



Evidence Summary

Academic Library Department Experience Fosters the Development of Leadership Skills Relevant to Academic Library Directorship

A Review of:

Harris-Keith, Colleen S. (2015). The Relationship Between Academic Library Department Experience and Perceptions of Leadership Skill Development Relevant to Academic Library Directorship. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 41(3), 246-263. doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2015.03.017

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Received: 28 June 2016

Accepted: 01 Feb. 2017

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Abstract

Objective – This study sought to identify if the perception of library leadership skill and quality development is equal across departmental experience, and what are the leadership skills and qualities most commonly perceived to be used in each department.

Design – Quantitative online survey instrument.

Setting – Master’s colleges and universities from 728 institutions in the United States of America, as classified by the Carnegie Foundation.

Subjects – 666 academic library directors.

Methods – Selected participants, representing academic library administrative leadership, were contacted by email a maximum of four times and were invited to complete an online survey instrument composed of six sections. The first three sections contained the purpose and confidentiality statements, demographic information, and data on the past five positions held by respondents prior to their current directorship. The next two sections each had 25 statements on a 5-point Likert scale, to collect data on perceived leadership skills and qualities exercised by respondents in their most recent three positions. The final section had four open-ended questions to help explain the academic library directors’ responses and provide context for the ratings in previous sections of the instrument.

Main results – A total of 296 responses were received, for a 40.66% response rate, which was representative of the institution type demographics, including private non-profit, public, and private for-profit.

The first research question asked: is the perception of library leadership skill and quality development equal across departmental experience? The data used for this question involved all library departments: Access Services, Administration, Collection Development, Digital Library Services, Information Technology, Reference and Instruction, and Technical Services. When departments were compared pairwise on composite leadership skill scores, Administration was significantly higher than another department. Results showed that perceptions of leadership quality development appeared to be equal across departments, but leadership skill development was not, and in fact, there was a significant difference between the variances of the composite scores in the population.

The second research question asked: what are the leadership skills and qualities most commonly perceived to be used in each department? Results revealed that every leadership skill score except for time management was significant, indicating a difference among library departments based on individual leadership skill scores. Respondents perceived that there was a difference in leadership skill (but not leadership quality) development opportunity by department.

Departments were also compared pairwise on offering a greater opportunity to develop leadership skills, and overall, academic library directors perceived that there were significant differences in skill development by department. Furthermore, respondents overwhelmingly indicated that Administration was where they perceived the most leadership skill development opportunities. There was no perceived difference in leadership quality development by department. As well, some departments were reported to provide targeted, department-specific leadership skills,

such as resource allocation and budget management.

Conclusion – This study offers strong evidence that development of many of the leadership skills necessary for success as an academic library director only present themselves to professionals once they enter the Administration department, the library director position, or the assistant director position.

Commentary

This study highlights the academic library directors' role as visional leader, how their role is essential to on-going development of libraries, and the best path for leadership development as they gain expertise within particular departments. The study was incorporated into the author's dissertation (Harris-Keith, 2015) and targeted academic library directors at Carnegie-designated (2010) Master's-granting institutions.

Application of Glynn's (2006) EBL critical appraisal checklist to the study resulted in a valid study. However, it would have been more impressive if the study had expanded its population to include leadership at additional institutions, including shared or outsourced library operations. Glynn's tool determined that the study would have been enhanced if the survey instrument had undergone more rigorous content validity testing, and if field testing of the pilot survey had been expanded, to include academic library directors in newly organized libraries, incorporating new department naming conventions.

Study results noted that leadership qualities explored did not demonstrate statistically significant relationships to academic library director work experience. While leadership skills were easily conceptualized as competencies, leadership qualities were more broadly conceptualized, possibly making them more challenging for respondents to measure empirically in terms of their progress or ability. Although the instrument was validated, the definition of leadership skills is highly subjective. Additionally, the data

strongly indicated that neither graduate school nor professional experience outside of the academic library directorship prepared the academic library director for library directorship. This suggests that most first-time academic library directors rarely exercised leadership skills prior to becoming an academic library director. However, just over 40% of respondents had been in a leadership position for four years or less. Therefore, the study would have been more revealing if it had looked at data from their most recent five, rather than three, positions. These findings have serious implications for organizational succession planning, and for professional organizations involved in leadership development.

Through collaboration with curriculum leaders, practicing academic librarians, and their professional organizations, this report is an excellent starting point from which further research could provide greater insights into the development of leadership skills in academic libraries. In addition, the results could enhance the content within leadership development opportunities available to academic and research librarians, such as those summarized by Herold (2015). As well, professional associations serving academic librarians should focus not only on helping individuals learn leadership behaviours but also on helping them learn where in their professional work participants expect to practice those skills. Finally, there should also

be a call for action amongst academic library directors, encouraging them to collaborate on the design and delivery of leadership opportunities, and to develop work responsibilities that would allow aspiring directors to gain the necessary experience for success in academic library directorship.

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