Clanitra Stewart recently joined the library faculty at the Northern Illinois University College of Law as a Reference and Instructional Services Librarian and Assistant Professor. Clanitra has previously worked for the South Carolina Appleseed Justice Center, where she provided policy advocacy on behalf of low-income communities, and the Georgia Legal Services Program, where she represented indigent clients in a variety of civil cases. She received an MLIS from the School of Library and Information Science at the University of South Carolina in 2013, and a J.D. from the Walter F. George School of Law at Mercer University in 2000. CALL Bulletin Committee member Kara Dunn recently chatted with Clanitra, so we could all get to know her a little better.
KD: Why did you decide to become a lawyer?

CS: I knew early on that I wanted to be a lawyer. My father and mother came from hardworking farming and domestic families, respectively, so it was critical to me that I pursue a profession that would allow me to be of service to low-income and moderate-income families.

KD: Why did you decide to become a law librarian?

CS: After several years of working for nonprofit legal organizations, I began to consider other ways that I could be useful to the public. Law librarianship has long been in my mind as one such method of serving the public. When I was a law student at Mercer University, one of my professors (Patricia Cervenka, currently Professor of Law and Director of the Marquette University Law Library) approached me about working in the law library. Thankfully, I said yes! My time working there opened my eyes to law librarianship as a possible career and as a way to be of service to students, faculty members, and members of the public. I attribute my decision to pursue law librarianship after a career in public interest law directly to the wonderful experiences I had at Mercer’s Law Library.

KD: You have an extensive background in public service. In your opinion, what role do law librarians play in ensuring access to justice for underserved populations?

CS: For me, access to legal information and information literacy go hand-in-hand with access to justice. Accordingly, I have a particular interest in the methods by which law libraries serve pro se library users and other members of the public who are not affiliated with the parent institution. Although law librarians cannot provide legal advice, I believe that we can still play a very important role in helping visitors from underserved populations. Everything from a law library’s visitor and usage policies to the way the library is organized to the types of legal materials available in the library can have an effect on these visitors. Therefore, I think it is incumbent upon us to do as much as possible to make the law library welcoming, inviting, and useful to pro se library users and to other visitors from underserved populations. The failure to do so can have far-reaching detrimental effects to a significant part of a community.

KD: What aspects of your new position are you most excited about, and what aspects do you think will be challenging?
CS: NIU College of Law has such a wonderful and dynamic student body. I am thrilled to be able to teach Basic Legal Research to our first-year students, because legal research is a skill that will serve them well throughout their careers. There may be some information that these students will learn in law school that they will not use on a regular basis after they graduate, but I am certain their legal research knowledge will be in constant use. So being able to teach those skills is one of the most exciting aspects of my position. I am sure there are lots of challenges that go along with teaching law students, but I am excited to try various methods of conveying knowledge and to figure out which methods our students seem to respond to best.

KD: What will you miss about living in South Carolina?

CS: I grew up in South Carolina, so there is always a part of me that will consider it to be “home.” Fortunately, I have met such kind and welcoming students and colleagues at NIU College of Law that I am nowhere near as homesick as I thought I would be. And although South Carolina has some wonderful weather to offer, I find myself excited about experiencing all four seasons of weather and surviving my first Chicagoland winter!

KD: What are you enjoying about living in the Chicagoland area?

CS: DeKalb is so close to Chicago that it offers the best of both worlds: quick access to the city when I want to explore Chicago, and a respite from the “hustle and bustle” the rest of the time. I have not yet had the opportunity to explore a great deal of the Chicago area, but I have already had the opportunity to visit several venues that exemplify the type of cultural and culinary delights that Chicago has to offer. I look forward to further exploration in Chicago.

KD: Why did you decide to join CALL?

CS: CALL offers the opportunity to learn from both novice and veteran law librarians in the Chicagoland area. As a new CALL member, I am excited to learn from the experiences of those members, particularly as those experiences relate to serving library users in the Midwest. Further, I am anxious to take advantage of the myriad professional development and mentorship opportunities CALL offers.

KD: Any advice for new law librarians beginning their careers?

CS: Well, I would say that learning from more experienced law librarians in your workplace and in organizations like CALL is key. There is no need to flail about on your own when there are so many dedicated and knowledgeable colleagues who are more than happy to offer advice and
assistance.

*KD:* What do you enjoy doing outside of work?

*CS:* Pottery is one of my passions. I love getting mud on my hands! I’ve always found the hobby to be quite cathartic and a great stress reliever. Plus, pottery is one of those hobbies where you can have tangible proof of your improvement over time. I have quite a few misshapen bowls and pots from when I first started, but I keep them to remind myself that all worthwhile activities require practice and dedication!

*KD:* Anything else you would like to share?

*CS:* Just that I am so pleased and thankful to be a new part of the law librarian community in the Chicago area. I certainly hope to be able to be of service to my colleagues at NIU College of Law and beyond, as well as to great organizations like CALL.