

GUEST EDITORIAL

A Valued Institution Builder: Gordon B. Davis

The information systems discipline is still young. Our more senior colleagues personally witnessed the creation of the key institutions of the field—our journals, professional associations, conferences, degree programs, curriculum recommendations, and research centers. Many did far more than witness! Beginning in the late 1960s, these institution builders riveted with near evangelical enthusiasm their emerging knowledge of information systems to institutional models and traditions they adapted from the neighboring disciplines from which they had migrated. The products of their energies were the essential institutions required for launching and establishing credibility for a new discipline.

Among the more notable of these institutions are top-tier journals including *MIS Quarterly*, first published in 1977, *Information Systems Research*, first published in 1990, and, more recently, *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, first published in 2000. In addition to journals, we required professional support groups. Initially we relied on the professional associations of our reference disciplines. Among the oldest of these relationships was that with the Association for Computing Machinery's Special Interest Group on Business Data Processing (SIGBDP), founded in 1961 (since renamed SIGMIS); similarly, the International Federation for Information Processing (IFIP) tried to meet the needs of our community through its Technical Committee 8 (TC8), Information Systems, formed in 1976. Some divisions within the Academy of Management, including Organization Communication and Information Systems, also partially served our community. TIMS (which later merged with ORSA to become INFORMS) and AIDS (later renamed as DSI) also sought to serve the professional needs of our community. By 1993, however, it had become apparent to many, including the past editors of the *MIS Quarterly* (Dickson et al. 1993), that a professional association was necessary. Two years later, the Association for Information Systems was founded. It now has over 4,000 members.

Another set of essential institutional building blocks were information systems research centers, such as the Center for Information Systems Research at MIT (1974) and the Management Information Systems Research Center at Minnesota (1968). So too were ground-breaking academic programs such as the Master's and Ph.D. program first established at Minnesota in 1968. By the early 1970s, these and other experiments in curriculum development began to be compared and shared as published curriculum guidelines. Conferences provided another opportunity for our founders to collaborate, with discipline-specific conferences emerging far sooner than a discipline-specific professional society. Among the first were the Information Systems Research Seminar in Scandinavia, founded in 1978, and the International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS), founded in 1980. Today we also have three major regional conferences that operate under the auspices of the Association for Information Systems: ECIS in Europe, PACIS in and around Asia, and AMCIS in North America. Other notable institutional artifacts include doctoral consortia, a directory of information systems faculty, an online index of dissertations in information systems, a worldwide distribution list for information systems faculty, and the ISWorld online archive.

The founders of our field were drawn from throughout the world. Some have now retired. Several, sadly, have passed away. To attempt to name them risks offending others equally deserving. Fortunately, the

Association for Information Systems, through its Leo Lifetime Achievement and AIS Fellows awards, has shouldered the task of identifying and acknowledging many of those deserving recognition.

One of those recently retired great institution builders, who is both an AIS Fellow and a Leo Award winner, has long been associated with the *MIS Quarterly*. Gordon Davis served as the *MIS Quarterly*'s publisher from 1996 to 2004 and, informally, as advisor and mentor to several Editors-in-Chief. Until recently, he was a member of the *MIS Quarterly*'s policy committee, and he was instrumental in making the *MIS Quarterly* available, free of charge, to the membership of the Association for Information Systems. This editorial honors and thanks Gordon for his many contributions to the field and suggests that Gordon be considered as a role model and moral compass for the emerging leaders who will be essential in pushing our discipline forward.

While the risks of a Type-I error may be high in attempting to identify our field's leaders or even its major institutions, there is no risk of a Type-II error in designating Gordon as a key institution builder and a founder of the information systems field. A past president and founder of the Association for Information Systems, Gordon has played leadership or strongly supportive roles in many of our field's great institutions. In 1968, together with Gary Dickson and Tom Hoffman, Gordon started the MIS Master's and Ph.D. programs at the University of Minnesota and was the first director of the MIS Research Center. Gordon was at center stage in the definition of the field, as evidenced by his authorship of the field-defining text, *Management Information System: Conceptual Foundations, Structure, and Development* (Davis 1974; Davis and Olson 1985) as well as a well-known research framework (Ives, Hamilton, and Davis 1980). He is also the author of *Auditing & EDP* (Davis 1968; Davis, Adams, and Schaller 1983), one of the first books to address the challenges of auditing in the computer age. Gordon has played a central role in defining information technology education through his participation in many national and international curriculum standards boards and through the 23 books he has authored or coauthored. He has played key leadership roles in ICIS, IFIP Technical Committee 8, and the ACM (which named him an ACM Fellow in 1997). In 1992, the Association for Information Technology Professionals also recognized Gordon's contributions in naming him educator of the year. Three years later, IFIP similarly awarded him its Silver Core Award.

Along with research and teaching, service is an important evaluation criterion for most scholars. For Gordon Davis, the term *leadership* is more apropos than *service*. Gordon has played key roles in many of our leading and path-breaking institutions. The success of these institutions is now clear. As the years pass, less clear are the specific contributions of the individuals who built them. Nonetheless, their values remain brightly reflected, decades later, in the institutions they helped create.

In the remainder of this essay, we explore six values that guided Gordon as he participated, along with others, in the creation and advancement of so many important institutions. We believe these values, to a greater or lesser extent, continue to be reflected in some of our institutions and in the persons of many, hopefully including the three authors, whose careers and lives have benefitted from their relationship with Gordon. We believe they are also compelling values for those who will be entrusted with maintaining today's institutions and with building new ones to meet the challenges ahead.

Fostering Egalitarianism

I knew the University of Minnesota was a top school for MIS, but I knew nothing of Gordon's role in founding the field or his lofty stature in the discipline. Had I known more about his power and influence, I might have been awestruck, or perhaps fearful of our

meeting. Instead, Gordon showed himself as a fatherly, down to earth human being, asking me about my interests, my capabilities, and especially my desire to finish the doctoral program.

I assured Gordon I could do the job and was motivated to graduate ASAP due to my family situation of having three small children motivating me to get a real job upon graduation. He looked me over, looking practically right into my heart, and decided I was being sincere. I immediately sensed I was going to get the green light for admissions and instinctively knew he would become one of my great mentors at the University of Minnesota.

Jim Brancheau ('87)

Gordon received his undergraduate education at Idaho State University and subsequently earned MBA and Ph.D. degrees from Stanford. While many Stanford classmates came from more-pedigreed undergraduate institutions, Gordon did well at Stanford (he came second in his MBA class). When Gordon later sat on admissions committees examining the records of prospective doctoral students, he was not swayed by pedigrees. "I looked at the student and judged whether he or she was a good fit with the program." All three authors, and no doubt many other graduates of the University of Minnesota program, benefitted from that openness. In particular, this openness was reflected in Gordon's views toward international students. From the outset, he sought diversity in the student body, and he encouraged and supported international students' entry into the University of Minnesota program. The initial trickle of international students became a stream, and today University of Minnesota graduates are found throughout the world.

That disdain for elitism and a focus on merit, we believe, are reflected in many of our institutions. For instance, members of the editorial board of the *MIS Quarterly* have rarely, if ever, been selected on the basis of their institutional home or heritage but rather on the basis of their scholarly record and effectiveness in reviewing. Gordon never served as the Editor-in-Chief of the *MIS Quarterly* and, therefore, never appointed an Associate Editor. Nonetheless, he had considerable influence in the selection of several Editors-in-Chief, including two of the authors. Respect for egalitarianism and the importance of earned merit have long been embedded in the editorial appointments process and, we believe, will continue to underpin future editorial appointments.

Helping and Sharing

When Mike and I arrived in Minnesota in the fall of 1984, Gordon went out of his way to help us feel at home. He knew that the doctoral program was a family effort and you had to pay attention to what was going on with the entire family unit....I was reminded of that care twenty years after I first arrived at Minnesota. At a recent ICIS conference, we had an informal Minnesota gathering. Gordon was there with a group of current students—one of whom was poised to be the 100th graduate. Gordon introduced the new people to each of us "oldsters," going slowly around the room, saying a few personal words to and about each person, and touching on everyone's accomplishments and shining moments. He enlarged the circle to bring the new people into the community, as he has been doing for decades.

Ilze Zigurs ('87)

This reminiscence, like the others in this essay, is drawn from a memory book prepared for Gordon on the occasion of the May 2005 symposium at the University of Minnesota to honor his career. A common theme that emerges from many reflections and tributes in the memory book is Gordon's warm and caring nature.

Gove Allen ('90), a recent graduate of the Minnesota Ph.D. program, described how Gordon helped integrate him into the field when he was still a student:

I remember being with Gordon at the opening social at ICIS in Charlotte. I knew virtually no one. Gordon took me to meet several of the researchers whose work we had studied. What an experience it was to be introduced around by the great patriarch of Information systems.

Gerry DeSanctis, a former long-time member of the Minnesota faculty, recalls Gordon's support for students:

I remember Gordon in the weekly Friday workshop events: always there...sat in the front row...asked challenging questions...helped the speaker (usually a student) find an interesting twist to his or her work. He was critical and positive, always constructive and kind. I don't think he ever saw a workshop that he didn't enjoy! What more could one want in a colleague? He set the tone of high quality and mutual respect for all in the department.

This value of helping others, particularly students or young colleagues, is reflected in many of our institutions. For instance, since its inception, ICIS has included a doctoral consortium intended to assist students to improve their capabilities as scholars. Faculty rarely decline coveted invitations to participate. The AMCIS "summer camp" for new faculty provides another opportunity for mentoring young scholars. Our journal editors also have found expeditious ways to help prospective authors develop the quality of their manuscripts. Senior or associate editors are encouraged to provide expedited feedback for promising papers that seem unlikely, without help, to survive the first review. Several editors-in-chief also commonly hold workshops at conferences, intended to improve the quality of submitted manuscripts. Members of editorial boards give generously of their time in support of these initiatives. Editors also look for constructive criticism and value-add in paper reviews. The best reviewers are rewarded with editorial appointments and reviewer-of-the-year awards.

ISWorld is another means of assisting scholars within the field, this time on a global scale. Scholars working on a particular research or pedagogical issue are encouraged to seek input from others on the ISWorld list, with the caveat that they share the results with the list. Other resources available from the ISWorld web repository also manifest the desire of their creators to help others. For instance, Michael Myers' ISWorld contribution on qualitative methods, originally published in *MISQ Discovery* (Myers 1997), is a rich, heavily used resource.

One interesting distinction among academicians is their degree of openness with their ideas. At the May 2005 symposium in his honor, Gordon explained his perspective on sharing:

I'm willing to discuss anything that I am working on with anybody. Some people are frightened all the time that someone is going to steal their ideas. I never worry about that. I really like to discuss my ideas with others, because as I discuss them they become clearer and clearer to me....Sharing ideas is the way they become clearer.

The payback may be in the form of constructive criticism or, in the case of curriculum innovations, the compliment of replication and extension.

His involvement in the development of published model curricula is an illustration of Gordon's willingness to share for the broader benefit of the field. He has participated in such efforts in every decade since the 1970s. Internationally, these model curricula have provided the foundations for many undergraduate and postgraduate information systems programs.

Expanding Horizons

I vividly remember the day that he attended a seminar at the LSE. The particular issue discussed was one with which he was familiar but the approach taken to the issue at the LSE was very different to that prevalent at Minnesota. What was immediately obvious was that he relished the argument, was tolerant to the very different approach described, and was prepared to accept its validity. After the seminar he told me how much he enjoyed such occasions in that it enabled him to get a better understanding of our discipline—a discipline he had played such a major role in defining.

Frank Land

As a young man, Gordon spent over two years in Sweden, learning the language and performing missionary service. Ten years after he joined the Minnesota faculty, he spent a year and a half at Belgium's European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management. He has subsequently visited extensively at universities in Europe and Asia, including over a year spent at the National University of Singapore and shorter stints in China, Finland, Sweden, and South Africa. This international exposure provided Gordon with a wealth of cross-cultural experience and early exposure to, and respect for, cross-cultural research and qualitative approaches to information systems research. The latter, due to his and others' influence, began to gain favor in and be reflected in the make-up of the *MIS Quarterly's* editorial board. While Gordon continued to encourage Minnesota doctoral students to first master positivist research approaches (in recognition of the methodological bias of the faculties they were likely to join), he encouraged and exposed his students to a range of non-positivist approaches.

After earning his Ph.D. at Stanford, Gordon worked as both an auditor and consultant. Five years after joining the Minnesota faculty, he enjoyed one year's leave at the American Institute of CPAs in New York City, where he wrote *Auditing & EDP* (Davis 1968). These practical experiences provided Gordon with a rich understanding of the uneasy distinction between research targeted at scholarly journals and research that had potential value to practitioners. In its early days, under the guidance of founding editor Gary Dickson, the *MIS Quarterly* sought to bridge that gap. A balance proved increasingly difficult to retain in a top-tier scholarly publication. Today, with Gordon's enthusiastic support, our more practitioner-oriented scholarship is found in the *MISQ Executive*. The University of Minnesota's MIS Research Center, established by Gordon, Gary Dickson, and Tom Hoffman in the late 1960s, provided a similar bridge between information systems scholars and senior information systems executives—a model that many subsequent research centers have emulated.

Our institutions reflect our founders' sensitivities to these differences in many ways. The presidency of the Association for Information Systems, for instance, rotates each year to a different region of the world. Similarly, the *MIS Quarterly* has long had a policy of identifying members of its editorial board from

throughout the world. At this writing, for instance, five of eleven of its Senior Editors, as well as the immediate past editor-in-chief, are located at universities outside of the United States.

Seeking Commonalities

Gordon Davis looked beyond his own field of study. He saw [writing a dissertation] as a general problem that plagued all disciplines. So, he designed the book to be a contribution to all Ph.D. students.

Nick Vitalari ('81)

Gordon's international travel helped him see and respect cultural, philosophical, and methodological distinctions. It also helped him to recognize similarities and opportunities for cross-border collaboration. Gordon's first draft of *Writing the Doctoral Dissertation* (Davis and Parker 1979) was crafted during his time in Belgium. While there, he discovered that the research methodologies used by Belgian doctoral students often differed from those used by his own students at the University of Minnesota. The problems that both groups of students faced in completing their degree, however, were similar. Indeed, Gordon was one of a group of international scholars who recognized that opportunities were ripe for cross-border synergy. Among the outcomes of that shared understanding and cooperation was the founding of ICIS and, a decade and a half later, the Association for Information Systems. In addition to his role as an AIS founder, Gordon served as treasurer, president-elect, president, and past president of AIS, and as conference chair for ICIS in 1988.

Paul Gray, another of our field's founders, describes Gordon's influence in the birth of AIS:

I happened to be President of The Institute of Management Science that year and had a munificent budget of \$1,000 I could spend any way I pleased. I chose to spend almost all of it to invite 40 people from 39 universities for lunch and a discussion on the afternoon after the conference. Before that meeting we ran an e-mail conference using that now quaint mainframe e-mail system BITNET. The subject of the meeting: "The Future of IS." Many proposals were discussed. One of the first was whether we should have a professional society of our own. Gordon, for a number of reasons, had always been opposed, feeling that TIMS, ACM, and others represented us well. So there was an air of expectancy when he rose to talk. He began speaking in his usual straight-forward, quiet, even-mannered tone.

He came out strongly for a professional society, stating that now was the time. To me, and to I believe almost everyone there, it was an electrifying moment. The recognized leader in our field had changed his mind. He was for it rather than against it. It took two years, but Bill King who volunteered to chair the effort accomplished it and today we have AIS. I'm convinced that without Gordon's support it would never have happened. We are all grateful to him.

AIS, largely through the insight and efforts of another Minnesota Alumnus, Rick Watson ('87), has attempted to provide an information systems knowledge base to countries that would otherwise not have the resources to obtain it. In particular, residents in many countries get substantially discounted membership rates and, even for non-members, access to AIS intellectual resources at no charge.

As another illustration of his interest in cross-border commonalities, Gordon served as Vice-Chair or Chair of IFIP's TC8 for over ten years. His involvement in TC8 included hosting two Working Group 8.2 conferences in Minnesota. TC8 has provided and continues to provide an important means for scholars throughout the world to understand the similarities and differences among one another's research.

Gordon also played a significant role in guiding the development of the international MISRC-AIS online faculty directory, managed and run by David Naumann and Jan DeGross at the University of Minnesota. In addition to serving as a directory, the tool provides a quick introduction to information systems faculty from throughout the world. It is a much-used resource, especially as a means of identifying colleagues around the world who have common research interests.

Maintaining an Optimistic View

What is so distinctive about Gordon Davis, in my experience, is that he sees the best in everyone and the best in every circumstance. No matter how dire the news, or how badly someone is acting, Gordon gives people the benefit of the doubt and seems to easily put himself in others' shoes. I can remember a time when a faculty member at Minnesota was acting atrociously, in my view, and Gordon commented afterwards that he was sure that this person did not always act in this way, and that maybe something was really upsetting him that explained his erratic behavior. I have always admired Gordon for that quality. There is little that seems to bring down Gordon's perennially sunny disposition.

Detmar Straub

Successfully launching something new, be it project, product, service, or academic discipline, benefits mightily from an entrepreneurial spirit and unbounded optimism. While we have no evidence, other than personal experience, to support this thesis, unbounded optimism sometimes seems in short supply in the information systems academy. Rather pessimism and self-criticism, perhaps because of our training, seems deeply embedded in our collective psyche. Illustrative is the long-simmering debate concerning the legitimacy of the academic discipline, which has intensified as enrollment numbers have declined in recent years.

At the May 2005 symposium held in Gordon's honor at the University of Minnesota, a wonderful panoply of the field's past, present, and future manifested Gordon's optimism about the field. For the speakers to have done otherwise would have been incongruent with the nature of the person they were honoring.

Beside the concern about the legitimacy of the information systems field, other perhaps equally dysfunctional but long-standing debates persist about the issues of rigor versus relevance, positivist versus interpretive research, and quantitative versus qualitative research.

The pessimist says, "if only we..." while the optimist suggests "why don't we...?" The pessimist perhaps tends to focus too much on comparisons with other disciplines, what Bennis and O'Toole (2005) describe as "Physics envy." The optimist, perhaps, is less shaped by comparisons with others but rather with the allure of the possible. Perhaps no discipline has a richer understanding of how information systems will shape the future, including the future of the academy. All of our treasured institutions increasingly will be placed at risk as the information revolution continues to gain speed. For instance, consider the emerging faces of Google, such as Google.Scholar, or of Wikis, such as the Wikipedia. They are reshaping both

knowledge dissemination and use, while our traditional approaches to knowledge creation grow more moribund. Google and Wikipedia are but the most-recent shots in the development of a global intelligence, constantly expanding and improving, with or without our participation. Surely our future will be defined by how we best learn to harness this revolution rather than by how we define our current place in the academic pecking order.

In Gordon Davis' words, "the best years for our discipline lie ahead of us." They do so, we believe, only if we can find other entrepreneurial optimists like him who continue to propel us forward. Optimists create energy among others; pessimists sap it.

Using One's Capabilities to Best Advantage

Gordon's lesson is easy to learn but often hard to practice—namely, one's gifts as a scholar are a privilege. They are not to be used for self-aggrandizement, but instead they are to be used in the service of others.

Ron Weber ('77)

Gordon has many gifts, but he also understands his strengths and limitations as well. Throughout his career, he had opportunities to take on a head-of-department's role or a dean's role. He felt, however, that he could make his best contributions to our discipline as a facilitator, a mentor, and a builder. In spite of many enticements, he carefully avoided taking on roles for which he felt he was not well suited.

Our discipline has been exemplary in recognizing that as scholars we all have strengths and weaknesses and that we should provide colleagues with opportunities to make contributions where they are most able. For example, many colleagues who have played significant administrative roles within the discipline have not necessarily been the highest-profile researchers. Similarly, our research leaders often have been quick to support the work of colleagues whose primary strengths lie in pedagogy. For the most part, colleagues have been affirmed for their strengths and not denigrated for their weaknesses. This ethos has allowed most, if not all, colleagues who are sufficiently motivated to make an important contribution to our discipline in some way.

Ongoing survival of this ethos requires that each of us realistically appraises our strengths and weaknesses as scholars and that we seek to contribute in ways that allow us to use our strengths well. Sometimes our colleagues' contributions will attract the limelight. Often, however, they will go unnoticed. Whatever the public visibility of our colleagues' contributions, they should be valued and respected when they have had a positive impact on another colleague's life.

Conclusion

The values delineated here are unlikely to be subscribed to universally by our field's founders. In addition, other founders, and Gordon as well, might identify other values that they consider equally or more important (e.g., strive for quality, behave ethically, span disciplinary boundaries) or a better fit with their own personalities. Moreover, Gordon's contributions are but some among many. In this regard, we previously noted our inability to list those who played key roles. Instead, our essay is intended to honor Gordon Davis

for his many contributions. Nonetheless, in doing so, we recognize, as he would want us to, that he was only one of the many who played instrumental roles in the development of our field.

It was our broader intention to recognize, and illustrate with Gordon as our exemplar, the role that values and principled leadership have played in pushing our field forward. We encourage emerging and prospective leaders to study these values, to reflect on those values that currently underpin their actions as scholars, to talk with other leaders about their values, and finally to embrace a set of values as their own. So equipped, the next generations of scholars will be well prepared to shoulder the mantle of leadership required to face the challenges ahead.

Blake Ives ('78)
Margrethe H. Olson ('78)
Ron Weber ('77)

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