AAHSL Leadership Scholarship Report

Reflections on the Harvard Leadership Institute for Academic Librarians (LIAL), 2026

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I attended the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Leadership Institute for Academic Librarians (LIAL, 2026) on July 12–17, with generous support from the AAHSL Leadership Scholarship. Before I describe what the week meant to me, I want to say simply: Thank you! As a solo medical librarian, opportunities to step away from daily library operations and think deliberately about my leadership are rare. This was the best professional development I have experienced.

The institute was led by Dr. Alex Hodges, Educational Chair, and his outstanding team, along with twelve faculty members. The cohort made the week's experience even richer, as colleagues from four countries joined, including nearly 30 from the United States, representing a wide range of geographies, institution types, and career stages. This gave every case study and discussion far more texture than a single-region group could have offered.

Preparation began before we arrived. Each of us wrote a case study in advance, submitted it through Canvas, and had it graded before the training. Each day also included assigned readings. I finished mine before the workshop began, which let me focus on discussion rather than reading cases. That preparation paid off most in my small group, which met over four days and included a Health Science and Biosciences Librarian, an Access Services Department Head, a Deputy Library Director, a Copyright Librarian, a Health Science Librarian, and me (Medical Librarian). We worked through each other's case studies in detail, comparing how the same leadership tensions played out across a hospital library, an academic access services department, and a small college. By the end of the week, we had grown close, and we have already agreed to keep networking.

The week opened with a persona exercise. Billy Tringali's "Leading with Adventure" exercise asked us to identify our role in the party. I came out as an Inspiring Bard: someone who leads through vision and enthusiasm, needs to be celebrated publicly, and thrives working alongside others rather than in isolation. Understanding how I am wired and how my colleagues are wired differently became the thread running through the rest of the program.

That thread became most tangible in Rachael Lowell's SHIFT sessions. My SHIFT Snapshot identified “Impact” as my dominant strength. I lead by connecting day-to-day work to a larger purpose, clarifying goals, and measuring progress. I recognize this strength from a decade spent building the case, one usage metric and literature search at a time, for our library’s contributions to patient care. The SHIFT framework also revealed the downside of my strengths. When I focus too tightly on execution, I can fall out of step with an evolving strategy or move faster than others can follow. Pairing that with “Fluidity,” I learned that my opportunity is to give people an anchor, a few clear priorities, when everything else feels like it is shifting.

Several tools stood out during the training. The “logic model” exercise, introduced during Dr. Hodges' session on moral injury, gave me a disciplined way to turn a "clear chart" into a decision-making tool for justifying a resource or for showing hospital leadership the reasoning behind a recommendation. Evan Simpson and Dr. Ken Kimura's work on “stakeholder disruption,” paired with Jessica Vanderhoff's session on “segmentation,” sharpened something I had done informally for years: mapping the constellation of physicians, nurses, residents, students, and community members served by the library and asking what each group actually needs. Dr. James Honan's case introduced me to "smart power," which blends hard and soft power moment by moment, a precise way to think about influence for a department of one.

Dr. Francesca Purcell's session, "Holding Tension, Making Change: Navigating Agency, Ambivalence, and Self-Care in the Wilson College Case," is one that I keep returning to. The case followed a division head trying to solve a staffing problem through faculty governance, watching reasonable proposals fail and absorbing a hallway confrontation that neither party handled well. What stayed with me was the reminder that leading change within a system I do not fully control; requires holding agency and ambivalence at once. I can push for a proposal in good faith and still not control whether it is accepted. Staying regulated in confrontation matters as much as the argument itself. I have no faculty committee, but I do have physicians and administrators whose buy-in I cannot mandate, and this case gave me language for staying grounded when buy-in is slow to come.

Dr. Nicole Cooke's sessions on “culturally responsive leadership and portraiture” left perhaps the deepest impression. They offered me a genuine research method for treating lived experience as evidence, not anecdote. Building our “zine” was unexpectedly one of the most valuable hours of the week. I could see recreating a version of it as a staff development exercise at my hospital. Dr. Jerome Offord Jr.'s session on “burnout” reminded me that prioritizing care for myself is a precondition for leading well, not separate from it.

Toward the end of the program, a group of us visited Widener Library, Harvard's main library: one of more than twenty-eight libraries across Harvard University campus. Standing in that

historic, soaring space reminded me of what libraries can be at their best. On the last day of training, our cohort shared takeaways and a few phrases that have stayed with me: "Culture eats strategy for breakfast," "Leadership is knowing when to say no," and "You are not alone... there are ~60 people who are dealing with it too." These phrases captured why gathering with peers mattered as much as any session.

The training's greatest impact on me as a library leader is how I now analyze people and projects. I am better equipped to see colleagues' strengths and blind spots, both formally and informally, and to weigh an initiative's requirements, value, and key stakeholders before committing to it. For my ongoing career development, it has prepared me to hold a more holistic view of my operational sphere. This includes the people, systems, and actions required to accomplish a task, as well as the wider constellation of stakeholders and decision effects. For future advancement, I now see two pieces coming together. One is internal: understanding my own strengths and regulating my energy under pressure. The other is external: the case study discipline to sit with a problem that has no easy answer and still move forward with good judgment. This week sharpened my long-term goal of becoming an academic health science library director. I have decided to pursue a doctoral degree in health science, beginning this fall. This will give me advanced leadership training, institutional credibility with medical faculty and administrators, and healthcare domain expertise that a future director’s role will demand.

I left Cambridge with a genuine sense that I am not alone in this work and that the challenges I face at a one-person library are shared, in different forms, by leaders across our field. I am deeply grateful to AAHSL for the scholarship that made this experience possible. I look forward to applying what I learned to my daily work at Penn Medicine, Chester County Hospital.