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Claiming a Seat at the Table: Inclusive Paths to Leadership in Academic Libraries and Beyond



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Abstract

The topic of leadership development in academic libraries is recent area of interest for the profession. There is nascent scholarship in the areas of how to prepare librarians to advance into a first formal management position as well as in the area of leadership capacity-building for librarians and library organizations. This poster combines two independent research projects with the common theme of leadership development in academic libraries. It is not often that separate scholarship integrates effectively and cogently, but these studies coalesced in such an impactful way that all parties felt the need to share the content as well as the process with other scholars. One of the most important aspects of the collaboration was ensuring each researcher's voice was honored so the audience had clarity about each individual's efforts as well as an understanding of how the studies' findings dovetail. Through multiple conversations during the poster creation process, it emerged that both studies revealed the need for libraries to better address first-level management potential and leadership development at the individual, organizational, and professional levels. This poster session outlines the processes and outcomes of both studies.

Literature Review

There is little comprehensive research addressing inclusive leadership development in libraries (Gilstrap 2009). When librarians think about leadership, it is usually in conjunction with management, not non-supervisory positions (Hernon & Powell 2013). This misperception still exists though libraries have become more complex and technical, rendering a traditional leadership culture increasingly difficult to maintain (Roberts & Rowley 2008).

Librarians as a profession have been one of the least likely to research and write about leadership development. Joseph Branim lamented in 2012 that only two articles were published about leadership in libraries in the previous five years (Bell 2013). One of Branim's greatest concerns was whether the current generation of leaders was adequately preparing their replacements (Bell 2013).

As academic libraries change, they must foster new, flexible, inclusive leadership approaches that recognize the abilities of all librarians. Allowing more people to share in leadership is important when organizations are changing from hierarchical models to teamwork and knowledge work organizations (Lankes 2011).

While there are some formal leadership development programs, there has been less research on developing leadership capacity at all levels of the library organization to prepare future leaders. New perspectives on how to create a more inclusive environment for leadership development are vital to meet the needs of the 21st century library. This includes creating more inclusive systems and structures for promoting librarians into leadership roles.

Opportunities for promotion on the public services side of academic libraries are rare (Corcoran & McGuinness 2014). DeLong (2009), referencing Renaud and Murray (2003), describes barriers such as disadvantageous organizational structures; hiring practices emphasizing degrees and years of service over performance; promotion processes emphasizing rank and seniority over performance; and few opportunities or resources for developing and demonstrating leadership abilities. Librarians also disagree on the best methods of attaining management positions. Continuing professional development and mentoring can help frontline librarians acquire the leadership experience and skills necessary to be considered for promotion, but management experience may be more important to hiring committees than participation in training programs or other continuing professional development (Lacy & Copeland 2013; Corcoran & McGuinness 2014; Rooney 2010).

Methodology

The intent of one project was to research hiring practices for management positions at academic libraries. IRB-approved interviews were used to elicit both analyzable raw data as well as freeform advice and suggestions. Interview participants were identified using a snowball sampling method, and were required to fit one of two categories: librarians who had successfully advanced into a first supervisory equivalent position within the last five years; or librarians who had served on hiring committees for such positions in academic library public services within the last five years. Participants were selected for inclusion only if employed at a university with an FTE of at least 17,000 students. Eighteen qualifying participants completed the interview process and transcripts and field notes were coded and analyzed to identify patterns in participants' responses.

The intent of the other study regarding leadership development in libraries was to conduct original research to investigate the how libraries view and execute leadership development including who is offered leadership training, what types of training are offered, how individual librarian development is handled in the environment as well as address the current curriculum in Masters of Library Science academic programs and offer ideas of changes that are needed to insure that the MLS programs address the needs of 21st century libraries. Currently, the path to leadership development is unclear and not offered to a majority of librarians so this study addresses ways to create paths to leadership development in libraries.

Participants were selected for inclusion only if employed or formerly employed at an academic library, with the title and/or position of librarian. An IRB-approved electronic survey with both closed- and open-ended questions was used to generate raw data; informal feedback at several library conferences and workshops was used in the descriptive statistical analysis. Of the 2,000 surveys sent out, there were 229 respondents for an 11.45% response rate.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Through the collation of these two research projects, it was discovered that there is a need for leadership development support at the individual, organizational and professional levels, and that there are certain behaviors which can help librarians advance into supervisory positions. Specifically, we found that individuals are more successful at finding formal and informal leadership positions when they cultivate awareness of big-picture issues affecting their institution and the profession as a whole, and demonstrate self-efficacy in their frontline jobs. Respondents felt libraries could promote the success of employees seeking such roles through mentoring, creating opportunities for librarians at all levels to engage in leadership activities and more formalized support. Finally, respondents in both studies revealed through their comments that library schools ought to prepare all graduates to advocate and to work with others who have different communication styles and different agendas. In addition, library schools need to recognize the need for future librarians to learn about developing personal leadership skills as well as about organizational behavior, organizational structure, finance and budgeting and marketing and negotiation skills. These skills are imperative for librarians to earn a seat at the table in 21st century libraries.

Future Research

The researchers studying the advancement of librarians are using a sequential exploratory design; as such, the results presented here are from the first (qualitative) stage. Participant responses will inform the crafting of questions for a survey that will reach a broader audience.

The researcher studying leadership development in libraries will complete the analysis of the findings from the survey and study, and will publish an article as well as share the research to support other scholarly inquiries.

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