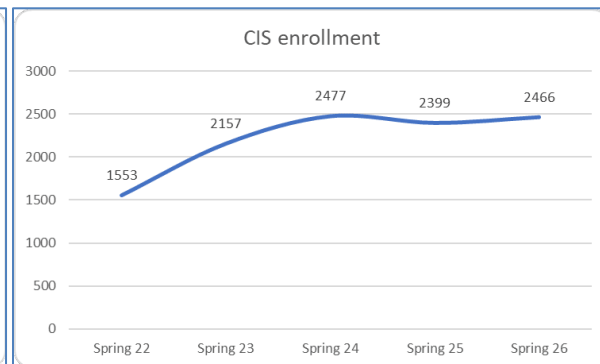
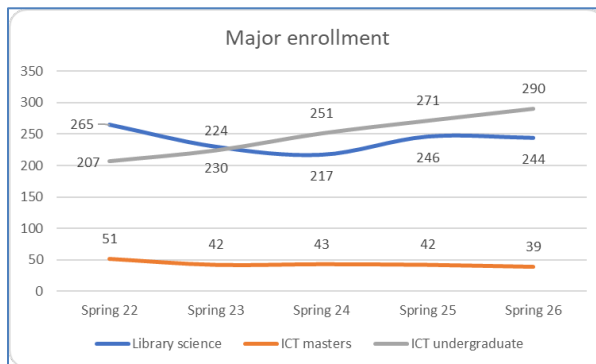
Students - Enrollment and Graduation

Student enrollment and progression patterns over the past year demonstrate excellent academic vitality, particularly within our flagship graduate library science and undergraduate information communication technology tracks. In the past academic year, the School graduated over 240 students across both undergraduate and graduate programs. And over the past five spring semesters, total major enrollment has increase 9.5% while CIS enrollment has increased 58.8%.



SIS faculty at graduation

Program Track Graduates	Spring 25	Fall 25	Spring 26	Total Enrolled
ICT Undergraduates	32	27	49	108
ICT Graduates	7	5	4	16
LIS Graduates	35	38	50	123
Total Graduates	74	70	103	247



Looking Ahead

As the School of Information Science looks toward the 2026–2027 academic year, it is well prepared to build on recent successes, turn them into ongoing strategic growth, expand its influence, and create new opportunities for learning, discovery, and engagement. Specifically, the School will continue strengthening connections among its programs, faculty, and staff; refine and broaden the curriculum to prepare students for a quickly changing profession; and advance research through new funding opportunities and collaborative efforts. These initiatives will promote innovation, improve the student experience, deepen community engagement, and further enhance the School's visibility and impact. With a shared dedication to excellence and teamwork, the School is well positioned to explore new possibilities and keep shaping the future of information science.

Conclusion



Enjoying the College holiday gathering

The 2025–2026 academic year stands as an inspiring testament to the resilience, intellectual energy, and shared vision of the School of Information Science community. From earning elite global citation rankings and securing high-profile national awards to launching crucial initiatives and welcoming accreditation teams, the School continues to redefine excellence in information science education.

With a modern foundation, an expanded and continuously improving curriculum, and highly qualified faculty and student body, the School

enters the upcoming year with great momentum, ready to meet the evolving information challenges of the Commonwealth of Kentucky and the wider global landscape.