

A Brief History of the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program (2004–the present)

Elizabeth A. Waraksa

The Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) Postdoctoral Fellowship Program, launched in 2004, is marking its decade-plus of existence with a collection of essays dedicated to reflections, recommendations, and prognostications on some of the issues central to its mission. To provide some background and context, this brief contribution will trace the history of the fellowship from its origins to the present, including remarks on some reactions to the program over the years and a brief characterization of the program as it welcomes its twelfth cohort in the 2015-16 academic year.

The CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship: Origins, Expansion, and Select Data

From the fall of 2004 to the fall of 2014, the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program has supported 116 fellows at 53 host institutions across the United States and Canada (CLIR 2015).¹ Throughout its first decade, the program expanded not only in terms of the number of fellowships awarded and the number of institutions hosting fellows, but also in the types of fellowships offered, the array of fields from which fellows were drawn, and the variety of institutions hosting fellows. The number of funding agencies that support the program has also increased, with The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation joining the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation in 2012 as the second major provider of grant funds for the CLIR/DLF Postdoctoral Fellowships in Data Curation (CLIR 2012).

1 Fourteen additional fellows were named in June 2015.

The brainchild of past CLIR President Deanna Marcum,² the CLIR postdoctoral fellowship was originally conceived as a fellowship that would bring those who had recently earned a PhD in the humanities and who had an interest in library work—regardless of whether they held a master of library and information science (MLIS) degree—into academic libraries as a means of enhancing dialog between scholars and the academic libraries they use, exposing the new PhDs to career opportunities within the library, and engendering a new kind of specialist and potential leader (Brunner 2010; Marcum 2012). An additional aim of the program was to expose host institutions to the research skills and technological abilities that those with PhDs in the humanities might bring to the library with an eye toward reinvigorating collection development and use, exploring new means of teaching with library collections, and advancing new and different modes of scholarly communication (Henry and Smith 2013; Shore 2012). Although the fellowship was not, at its origins, specifically branded a “digital humanities” (Marcum 2012) or “alternative academic” (“alt-ac”)³ opportunity—these terms were not yet pervasive in 2004—it was in part conceived as a response to the ever worsening job market for those with a PhD in the humanities who were seeking tenure-track positions (Brunner 2010; Shore 2012).

Given the program’s early recognition of some of the most significant issues facing higher education in the twenty-first century, including “the exponential advance of linked information technologies and the concomitant need to manage them, the need for deep and diverse subject expertise in libraries, and the increasing scarcity of full-time teaching positions in the academy” (Shore 2012, 194), one may indeed characterize the program as one of the earliest alt-ac fellowships, created specifically to address the needs of both the emerging scholars and the institutions facing radical changes in the information landscape. In short, the CLIR postdoctoral fellowship has been, from its beginning, an attempt to address the pressing issues facing academic libraries by placing recent PhDs in full-time positions for a period of one to two years so that they might apply their training to the urgent needs of their host institution.

The CLIR postdoctoral fellowship has expanded to include an array of opportunities for PhDs from a wide range of disciplines, from the humanities and the arts to the natural and social sciences. And although the terminology used to describe the types of emerging professionals who tend to seek out CLIR postdoctoral fellowships has evolved through the years—from “feral professionals” (Neal 2006) to “hybrarians” (Watson et al. 2011) to digital humanists, among others—the core aims of the fellowship remain intact. Further, libraries’ ongoing need for the expertise that can be provided

2 For a recent reflection on the origins and aims of, and the initial resistance to, the program, see Marcum 2015.

3 For more on this term and its use, see Bethman and Longstreet 2013; the website “#alt-ac in Context”; and Sayre et al., “Toward a Trackless Future: Moving Beyond ‘Alt-Ac’ and ‘Post-Ac,’” in this volume.

by recent PhDs is clearly demonstrated by the ever-expanding number and variety of fellowships offered throughout the past decade.

As noted earlier, over the last decade, the fields from which fellows have been drawn, as well as the types of institutions offering CLIR postdoctoral fellowships, have expanded significantly. Past and present hosts include not only college and university libraries, digital humanities centers, and other information-centered campus institutions across the United States and Canada, but also state libraries such as the Arizona State Library, Archives and Public Records; specialized libraries such as the College of Physicians of Philadelphia and the Folger Shakespeare Library; and academic and library associations such as the Appalachian College Association. Adding to the diversity, the 2015 cohort will include a fellow based at the nonprofit digital library, the Internet Archive (CLIR 2015).

With these disciplinary and institutional expansions have come several name changes for CLIR's postdoctoral fellowships. The fellowships currently known as the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowships in Academic Libraries are the latest iteration of the original postdoctoral fellowship offered through CLIR, the Postdoctoral Fellowship in Scholarly (and) Information Resources (2004–2007). Other name changes have occurred as well. Following the merger of CLIR and the Digital Library Federation (DLF) in 2009 and an environmental scan and research data management needs assessment funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation in 2012,⁴ a series of joint CLIR/DLF Postdoctoral Fellowships in Data Curation for the Sciences and Social Sciences were launched in the fall of 2012; these were offered in addition to the continuing Postdoctoral Fellowship in Academic Libraries. Additional funding from the Mellon Foundation allowed for the establishment, in 2013, of five fully funded, two-year CLIR/DLF Postdoctoral Fellowships in Data Curation for Medieval Studies, which were offered in addition to the already established Fellowships in Academic Libraries and Data Curation for the Sciences and Social Sciences. In the following year, 2014, the Mellon Foundation enabled the creation of five additional, fully funded CLIR/DLF Fellowships in Data Curation for Early Modern Studies. Beginning in the fall of 2015, five fully funded fellows, supported by a grant from the Mellon Foundation, will take up CLIR/DLF Fellowships in Data Curation for Visual Studies, while numerous Postdoctoral Fellowships in Academic Libraries and Data Curation for the Sciences and Social Sciences will again be offered.

From the first (2004) postdoctoral fellowship cohort of 11 fellows placed at 10 institutions, the number of CLIR postdoctoral fellows and host institutions has varied from year to year; steady growth has been most evident since 2011, largely because of the creation of the suite of data curation fellowships described earlier. To date, the greatest number of fellows hosted at a single institution from within the same cohort is four (at McMaster University in 2011). The largest number of host institutions in a given year stands at 23; these are the

4 Published as *The Problem of Data* (Jahnke, Asher, and Keralis 2012).

institutions currently hosting the 27 fellows of the 2014 cohort. Although not all host institutions continue to host fellows every year, some early adopters of the program have hosted several fellows throughout the program's first decade (e.g., Bryn Mawr College: 5 fellows; Lehigh University: 7 fellows; Johns Hopkins University: 8 fellows; University of California, Los Angeles [UCLA]: 13 fellows). Others have either sporadically hosted fellows throughout the years, hosted just one fellow at a time when there was a particular need or interest, or are current hosts that may yet welcome additional fellows in the future.⁵

The institutions offering CLIR postdoctoral fellowships include those approached by CLIR at the outset of the program (Brunner 2010), as well as others that have approached CLIR over the years. Once an institution becomes a CLIR postdoctoral fellowship host, there is an ongoing dialog between CLIR and the host, particularly as CLIR provides educational support for both new and continuing fellows. (The salaries of those awarded the Postdoctoral Fellowship in Academic Libraries—as well as some parts of the Data Curation fellowships—are funded by the host institutions themselves, rather than by CLIR or its funding agencies.) This educational support takes the form of a one- to two-week orientation “bootcamp” held at Bryn Mawr College at the start of the fellowship,⁶ monthly online synchronous sessions featuring guest speakers and updates from fellows, and a winter seminar that has been held at various venues over the years, including the 2013 Coalition for Networked Information (CNI) winter membership meeting and the 2014 DLF Forum (Brunner 2010; CLIR 2015; Henry and Smith 2013).

The parameters within which host institutions offer their fellowship positions are outlined on the CLIR website (CLIR 2015), and the application process for prospective fellows in the first years of the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program has been summarized by Brunner (2010). Beginning in 2009, to better align with the academic hiring calendar and to adjust to the ever increasing number of fellowships and applicants, CLIR adopted an application process reminiscent of the Fulbright Fellowship model, in which CLIR staff and past or current fellows first evaluate candidates' qualifications and then make candidates' applications, including preliminary reports generated by CLIR, available to host institutions for review. Hosts then typically conduct their own interviews before selecting their preferred fellow(s) and making an offer.

5 Additional statistics on the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program are presented in an infographic available at <http://www.clir.org/fellowships/postdoc>.

6 For more on the pedagogy of the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program, see Coats and Shore, “Postdoctoral Pedagogy” in this volume; for an overview of the content and nature of the bootcamp in its present form, see CLIR postdoctoral fellow Jessica Otis' Storify chronicle of the 2014 orientation at Bryn Mawr College.

Critiques and Resistance

The CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program has not been without its detractors over the years. However, critiques of the program tend to revolve around one particular misconception about the program: the erroneous belief that the CLIR postdoctoral fellowship is a “fast-track entrance to coveted positions in academic libraries without the need for the traditional LIS [library and information science] education and resulting degree from an accredited program” (Bell 2006). Unfounded though it is,⁷ this critique appeared at the very outset of the program, even before the first cohort of fellows had been selected (Berry 2003). Questions surrounding the necessity and ultimate goals of the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program, as well as larger questions (e.g., whether candidates with subject doctorates but without library degrees could, or should, find a place within the twenty-first century academic library) persisted for several years after the first CLIR cohort took up their fellowships in 2004, with librarians, library administrators, and numerous CLIR fellows engaging in vigorous discussion.⁸ The debate largely disappeared from the literature around 2006, most likely because, as Rentfrow (2007) noted, more and more CLIR postdoctoral fellows were by then completing their fellowships and going out into the professional world, effectively forming the program’s proof of concept and thereby quelling many of its detractors.

A second round of critiques directed at the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program began in April 2011, immediately following a lecture delivered at The Pennsylvania State University by Jeffrey Trzeciak, then university librarian at McMaster University. In his lecture, entitled “Transforming Traditional Organizations,”⁹ Trzeciak made a case for hiring PhDs to fill positions previously held by librarians with the traditional MLIS (Ciszek 2011). Dubbed “Trzeciak-gate” (Bell 2011) or “McMastergate” (Dupuis 2011), the lecture set off a firestorm on social media and brought past anxiety about the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program back to the surface. By that time, the program was well established at the McMaster University Library (Trzeciak, Maclachlan, and Shenker 2011), but it had not,

7 The fellowship was explicitly announced as a one- to two-year fellowship open to all recent PhDs in the humanities—including, but not limited to, those already holding an information studies degree (as at least one fellow from the first cohort did)—with the aim of fostering “a new kind of scholarly information professional” (CLIR 2003). From the beginning, CLIR staff took no position as to where fellows might find employment at the conclusion of their fellowships, suspecting that some might take up hybrid positions based in both academic departments and university libraries (Marcum 2012); as the years went on, it became clear that fellows would go on work in all manner of academic and alt-ac positions, both within and outside the library (Brunner 2010; Marcum 2012). A complete list of all current and previous fellows and their host institutions is available at <http://www.clir.org/fellowships/postdoc/fellowsupdate>.

8 See, for example, Bell 2006; French et al. 2005; Neal 2006.

9 Although video of the presentation is no longer available on the Penn State Libraries website, an abstract of the lecture may be found at the Libraries Colloquia Committee web page at <https://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/groups/colloquia.html>, and much discussion of and reaction to the lecture remains readily available online (see, e.g., Bell 2011).

it should be noted, proven to be a fast track to academic librarianship nor a solution to libraries' long-term staffing needs. Particularly when bloggers or other commenters misstated or decontextualized Trzeciak's prediction that future McMaster Library staff were more likely to have PhDs, come from an information technology (IT) background, or have skills we haven't even thought of than to be traditionally trained librarians and paraprofessionals¹⁰—that is, when Trzeciak's prediction was presented as if he were advocating for a staff full of CLIR fellows, rather than outlining the likely skill set of future long-term hires—the CLIR fellowship once again became a lightning rod for a host of anxieties relating to the future of academic librarianship.¹¹

Although the misconception continues to crop up in the occasional publication (e.g., Webb 2012, 116–120, 122–124), the resistance—or at the least, isolation—reported by early fellows in the program appears to exist no longer; the more recent fellows tend to be quickly integrated into new or existing collaborative endeavors at the start of their fellowships (Williford 2013). This rapid integration is again likely the result of host institutions' recognition, some 11 years on, of the value of a CLIR postdoctoral fellow. The 130 past and current fellows, and their varied successful projects, are too numerous to delineate here,¹² but they stand as testament to what can be accomplished by a well supported recent PhD during a limited-term fellowship in an academic library. Alumni of the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program, as befitting their diverse academic training and skill sets, have moved on to a wide array of positions in libraries and IT organizations, academic departments, government, law, and independent consulting all around the world. Of the 71 former CLIR postdoctoral fellows, only 18 are currently employed by the institution that sponsored their fellowship; of those 18, many are based in new or different departments than the one in which they originally held their fellowship. And while some former fellows who did not previously hold library science degrees have chosen to pursue one, all fellowship alumni no doubt continue to use the broad range of skills that they acquired during their fellowships in their post-fellowship endeavors.

10 The relevant slide from Trzeciak's lecture is available at Rogers' 2011 blog post, "This Is Not the Future of Librarianship."

11 For a balanced response to both the Trzeciak lecture and the ensuing firestorm, see, e.g., "Laika," *A Library without Librarians? The Opinion of a PhD-Librarian on the Jeffrey Trzeciak Controversy* (Laika 2011).

12 A selection of fellows' projects is available at <http://www.clir.org/fellowships/postdoc/projsandpubs>.

Contributions, Collaboration, Collegium: The CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program in Its Second Decade

Perhaps the best way to describe the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program in its current state is as a *collegium*, a group of diversely trained, deeply engaged, and dedicated scholars working together to solve the issues facing academic libraries today. CLIR fellows may be based at a variety of host institutions throughout the United States and Canada, but their orientation seminar, monthly synchronous sessions, and winter meeting create a cohesion that is seldom found among fellows or alumni of other, similar postdoctoral fellowships, particularly those in the humanities. Furthermore, CLIR fellows are dedicated to enhancing library collections and services by applying their specialized skills to the needs of their host institutions, and this like-mindedness of purpose has proven to be a bonding agent for many current and former fellows, even as the program has expanded beyond humanists to include those in all fields of study and many diverse types of fellowships. This cohesion, fostered so fervently by CLIR, drives the continued expansion of the program as it enters its twelfth year.

Participation in the collegium that is the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program need not end when the fellowship ends. Fellows who seek continued engagement with CLIR and the postdoctoral fellowship community at large find many outlets for their talents. From serving as pedagogical consultants at the annual orientation seminar to speaking to fellows at their monthly synchronous sessions, from contributing to CLIR's "Re:Thinking" blog to collaborating on CLIR publications such as this essay collection, and from engaging in informal mentorship via e-mail and social media to cooperating on formal panels, presentations, and research projects, the possibilities for meaningful engagement with CLIR and with one another are numerous and ongoing. As a result, the program is much more than a one- or two-year experience; rather, it is a college of scholars offering sustained engagement with critical issues well beyond the fellowship years.

The output of CLIR postdoctoral fellows is further testament to the program's longevity and success. In addition to their contributions to an enormous range of research library services, projects, and products, CLIR fellows past and present have authored or coauthored numerous publications about their fellowships (e.g., Kouper 2013; Kouper, Akers, and Lavin 2013), as well as on topics of interest to the greater academic library community and within their areas of specialty.¹³ Principal among the current topics of conversation at CLIR is collaboration, which is not only an integral facet of a successful postdoctoral fellowship, but also a pervasive component of contemporary academic engagement both within and outside of the library (Henry and Smith 2013; Marcum 2012; Waraksa 2014; see

13 See above, n. 11.

also the essay by Rose-Steel et al. in this volume). It is this essential feature of the twenty-first century information landscape that CLIR fellows embody, and the collegium that is the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship will doubtless continue to model—and improve upon—its by now well established tradition of scholarly collaboration as it moves into its second decade.

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