

NLM fellow established passion for health sciences librarianship

By Jordan Stidham



Shannon Sheridan applied to the National Library of Medicine (NLM) Associate Fellowship Program because she knew the experience with NLM could help her develop as a health sciences librarian.

These days, the roles of libraries and librarians are changing, and their importance is growing as more and more people seek help in finding valid information.

Shannon Sheridan graduated with a bachelor's degree in liberal arts from Lycoming College in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. The idea to pursue an advanced degree in librarianship came after she happened upon an advertisement for library science in a graduate school program guide.

Intrigued, Sheridan did some research and, after a discussion with the director of her school's library, she decided to pursue a master's degree in library and information science at the University of Pittsburgh.

Sheridan had a strong desire to become a health sciences librarian, but feared she would not be considered without a robust science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) background.

To broaden her experiences while specializing in academic libraries, Sheridan began a volunteer internship in the health sciences library at St. Clair Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. During this internship, she learned about the National Library of Medicine (NLM) Associate Fellowship Program.

The NLM Associate Fellowship Program is designed to provide a broad foundation in health sciences information services and to prepare librarians for future leadership roles in health sciences libraries and in health services research.

As a participant in the program, Sheridan was assigned to NLM in Bethesda, Maryland.

“My first year on the National Institute of Health (NIH) campus at NLM was an excellent opportunity to explore research data management, in addition to other areas of interest,” Sheridan said.

Under the guidance of her mentor, program coordinator Kathel Dunn, Ph.D., Sheridan contributed research to several projects during the first year of her fellowship. One project consisted of being the sole adapter of NLM health content for 131 topics into an artificial intelligence (AI) environment in a collaboration to implement an innovative AI prototype. Sheridan’s research on the AI prototype may eventually allow people to access health information in more efficient ways.

Sheridan served as a coinvestigator on a data analysis project that was the first of its kind. Her research compared medical subject headings (MeSH) term trends in PubMed literature and Medicaid prescription data. MeSH is the NLM-controlled vocabulary thesaurus used for indexing articles for PubMed.

During the second year of Sheridan’s fellowship, her projects shifted to being more academic in nature when she moved to Drexel University Libraries. Sheridan was involved in teaching instruction sessions on evidence-based medicine, research data management and database searching. She led a course redesign, which made information attainable on a wider scale. The project involved taking a workshop that had been taught face-to-face and converting it to online modules.

Visits to libraries were Sheridan’s favorite part of the program because she benefited in two ways. First, she gained a much broader view of the profession by talking to many librarians and information professionals working in different specialties. Second, no two libraries she visited were the same; each had different functions, served different communities and had different processes for handling day-to-day operations.

“Seeing such a vast scope so early in my career reminded me of the importance of staying flexible and adaptable, and that there can be a few right ways to do something,” Sheridan said.

Sheridan’s involvement in the NLM program will undoubtedly serve her as she progresses in her career.

“Researching in a health sciences library combined everything I enjoyed about a humanities library role with the additional benefit of feeling like I might be making someone’s life a little bit better. This experience allowed me to explore a new career path, make connections and grow as a health sciences librarian and leader. I would do it again in a heartbeat,” Sheridan said.

Ultimately, Sheridan envisions herself with a full-time position in an academic health sciences library and eventually moving into a leadership role.

The NLM program is funded by NIH and administered through the U.S. Department of Energy’s (DOE) Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education (ORISE). ORISE is managed for DOE by ORAU.