The CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship 10th Anniversary Survey

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The development and implementation of the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) Postdoctoral Fellowship Program 10-year survey illustrates one of the great strengths of the program—bringing together people with varying academic skills and backgrounds in nontraditional settings to foster conversation and idea building. The original concept was to gather the fellows' reflections on their experiences as CLIR postdoctoral fellows in the program's first decade in order to celebrate the successes, identify the challenges, and look ahead. In addition, the survey was to explore the role of the CLIR fellowship in the fellows' personal and professional development. The creators of the survey hoped for a better understanding of how fellows' experiences were influenced by their participation in three areas: CLIR's networking opportunities, CLIR's educational programs, and fellows' placements as researchers working in academic library settings.

Survey Construction and Distribution

Past and current CLIR postdoctoral fellows were invited to participate in the online survey, distributed via e-mail in late October 2013; a reminder was sent in December 2013. The survey was open for three months, closing in January 2014. After being asked for personal information, such as the cohort year of fellowship and host institution, respondents answered a series of short-answer and open-ended questions that encouraged them to reflect on the challenges and benefits of their fellowships, the relative value of various aspects of the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program, the skills they learned during their fellowship, and their accomplishments during their tenure.

Survey Results

The survey was completed by 51 of the 89 past and then current fellows, for a response rate of 57 percent. The results of the survey reflected four major themes: the value of the CLIR postdoctoral fellowship to subsequent positions, the overall value of the CLIR postdoctoral fellowship, the challenges faced by CLIR fellows, and the value of various components of the fellowship.

Value of the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship to Subsequent Positions. Of respondents who have completed their fellowships and moved on to other positions, 83 percent stated that they found their CLIR fellowship either completely or mostly relevant to their subsequent positions. One fellow explained:

> The CLIR fellowship has been critical to my professional development. Although [it] was initially designed to match those with PhDs to library positions, I've found that it also did a great job of preparing me to be a faculty member. One important way that it does this is by raising my awareness of libraries, their needs, and their roles on campus. . . . The fellowship also positioned me to understand how the ecosystem of scholarly communications functions, including scholars, libraries, administrators, museums, and funding agencies; junior faculty rarely get glimpses into this in the way I did as a postdoctoral fellow.

Conversely, 17 percent of respondents classified their fellowships as somewhat or minimally relevant to subsequent positions. A member of an early CLIR cohort responded: "I hope it's changed since I did it. I feel it did little for my career overall."

Overall Value of the CLIR Fellowship. More generally, 90 percent of respondents ranked the value of their fellowship as "high" or "very high," while 10 percent rated the value as neutral; no respondents rated it as "low" or "very low." Fellows interpreted "value" differently; one respondent found value in the freedom and confidence gained through the work:

> Through my specific job . . . and my broader engagement with CLIR, I feel I am in touch with a broader spectrum of people. Being able to talk to archaeologists, chemists, philosophers, librarians, computer scientists—to name but a few—allows me to think about my research in new ways and to explore avenues of investigation I could never have dreamed up in isolation. There is a culture of "yes" in CLIR and in the team I'm working with . . . which breeds confidence: I am encouraged to try things, to attend a variety of meetings and symposia, and I am given easy access to the resources I need—this gives me the sense that I can achieve my goals.

Similarly, another fellow specified both the acquisition of new knowledge and the opportunity to enhance the interpersonal skills that are vital to success in almost any career:

> The CLIR fellowship has given me the opportunity to gain new knowledge about data curation theory and data curation in conjunction with the library and the campus settings, especially what it takes to help develop a new service. It has also helped me to meet talented people in the library and data world and build new relationships. The past CLIR fellows have been very helpful in giving me feedback on their own career experiences as they have readily answered my e-mails. I have learned many things about the library . . . and the various roles of librarians. At a personal level I've learned a lot about working with and observing people and the skills that are required to thrive and do well in this environment.

Challenges Faced by CLIR Fellows. Although most respondents valued their fellowships and found them relevant to subsequent positions, they also faced a number of challenges (figure 1). The most common were balancing and understanding time expectations (57 percent) and adjusting to a new work environment and culture (49 percent). Regarding the challenge of allocating time, one fellow explained:

> Getting used to balancing my time has been difficult. I've been given a lot of freedom to design how I want to work, which on the whole is wonderful, but does leave me anxious as to whether I'm doing the right thing.
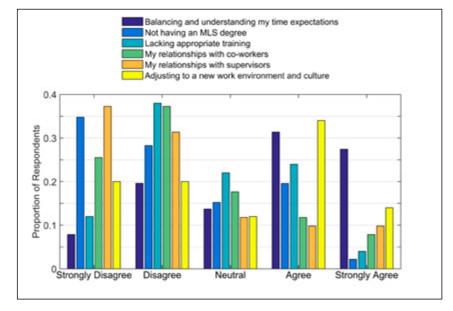

Fig. 1: Histogram of fellow agreement for various potential challenges for the CLIR postdoctoral fellows. Results reflect responses to the prompt: "As a CLIR fellow, I found the following aspects challenging."

Another fellow identified similar uncertainties, specifically in relation to assigned projects and time management: "Fellowship projects were not determined from the start but TBD [to be determined] as the fellowship progressed, making it difficult to know what was expected and how to arrange my time."

Regarding the culture shift inherent in the fellowship, one respondent noted:

> The culture and operations of the library were very different from those I had experienced during my academic research tenure. It took me a long time to understand the internal and external operations of the library.

Yet another fellow "remember[s] being flummoxed by the idea [of] show[ing] up for regular hours and attend[ing] meetings. Though . . . , in retrospect, those weren't all that challenging to overcome."

Approximately 30 percent of respondents found a lack of training to be a challenge:

> With regards to training, while I [didn't] feel at a disadvantage, I did feel I wanted to know more in order to be able to communicate effectively in the many different settings I find myself. Therefore, I've taken it upon myself in my spare time to learn some things about coding and computer science.

Additionally, 22 percent of those who responded found their relationships with supervisors to present a challenge. On the other hand, the survey revealed that not having a master's degree in library science (16 percent) and managing relationships with co-workers (19 percent) were less common challenges among fellows.

In the process of facing these challenges, CLIR postdoctoral fellows acquired a variety of new skills and experiences and attained greater knowledge of library-related issues. Respondents noted the many opportunities for collaboration in their fellowships, particularly with librarians and other staff members. One fellow reported an improved "ability to work with others—after a disciplinary PhD that was independent work—and to negotiate challenging workplace politics and personalities." Another respondent similarly found the shift in perspective, from individual researcher to team member, to be one of the most important take-aways from CLIR: "I think I have become a better researcher, one willing to collaborate with people outside of my discipline."

Value and Benefits of the Fellowship Components. Overall, the majority of respondents perceived all aspects of the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program to be of "high" or "very high" value (figure 2). Most notably, over 70 percent of all responses assigned a "very high" value to the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program as a whole,
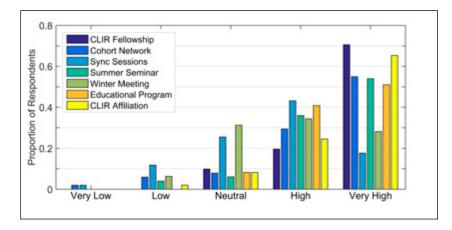
Fig. 2: Histogram of fellows' perceived value of various components of the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program. Results reflect responses to the prompt: "Evaluate the following aspects of the CLIR fellowship."

while over 90 percent perceived the value to be above "neutral." Elements such as the CLIR cohort network, educational program, and affiliation were also rated exceptionally high.

The perceived high value of the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program is supported by the many benefits that past and current fellows reported. Indeed, collaboration was one of the most commonly mentioned benefits of the fellowship, with one respondent noting:

> Overall, the experience renewed for me the feeling that collaborative work is important and rewarding, and I was grateful for the chance to be a small part of a crucial conversation about the future of academic libraries.

Another respondent discussed the wide range of situations in which fellows could make use of the collaborative spirit fostered within the fellowship:

> The connections that I have made both during and since my CLIR postdoctoral fellowship have deeply affected my work and research in the most positive way. Not only have I been almost continuously engaged in rich, rigorous, and enriching collaborative research projects, consulting teams, and other projects . . . , but I have been able to bring what I have learned from working within and around research libraries to my students in the classroom.

Likewise, respondents indicated that they valued the networking opportunities that accompanied their fellowships. These opportunities arise within CLIR cohorts ("my cohort network was valuable during the term of my fellowship, but it is the larger network of fellows and CLIR associates that is valuable to me now"); within the larger CLIR network ("being part of the CLIR network has resulted

in numerous, rewarding, collaborative consulting endeavors with CLIR staff and former fellows"); and beyond the confines of CLIR with the many librarians, technologists, researchers, and faculty members that fellows encounter through their work ("I believe I have become better at networking and forming working relationships with others in my field on account of the [number] of conferences and meetings I attend"). These responses make it clear that CLIR postdoctoral fellowships offer opportunities for personal and professional development to fellows who make the switch from academic to library career paths, as well as to those who ultimately return to academic positions.

In addition to collaboration and networking, many fellows commented on the wide range of tangible hardware- and software-related skills that they developed as part of their fellowships. These digital skills took many forms; for example, several respondents mentioned their engagement with metadata, in the form of advising projects and training graduate students in standards and input. Several respondents appreciated learning the skills necessary to manage and curate data, while others mentioned learning the skills for digital project management and an awareness of the wider infrastructural concerns for digital scholarship. One respondent discussed the importance of experiences with data curation:

> In my doctorate experience, I found myself in a position where I encountered incredible resistance to best practices in large-scale data management. My experiences with CLIR, and my interaction with the CLIR fellows, have reaffirmed my beliefs on data management and have inspired me to continue to pursue data management and curation efforts in my research and current library position.

Other fellows specified the importance of learning technologies such as TEI and XML encoding basics, SQL databases, LibGuides, Python, and digitization of audio and text. One enthusiastic respondent proudly exclaimed, "I've also had to learn to use a Mac!!!" In short, CLIR postdoctoral fellowships have afforded fellows opportunities both to develop stronger collaborative and networking strategies and to enhance their digital repertoires.

Although fellows reported developing broadly used skills such as networking, collaboration, and a range of technical abilities, they also gained a substantial amount of library-specific knowledge. One fellow summed this up by writing, "I developed an understanding of the challenges facing the academic library community in terms of budget, digitization, and gaps in education."

Fellows appreciated the firsthand knowledge that they gained about the inner workings of the library, including an awareness of library language, terms, and concepts; the roles of librarians; library budgets; and the history and culture of libraries. One fellow responded:

> I had the chance to talk to librarians from other departments to learn the kind of work they do and their role in the library system—this was one of the most exciting things to do. I have talked to conservation and preservation librarians, science librarians, and a special collections librarian. I also joined various library tours to learn about the technical aspects that happen in other areas of the library.

Fellows also commented on their newfound appreciation for archives, specifically the ways that the knowledge of archive management and the preservation of archival material could benefit their work. They appreciated the ability to interact with rare materials and to learn the processes of the special collections reading room. Other fellows noted their growth in the field of content management, as they learned about digital content management, spatial collection methods, cataloging, referencing, preservation, and exhibit preparation.

The most common response was that fellows gained a better understanding of the role of the librarians, followed by a greater understanding of digital content management and cataloging. One fellow explained:

> I gained a real awareness of libraries and a respect for the work librarians do. This has enriched my relationships with librarians and technology professionals, made me more earnest about developing these relationships, and conscious of how I advertise the benefits of libraries to my students.

Fellows also seemed to appreciate learning a more modern technique of digitizing data, and they claim to have a deeper understanding of the role of librarians and libraries in general; one respondent concluded, "I now see the production of knowledge from a completely different, higher-level view. I understand more of the 'big picture' of how information is created and disseminated."

Moving Forward from the Results

The survey allowed for both an assessment of the value of specific components of the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program and a reflection on the ways in which the experience has benefited the fellows personally and professionally. It quickly became apparent that there had been dozens of collaborative efforts among past fellows on projects outside the confines of CLIR. Although not all responses were positive, the overall tone indicated a perception of the experience as beneficial. As put by one fellow:

> Personally, CLIR leaders and fellows have been much more supportive and actively helpful than my graduate school mentors, in terms of understanding the stresses of the job market, taking on new roles, and the personal balancing act. Also, in terms of forging an "alt ac" identity.

Another fellow specified the variety of opportunities offered by a CLIR postdoctoral fellowship:

> Professionally, it has given me a whole new career that absorbs many of [my] academic skills and interests, plus new perspectives and options. Library-land is not the perfect place for me, but I do have work, opportunities, and abilities that are much more relevant to the real world and problems I care about than I probably would have had as a career academic.

The results of this survey will be used to help the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program evolve to meet the needs of both fellows and host institutions. More specifically, CLIR will focus on improving communication between CLIR and host institutions, and on clarifying expectations and potential future career paths for the fellows. It is expected that these survey results will play an integral role in the evolution of the CLIR Postdoctoral Fellowship Program in its second decade.