



Informationist Careers for Librarians– A Brief History of NLM’s Involvement

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The National Library of Medicine (NLM) has long had an interest in supporting new roles for health sciences librarians. Goal Four of the Long-Range Plan of the National Library of Medicine, whose focus is workforce development, calls for programs that prepare librarians to meet emerging needs for specialized information services

(http://www.nlm.nih.gov/pubs/plan/lrp06/report/LRP_Goal4.html#R4_2). The Medical Library Assistance Act of 1965 (PL 89-29) gave NLM the authority to support extramural training in 1965. As early as 1968, there were university-based programs for biomedical librarianship. NLM’s 1975 Annual Report notes: “Recent Studies have shown that graduates of Library-supported internship programs have been significantly more active in enterprises involving the application of automatic data processing, computers and computer programming, and library administration. Such graduates are more likely to participate in research and development activities than other library school graduates.” It also noted that “a second area of manpower need was for biomedical information personnel to assist on-going scientific research.” (NLM Annual Report of Programs and Services, 1975, p. 58.

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/manuscripts/nlmarchives/annualreport/1975.pdf>). In the last 40 years, NLM has supported many initiatives related to specialized training for health sciences librarians, both intramurally and extramurally. Two extramural examples from the 1980s and 1990s:

- Integrated Advanced Information Management Systems (IAIMS) projects offered prominent roles for librarians in leading planning and implementation projects for their academic organizations.ⁱ
- Several of NLM’s university-based biomedical informatics research training programs offered special tracks for librarians who wanted to expand their knowledge of informatics.ⁱⁱ

Drawing upon the rich history of clinical librarianship as a model worth expanding, Davidoff and Florance wrote an editorial in 2000 proposing that librarians could and should play specialist roles in all areas fundamental to academic health sciences centers.ⁱⁱⁱ Looking for a short, memorable name for this role, they settled upon the term “informationist.” Since that time, more than 30 articles have been written describing this role, recommending appropriate training for it, and evaluating the effectiveness of programs at several organizations. Both the Medical Library Association and NLM have sponsored activities focused on informationist (or in-context information specialist) roles for librarians. In addition, NLM has sponsored two extramural funding programs in support of informationists. In 2002, NLM and MLA sponsored a joint conference on the Informationist Concept, held at NLM. An outgrowth of the meeting was the NLM Individual Fellowship for Informationist Training,

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an extramural fellowship program launched in October, 2003: <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PA-06-509.html>. This initiative offered support in four areas: clinical, biomedical research, public health, and consumer health. In 2008, NLM brought the awardees together at NLM to discuss lessons learned, benefits, and barriers. During the life of the Informationist fellowship program, which ended in 2008, nine people received support for coursework and internships to prepare them for new career directions. A critical factor in each fellowship – aside from immersion in the work setting of one of the four focus areas – was a research project that incorporated both information principles and core concepts of the domain. These fellows completed their work and joined a group of ‘pioneers’ who were already working as informationists in clinical and basic biomedical research settings. The experience of the fellows reinforced the importance of ‘immersion’ in the culture and workplace of the clinicians or scientists being supported.

In 2010, NLM launched a new and novel support program at the National Institutes of Health: NLM Administrative Supplements for Informationist Services in NIH-funded Research Projects (PA-12-158) <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PA-12-158.html>. Rather than offering support to an individual for coursework, an immersion experience and research project, this program seeks applications from NIH-funded extramural scientists who wished to add an informationist to their research teams. The launch of this grant supplement program was dependent upon participation of other NIH organizations; seven of the 23 Institutes and Centers that fund extramural research participated, including NLM. Eight awards were made, bringing 15 librarians at six different universities into existing research

teams at their organizations. In the current group of NLM informationist supplements, the science areas span smoking cessation, GIS information for use by primary care providers, corneal hydration, breast cancer screening, research into causes of cancer pain, radionuclide therapy, cochlear implants, and disability reduction. The librarian roles in individual projects vary, but build on knowledge and skills that are fundamental to librarianship, including evidence-based decisions, indexing and classification, data curation and archiving, information retrieval, knowledge organization and mapping, and user needs assessment.

An important feature of NLM’s informationist administrative supplement program is the requirement that the awardee evaluate the value added to the project by the informationist’s participation. The generation of evidence of this kind can help the informationist role spread to more organizations, and help convince researchers to routinely include information specialists in the research team on their next grant applications. The future possibilities for librarian engagement as informationists within clinical and research teams, patient advocacy groups, or other biomedical information-centered activities seem limitless in the era of big data, community-based research, personal genomes, and patient-centered health records.

i. Next-Generation IAIMS: binding Knowledge to Effective Action. Report to NLM on contract N01-LM-9-3523.

Masys, D. and Florance, V. Washington, D.C., AAMC: August 2002

ii. See, for example, RFA-LM-06-001, the funding announcement from 2006 for NLM’s Institutional Training Grants. <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/rfa-files/RFA-LM-06-001.html>

iii. The Informationist: A New Health Profession? Davidoff, F and Florance, V. *Annals of Internal Medicine*. Vol 132, no. 12, 20 June 2000, pp. 996-8

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