

Exploring a Career as an NIH Informationist: Interviews with the National Institutes of Health Librarians

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Introduction

“Alternative Spring Break”

- The Graduate School of Library and Information Science sponsors the Alternative Spring Break program, which allows students to work in professional settings with mentor librarians for one week in March.
- This poster presents insights gleaned from my “alternative spring break” experience at the NIH Library in March 2009, and it illustrates results from my interviews with thirteen of the fifteen Informationists.

Informationists

- An NIH Informationist or information specialist in context is a medical librarian who specializes in biomedical, clinical, or bioinformatics research areas.
- NIH Informationists are “embedded” librarians who work directly with laboratory or clinical research teams, attend weekly meetings with their research groups, and are considered integrated members of the research/clinical team.



NIH Library

Acknowledgments

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Method

Rationale

- Grounded theory methodology is the research approach best suited for analysis of data for this poster.
- This method of data analysis from qualitative interviews with the Informationists posits few *a priori* assumptions or hypotheses and enables extraction of main concepts and themes.
- Interviewees: Thirteen NIH Informationists out of Fifteen. One Informationist was out of town and another was sick. The director of the NIH Library is not listed in the Informationist Specialty Area chart below.
- Interviews with each NIH Library Informationist ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. Most interviews were tape recorded.
- The specialty areas and degrees of the Informationists I interviewed are listed below. I did not include names.
- Results from my interview with the NIH Library director, Suzanne Grefsheim, are depicted in the chart: NIH Informationist Program: Future Goals.

Informationist Specialty Areas

- Genetics and bioinformatics research. PhD in biochemistry
- Laboratory of Comparative Carcinogenesis; Drug Information Service in the Clinical Center. BS Chemistry
- Endocrinology services of the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development; National Institutes of Kidney and Digestive Diseases; Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, Indian Health Services. MLIS
- Intellectual property, chemistry, biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, engineering, competitive intelligence and technology transfer resources. BS Chemistry
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism; Office of the Clinical Director, National Institute on Mental Health; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. MLIS
- Preparedness and Response. MLIS/MPH
- National Cancer Institute, Food and Drug Administration, nutrition research. MLIS/PhD in nutritional biochemistry
- clinical research teams. MLIS
- neuroscience and psychology research. PhD in biopsychology. MLIS
- National Eye Institute and the Clinical Center’s tracheotomy care team. MLIS/MA English
- Clinical Pain & Palliative Care Consult Service, Clinical and Translational Research. MLIS
- Center for the Application of Research Discoveries; Office of the Secretary. MLS
- Extramural Program, Intramural Program, HHS/Administration for Child and Families, and Office of Science Policy. MLS

Interview questions:

RQ1: What type of Informationist role do you perform at NIH?

RQ2: What barriers do you encounter in becoming accepted into groups?

RQ3: How do you entice scientists to “buy in” to your services?

RQ4: How do you see your Informationist role evolving in the next few years?

RQ5: Advice to someone just starting out on this career path?

Results

Informationists within the NIH library perform different roles, work with a variety of people in a variety of settings, and encounter similar barriers. Key concepts arising from the interviews are grouped together and are depicted in the table.

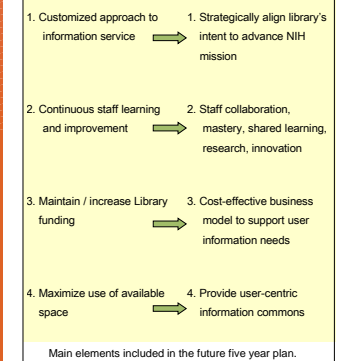
Interview Questions	Representative Quotations from Informationist Interviews	Examples of Informationist Activities
What type of Informationist role do you perform at NIH?	<p>“I do a lot of on-the-fly searching on my clinical rounds. I can look things up because I always take my tablet with me.”</p> <p>“My primary role is as an expert searcher.”</p> <p>“I do an annual review of all protocols to uncover any increase of adverse events.”</p> <p>“Often I write part of the article . . . and I do research for the systematic reviews.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attend weekly clinical sit-down rounds and patient rounds Offer editing help in library writing center Interview scientists to find out information needs [I do] 60-70 protocol reviews every year for the hematology branch
What barriers do you encounter in becoming accepted into groups?	<p>“. . . convincing scientists to look beyond first 10 results . . . and Google. People who have grown up with that are a little more hard to convince.”</p> <p>“It takes a while to establish that relationship, and I’m pretty introverted so it takes me longer to develop those relationships.”</p> <p>“Occasionally I encounter the ‘do you get anything out of doing this?’ attitude.”</p> <p>“They [scientists] all think they can do it themselves i.e. get articles; they think they can search PubMed, and they can’t, always.”</p> <p>“They’re [the scientists] trained to search the literature, and they [jokingly] even write the literature . . . so this is a primary barrier to gaining acceptance.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customize search instruction in labs Take advantage of seminars and rounds . . . when we leave and return to the library it’s easy for them to forget about us Bring team a cleaned up set of the most important results Offer library database searching courses
How do you entice scientists to “buy in” to your services?	<p>“We save them time.”</p> <p>“Educate people about what they don’t know they don’t know.”</p> <p>“. . . provide customized services”</p> <p>“You don’t have time to do the literature searches, and I can do it for you.”</p> <p>“Just being there . . . people can drop in and ask questions.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research software packages that a lab is considering purchasing Help new fellows with database/bibliographic expertise Write part of the scientific articles/lit reviews Subject knowledge Office hours at night for the intramural bench scientists research program
How do you see your Informationist role evolving in the next few years?	<p>“Expect to be nimble; expect to change the way you do the job”</p> <p>“Enroll in more science classes for my own self-confidence and to be able to communicate [with the scientists].”</p> <p>“. . . will take on more research groups”</p> <p>“technological expertise-- ‘Keeping my skills up ahead of theirs. . .and being aware of new programs like bibliographic software packages”</p> <p>“I feel I need to take a lot more science classes for my own feeling of confidence and also for the users because NIH is very title driven.”</p> <p>“Identify the biggest numbers—grants, publications, researchers—and tie our priority markets into NIH’s strategic plan. We need to serve the people who support the NIH deliverables. Don’t confuse the general market with the target market.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mastering Quosa Take a lab course in stem cell research Work on being embedded in mental health groups Give more papers and presentations at conferences in subject areas such as neuroscience, ophthalmology, etc. NIH library brought a biostatistics professor in from George Washington teach 2 semesters to the Informationists Conduct user surveys and collect library and document use studies to find out who/where the target markets are at NIH.
Advice to someone just starting out on this career path?	<p>“Take advanced searching, anatomy, and medical terminology”</p> <p>“Value yourself and value the skills that you have. Don’t sell yourself short because you have a lot to offer.”</p> <p>“Keep a positive attitude no matter what happens because when you’re new it’s easy to get frustrated”</p> <p>“Join professional societies beyond library groups”</p> <p>“Network”</p>	

NIH Informationist Program: Services

Broad Services	Specialized Services	Clinical	Outreach
Chemists – patents & databases Biochemists – genetics/ bioinformatics	Social Science, Psychology, Neuroscience, Nursing, Ophthalmology	Cardiac, Hematology, Bone marrow, Pain & Palliative Care Consult Service	Office of the Secretary, Public Health Policy, Disaster Control, Native American Health

NIH intramural service areas. The right column presents some example areas

NIH Informationist Program: Future Goals



Conclusion

Viewers will understand better the work of an NIH Informationist and the various roles an NIH Informationist may perform. My experience at NIH helped me realize that Informationists share many similarities with academic health science liaisons while simultaneously embracing a business model that takes advantage of target markets, clients, and a strategic plan.