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The Transition Experience of Academic Library Directors

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ABSTRACT

Academic library administration is challenging work, and this is especially the case during a leader's transition into a new director role. This phenomenological study examines the transition experience of three academic library directors who have been in their positions for approximately one year. This study investigates strategies for success, lessons learned, and pitfalls during the transition period. The findings explore actions and strategies that were taken by the participants to help ensure success during their own transitions, information that may prove useful to new and aspiring academic library directors.

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INTRODUCTION

It has been over forty years since [McAnally and Downs \(1973\)](#) identified the end of the academic library directorship as a lifetime post. Their findings anticipated an average tenure of five to six years for library directors at Association of Research Library institutions. Subsequent research has confirmed this trend toward shorter stays in the director's chair ([Hernon, 2010](#)). With the potential of facing several administrative transitions over the span of their career, academic library directors stand to benefit from information that would help them succeed during this important time. Higher education institutions stand to benefit as well in seeing their directors transition successfully into their new positions.

If academic libraries were largely static, the pressure encountered by new directors, as they moved from institution to institution, would not be so high. But that is not the environment directors find themselves stepping into. Academic libraries are extremely dynamic, with multiple factors driving change across their services, collections, and workflows. The feverish push for change in the academic library has led some to call for library leaders to adopt an entrepreneurial or start-up approach to running their libraries ([Mathews, 2012](#)). The idea being that library leaders need to innovate and can no longer rely on what has worked in the past. Such an environment raises the stakes for a new leader and makes the transition period more challenging than ever.

This article reports findings from a phenomenological research study that examined the transition experience of three academic library administrators (two directors, one dean) from three different types of academic libraries — a community college, liberal arts college, and comprehensive university. For the sake of preserving the participants'

anonymity, participants will be referred to using the masculine pronoun. The transition experience for an academic library director was originally defined as the period beginning with the job interview and ending after the first twelve months in the new position. However, during the interview process it became clear that some experiences previous to the job interview also affected the transition experience. In such cases, these experiences were not excluded from the analysis. The central question of the study is: how do new academic library directors and deans describe their transition experience? It will look directly at the experience of directors during the transition period, examining strategies for success, pitfalls, and lessons learned. The findings of this research will provide important insight for those facing such transitions and for those who wish to see directors succeed in their new roles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research examining the experience of academic library directors as they transition to a new position is extremely limited. In addition to sharing from her own experience as a library dean, [Dewey \(2012\)](#) reviewed the transition literature found in the areas of business and management and presented relevant ideas that could help directors succeed during their transition. From her own experience, she included concrete advice, such as performing intensive research on the new college and library, and suggestions of key people the new director should meet. [Mathews \(2002\)](#) touches briefly on the transition period, describing an adjustment stage that leads to the new director bringing his skills to bear in the particular organizational environment of the new workplace.

The transition literature is well represented in the areas of business and management, where companies and their shareholders stand to profit or not based on the success of their leaders' transitions. Much of this work is based on informal interviews with leaders who have undergone or are going through a transition to a new position. Empirical

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methods of inquiry are not common. At their worst, these works slip toward pithy motivational jargon that would be at home in the self-help aisle. At their best, they crackle with advice that is both readily applicable and which makes a lot of intuitive sense.

Several key ideas recur in the business and management transition literature. They are: 1) learning the new environment; 2) building momentum; 3) building your team; and 4) establishing a vision or direction.

The foundation of any successful transition is learning the lay of the land. Ciampa and Watkins (1999) believe a newly arrived leader is like sailor on a foggy sea without means of navigation. Before any course can be charted, it is imperative to find out where one is currently floating. Watkins (2013) equates this early information gathering to drinking from a fire hose. The signal to noise ratio can easily cause the transitioning leader to miss a key information. Shaw and Chayes (2011) call this early period the discovery phase. The key question they put forward to the transitioning leader is, "What do you need to learn, and how will you learn it?" (p. 47). Appelbaum, Jolson, and Valero (2007) surveyed 175 managers and found that the highest priority for a transitioning leader should be to listen and learn. One obvious source to learn from is the existing staff. However, Gilmore (1988) points out that this can lead to a form of dependency that a transitioning leader should be aware of. One way to manage this, he suggests, is to solicit information through structured encounters that allow for thoughtful questions and focused inquiry.

Building momentum is a key achievement for the transitioning leader. The easiest way to accomplish this is by achieving successes early in the transition period. Ciampa (1999) stated "In the short term, these successes solve immediate problems and help new leaders establish credibility: done with the long term in mind, they also establish a foundation for more fundamental change" (p. 42). The importance of establishing credibility through early successes is also recognized by Watkins (2004, 2013). However, Shaw and Chayes (2011) warn that the difficulty lies in achieving early success without acting prematurely. This leads to the seemingly contradictory advice to move slowly, allowing time to gain support and receive input (Kelly, 1980). But the scale of the change helps determine the alacrity with which it should be pursued. Since overreaching and failure do little to build momentum, early endeavors should be of a size that makes them attainable.

The importance of a strong team is well supported in the business and management transition literature. Watkins (2004) stated that a leader's decisions around staffing his team are the most vital that will be made. Gaines-Ross and Ciampa (2000) found that most of the CEOs she interviewed thought they should have moved quicker in identifying their leadership teams. The importance of the team rests in its pivotal role in executing the new leader's vision. Without the right talent in the right positions, a new leader's ability to attain early success becomes much more difficult. There are several suggestions for developing a strong team. Shaw and Chayes (2011) believe development of the leadership team should be an iterative process that unfolds as strategy and vision come into focus. Development includes bringing in new people, improving the talent and capabilities of the existing personnel, or most likely a combination of the two. Gilmore (1988) believes an early step must be assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the existing team. Watkins (2013) recommends assessing team members according to competence, judgment, energy, focus, relationships, and trust. But Watkins also believes it is important to assess how the team functions together, since both individual and team performances are critical to success.

The last idea that finds strong representation in the business and management transition literature is the need for a new leader to establish a vision or direction for the organization. Gilmore (1988) stated "the arrival of the newly appointed leader is almost inevitably an opportunity for rethinking mission and agenda" (p. 165). One technique suggested by Gilmore is to think broadly and set guiding themes

that allow others to elaborate. Ciampa and Watkins (1999) believe visioning works together with learning to provide the foundation for coalition building and the support that is necessary for early successes. But they also recognize that to create a shared vision takes time, generally extending beyond the transition period. This is supported by Kelly (1980), who found that experienced executives placed the development of strategy as the most important thing to do in the 12 months following the initial 6 months. This delay allows the new leader to become familiar with his new organization and also deal with any immediate problems that might be encountered.

While these are some of the main ideas found in the management and business transition literature, there are several others that are relevant. Common traps for transition leaders have been identified by Watkins (2004) and by Neff and Citrin (2005), these include such things as coming in with the answer, being captured by the wrong people, and setting unrealistic expectations. Appelbaum et al. (2007) found that the two most common mistakes made by managers and executives during the first 90 days are, 1) not taking the time to learn the new environment and its culture before making changes, and 2) failing to build relationships and not being sufficiently people oriented. And Dewey (2012) warned of situations the transitioning library director is likely to encounter, such as concern over reorganization, past commitments and expectations, and pressure to right past wrongs.

Less relevant to the focus of the transition experience of academic library directors are works that deal with how organizations should handle the transition of new leaders. These articles make suggestions regarding such topics as handling the search process, succession planning, and facilitating the transition (Artman & Franz, 2009; Christy, 2009; Dym, Egmont, & Watkins, 2011).

ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

Phenomenological research is influenced by the investigator's own experience. But even beyond this experience is the researcher's personal interest and own personal connection to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Because of this, it is recommended that the researcher bracket himself out of the study by disclosing these interests and experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). My interest in the transition experience of academic library directors stems from my own experiences as an academic library director at a community college and at a liberal arts college. It was during my transition to my current director position that I realized the transition experience of academic library directors is not well represented in the literature. Out of this realization came the idea for this research project. The interviews took place during my second and third months at my new position. The experiences of the subjects resonated strongly with what I was going through at that time. The experience of being an academic library director could not help but influence and frame my approach to this project. For the sake of transparency, I made the decision early on in the project to disclose to the subjects that I was in a similar position to theirs. At times, during the interviews, this knowledge led the subjects to make statements such as, "You know how this goes" or "You've dealt with this kind of thing I'm sure". To the extent my shared experience helped me establish a connection to the subjects and more openness, I took advantage of it. To the extent it limited their descriptions of their own experiences, I tried to downplay it.

METHODS

This study pursued a phenomenological methodology within a constructivist framework. This framework is antifoundational, resting on the refusal to adopt any permanent understanding from which truth can be understood (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). The purpose of inquiry within this framework is "to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world" (Creswell, 2014, p.8). As recommended by Moustakas (1994), the phenomenological investigation I pursued in

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