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PANEL 10

MIS: ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE OR TEMPORARY PHENOMENA

Panel Chair: Ephraim R. McLean, Georgia State University

Panelists: Cynthia M. Beath, University of Minnesota
Jon A. Turner, New York University
Nayaran R. Umanath, Pennsylvania State University
Robert Zmud, Florida State University

An argument is raging throughout academia and industry to determine whether or not there is an enduring need to maintain information systems (IS) as a separate, distinct academic and professional discipline. The topic is debated openly, from the popular computer press to academic conferences, most recently at the 1988 International Conference on Information Systems. Underlying the argument is a need to determine whether or not there is a profession of IS, and to determine the extent to which political factors work to sustain or diminish IS departments within universities.

In addressing this issue, the first major question concerns the stages of development of a profession and whether MIS has met these stages. To paraphrase Elting Morison, at the center of all IS lies the problems of converting knowledge to practice. A field develops a tradition of knowledge and conversion practices that can be generalized to form the basis of a profession through distinguishable events: development of a level of understanding, a communication network of practitioners, consolidation and codification of a clearly defined body of knowledge, continuous learning, and evidence of the development of experts.

The first two speakers discuss IS in terms of these criteria and their importance in determining the future of IS departments. Jon Turner discusses the criteria for a profession and argues from both the pro and con positions to debate whether or not IS is, in fact, a profession. Cynthia Beath discusses the importance of epistemology and ontology as philosophical foundations of the field and relates the consensual foundations (if any) to IS's position relative to its major reference disciplines (e.g., management, computer science, sociology, economics, psychology, etc.). The next two speakers take a slightly different approach. Narayan Umanath argues that paradigm consensus is not only absent from IS research but it is not even desirable that there should be such consensus. Finally, Robert Zmud takes the position that all of these issues are less important than the political realities of academic life.

Thus, the second, and equally important issue, refers to the political position of IS departments in their institutional and environmental settings. The absence of IS departments from some schools, the recent disbanding and/or merging of IS with other departments, the record in some schools in the granting of tenure to IS faculty, and the controversial Porter and McKibbin book are all evidence of the turmoil in academia over where to position IS departments, or whether they should exist at all. The key questions accompanying the debate are what are the key political and contextual issues facing IS departments and how can IS departments position themselves to offer sustained, secure service? Zmud describes the political aspects of academic existence and offers evidence of its importance to IS departments. Umanath counters that territorial integrity for IS should not be the motivating force in sustaining IS as an academic discipline and offers an alternative to the political view.

In summary, the key issues to be discussed are:

- Is IS a distinct academic discipline or merely an intersection of reference disciplines?
- How do IS ontology and epistemology affect the positioning of IS departments?
- Does IS have distinctive competencies, a cumulative body of defined concepts; in other words, a niche?
- What are the political aspects of universities and IS departments?
- How do IS departments position themselves to weather these political factors?