



The Relationship Between Academic Library Department Experience and Perceptions of Leadership Skill Development Relevant to Academic Library Directorship



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ABSTRACT

Though research into academic library director leadership has established leadership skills and qualities required for success, little research has been done to establish in which library departments library directors were most likely to acquire those skills and qualities. This study surveyed academic library directors at Carnegie-designated Master's granting institutions about their previous academic library positions, and what skills and qualities they perceived to have exercised in those positions. The two research questions addressed by this portion of the research project were: (1) is the perception of library leadership skill and quality development equal across departmental experience? and (2) what are the leadership skills and qualities most commonly perceived to be used in each department? Findings revealed that respondents perceived that there were great opportunities to exercise leadership qualities in previous positions, but few opportunities to develop more empirically measurable leadership skills. In addition, respondents perceived those skill development opportunities to be available only once working in the position of library director or in the administration department of academic libraries.

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership in academic libraries has emerged as a pressing topic in an environment currently dominated by budget difficulties, rapid change, and demands for increased demonstration of value, assessment, and accountability for performance. In particular, as current academic library directors retire and institutions look for qualified successors, planning for the academic library leadership becomes crucial to organizational stability. The concept of grooming leadership and succession planning is not new to the library profession (Bridgland, 1999; Curran, 2003; Metz, 1978). Various institutes, associations, and programs focused on developing librarian leadership exist, but many of these programs depend heavily on self-selection or nomination by colleagues. There is little in the way of formal path-setting in the profession that would guide a librarian interested in becoming a director.

A more discerning eye towards how the profession develops its leaders is essential, particularly in light of the recent criticisms, including the 2011 Ithaka Report, which notes “a number of important divergences between high level strategies on the one hand and budget priorities on the other, suggesting that library directors are not able to fully execute the strategic direction they have in mind for their libraries” (Long & Schonfeld, 2011, p. 5). Evidence thus exists that better leadership training is necessary for the development of effective directors,

and that attainment of the directorship itself does not translate into effective leadership.

Given the disparity of work within the library, it is highly likely that some departments better prepare librarians for managerial leadership roles as attributed to former American Library Association President Maureen Sullivan, and described in Ammons-Stephens, Cole, Jenkins-Gibbs, Riehle, & Weare (2009) than others. However, there is little information available on the subject, and any assertions of this belief are based more on opinion and anecdote than data.

Leadership as a concept is celebrated and encouraged in the librarianship profession through institutes and generalized workshops. While various studies describe the desired skills and qualifications of library directors (Ammons-Stephens et al., 2009; Bailey, 1992; Fitsimmons, 2008; Garrett, 2009; Hernon, Powell, & Young, 2002; Hernon & Rossiter, 2006; Kreitz, 2009; OKeefe, 1998; Young, Powell, & Hernon, 2003), there has been little connection between those qualities and skills and the library departments that provide the best opportunities to develop those skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic library directors provide both leadership and stability for their organizations. Their role in terms of advocating for library resources, and providing visionary leadership for new services and trends, is essential to the functioning and development of the library. In turn the library serves as the home of research resources and guidance for

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the university and college campus. Focus has been placed on general leadership training opportunities (Neely & Winston, 1999), mentorship for new directors (Hardesty, 1997), and even what directors do in their post-directorship professional lives (Mech & McCabe, 1998), but little light has been shed on developing library administrative leadership skills within the departmental organizations where individuals garner their practical work experience.

There have been a number of studies exploring the characteristics the profession requires of its library directors, largely through identifying characteristics and traits current directors perceive necessary for incoming directors (Bailey, 1992; Fitsimmons, 2008; Garrett, 2009; Hernon, Powell, & Young, 2001, 2003; Hernon & Rossiter, 2006; Hernon et al., 2002; Kreitz, 2009; O’Keeffe, 1998; Weingand & Ryan, 1984; Young et al., 2003).

The library profession has been pro-active in developing avenues for librarians to practice leadership skills and behaviors, and some of these endeavors include the Library Leadership and Management Association (LLAMA, a division of the American Library Association), the Triangle Research Libraries Network (TRLN) Management Academy, the ALA Emerging Leaders Program, the Snowbird Leadership Institute, and the Harvard Leadership Institute for Academic Librarians, among others (Mason & Wetherbee, 2004).

Initiatives focusing on developing librarian leadership skills, such as the ALA Emerging Leaders Program, emphasize developing those skills in the context of service within state and national organizations for librarians in their first five years of the profession (American Library Association; Sullivan, 1999). These initiatives seek to develop leadership qualities, but are focused largely on service activities and not directly related to either grooming library directors or academic librarians in general. The leadership skills taught are general in nature and are more focused on generating social leadership skills within the professional organization through committee work than those skills and qualities specifically related to leadership positions.

The Association of Research Libraries also offers an 18-month Leadership and Career Development Program to “prepare mid-career librarians from traditionally under-represented racial and ethnic minority groups to take on increasingly demanding leadership roles in ARL libraries” (Association of Research Libraries, 2014, para. 1). While it is possible that a library director at a master’s level university may have served at a larger research institution and attended such a program, it is unlikely that such would be standard practice.

Young et al. (2003) list a variety of leadership institutes, as well as leadership inventories and assessments, where librarians might hone their leadership skills, but no mention is made as to the importance or significance of particular experiences or the department in which the librarian works. There have been attempts to influence the leadership development specifically of library directors. Hatcher (1997) notes that succession planning can help directors groom replacements from within their own libraries. Hardesty (1997) notes that the College Libraries Section (CLS) of the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL, a division of ALA) created an ad hoc College Leadership Committee with the intent to develop a College Library Directors Mentor Program. The resulting program matched first-year directors with experienced mentors and directors from other institutions, and participants engaged in a three-day seminar occurring prior to the mid-winter ALA meeting.

Due to their presence, influence on professional practice, and resources, Association of Research Library (ARL) member libraries are often spotlighted in studies regarding academic library directorship (Hernon et al., 2001, 2002, 2003; Young et al., 2003). It is important to note that while these libraries wield great influence in terms of goal-setting and funding in the world of academic libraries, there are only 126 ARL member libraries (Association of Research Libraries, 2010) compared with thousands of libraries at the four-year, master’s, and doctoral-granting levels not included in their number. Studies that have largely focused on this group of directors have thus omitted the

vast majority of academic library directors. This omission represents a very large gap in terms of the study of academic library directorship (Hernon et al., 2001, 2002, 2003; Young et al., 2003). Existing research shows that ARL directors and ACRL directors demonstrate differences in the desired attributes of a director (Young et al., 2003). Most notably, the ACRL directors have placed greater emphasis on record of achievement, and emphasized the need for both the MLS degree and a second advanced degree (Young et al., 2003). It follows that the experience of non-ARL library directors is an important factor in understanding academic library leadership skill development.

Schirer-Suter (2008) performed a content analysis of nationally advertised academic library director positions from 2002 to 2003, noting that in addition to the commonly-required MLS degree, directors are more often asked to possess the doctorate, and are more often required to engage in leadership activities external to the library. Schirer-Suter (2008) also noted that doctoral-granting and research-focused university library director job ads emphasized more education (most particularly in a more common demand for a doctoral degree), greater degree of experience, higher expectations for involvement in the profession, and “greater qualification requirements and job expectations dealing with the library director’s external role, and a much smaller expectation of involvement in the daily internal operations and management of the library” (Schirer-Suter, 2008, p. 27). Position descriptions differed in these requirements for master’s-granting and four-year colleges and universities, as well as community colleges. Pajewski (2010) notes in an informal job ad assessment that nearly all library management positions, both at the directorship level and at lower levels of management, at all sizes and specialties of libraries, required a number of years of demonstrated supervision and management. It follows, then, that departments offering librarians this experience are likely more represented among administration, but there is little available research confirming this assertion.

There is an implicit assumption with these library leadership institutes and programs that it does not matter which career strand in librarianship a professional takes, so long as they cultivate the necessary traits and skills. On the contrary, according to leadership development research and expertise theory, experience is an essential ingredient in leadership development. Because researchers note that certain leadership skills do not emerge until one reaches the highest level of an organization (Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007), this makes academic library directors the appropriate population to study, given that they have reached the apex of the library organization. While succession planning and grooming new leaders are recognized as essential to academic library success (Bridgland, 1999; Curran, 2003; Metz, 1978), exactly which skills those new leaders should be groomed to have, and how they should develop those skills in the course of their careers, are more complicated issues.

The library and information science literature does not address what library work experience offers the best opportunity to develop the leadership skills and qualities required of academic library directors. Given disparities in the type of work done in different library departments (for example, budgeting, personnel management, outreach and advocacy, technology planning and implementation), to date, the library and information science research has identified the various leadership skills and qualities necessary to be a successful academic library director (Ammons-Stephens et al., 2009; Bailey, 1992; Fitsimmons, 2008; Garrett, 2009; Hernon & Rossiter, 2006; Hernon et al., 2002; Kreitz, 2009; O’Keeffe, 1998; Young et al., 2003). This study identifies which library departments offer relevant experience in developing those necessary leadership skills and qualities, and which departments may need supplementary development opportunities, which can inform leadership development programs and career planning. This gap in the literature – lack of a clear experiential path in terms of departmental work for those interested in developing leadership skills and becoming library administrators at mid-level academic institutions – represents an important area for research development.

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