

Leadership Development for Academic Librarians: Maintaining the Status Quo?

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Abstract: Leadership development experiences within librarianship are immensely popular, however, informal critiques leveled at library leadership training opportunities claim that these opportunities only reinforce the status quo and that there is no real desire to address issues affecting our profession, particularly in terms of diversity. In order to critically determine the value of these professional opportunities, we must ask: what does library leadership training accomplish? Could library leadership training be done better, and if so, how? Data from library leadership training opportunities in the United States and Canada was gathered to address these questions. In addition, a survey was conducted of librarians about who attends these offerings, why, and whether the stated outcomes both met their needs and were addressed effectively. This is followed by an analysis of recent literature regarding diversity, gender and leadership within the library profession, which leads to some suggestions for library leadership development professional opportunities.

Leadership development institutes, seminars, workshops, academies and courses have been popular within librarianship for decades. They have been sponsored by associations, corporations, and educational institutions, and they have taken a variety of forms comprising the intensive and extensive, online and face to face. However, informal critiques leveled at library leadership training opportunities claim that these opportunities only reinforce the status quo by perpetuating the biased discourse and power structures inherent in society, and that there is no real desire to address issues affecting our changing profession, particularly in terms of globalization and diversity. I personally came face-to-face with this perception in the early spring of 2016 at a regional library leadership development workshop in the rural western United States. During a discussion on promoting diversity within the profession, a middle aged white man asserted that as a man he has faced more barriers and discrimination within librarianship than a woman would, while two other middle-aged white men nodded enthusiastically behind him. I was completely floored by this point of view and unable to respond. So it would seem were most in the room. After a moment of silence, discussion turned toward how to encourage persons of color in the profession, to which a white middle-aged woman suggested that they

ought to be ‘farmed out’ to communities with librarian shortages. At this point I completely gave up on attempting to participate and left the room.

While I very much wish this conversation was an aberration brought on by the mountain air of our rural location, these opinions are probably not uncommon at library leadership workshops, trainings, seminars and courses in which I have taken part. I feel that by spring of 2016, the political climate favoring the election of Donald Trump in the United States had become widespread and relaxed enough that people were emboldened to say what they may have only thought in years past. At previous leadership development experiences I have been involved in, the focus of the event has been on the mechanics of management, and often a library perspective has been secondary to a management one. The attention paid to issues of diversity and globalization in library leadership development has been cursory at best, and dangerous at worst (as related above). The coordinators of these experiences seem loath to touch the topic, and after my experience last spring I can see why. I have been involved with a number of library leadership trainings and events as a participant, coordinator, and mentor over the past 15 years and can say that from my perspective a particular crowd is involved in these experiences—one that is nominated or supported by employers and is seeking to build particular skills toward a management position in a library. I have heard from those outside the crowd, informally, that these experiences often are limited to those who are supportive of the status quo within librarianship and management generally, and that the experiences in turn seek to support the current state of mind within the profession rather than dynamically support broader professional goals, values and transformative change. After my experience this past spring and with the election of white nationalist forces to the Presidency of the United States, I began to wonder if and how these experiences were in fact in line with our professional needs.

In order to critically determine the value of library leadership development professional opportunities, I set out to answer a few questions: what does library leadership training accomplish? Is there evidence that current offerings accomplish their stated outcomes? Do the stated outcomes address current library leadership issues? Who is enrolling in these offerings and how well served are they by them? Who isn’t enrolling and why? Could library leadership training be done better, and if so, how? I attempted to answer these questions by gathering data from a variety of library leadership training opportunities in the United States and Canada. The stated outcomes of each were evaluated for relevancy in the current library environment, and the

providers asked for data demonstrating the efficacy of the leadership training opportunity. Alongside this data-gathering, I conducted a survey of librarians across the U.S. and Canada to determine who is attending these offerings, why they do so (or choose not to do so), whether the stated outcomes both met their needs and were addressed effectively, and what measurable effects attendance has had on their careers. My findings from both are presented below, followed by an analysis of recent literature regarding diversity, gender and leadership within the library profession, which leads us to some conclusions and suggestions for library leadership development professional opportunities.

Librarianship and Leadership Development

According to the American Library Association, among the chief values of the profession of librarianship are:

- Access: information resources provided by the library should be readily, equally, and equitably accessible to all library users
- Democracy: chiefly for our purposes; free and equal access to information for all the people of the community the library serves
- Diversity: valuing diversity in services and resources, but also reflecting that diversity found in our communities
- Social responsibility: that librarianship can ameliorate or solve critical problems of society.

The International Federation of Library Associations also embraces the value of freedom of access to information and ideas as essential for social, educational, cultural, democratic and economic wellbeing. While there is a great deal of professional respect for and emphasis on the diversity of ideas, information and opinions within the content and resources provided by libraries alongside a commitment to serve our communities in an equitable manner, there has generally been less of a focus on making sure our staff reflects the diversity found within our user groups. While, in fairness, the American Library Association and many other professional groups have stated goals and active programs to recruit persons of color to librarianship, the Diversity Counts study conducted by ALA showed that only 12 percent of credentialed librarians in the United States in 2009 were racial and ethnic minorities (ALA, 2012). Results from the

2006 Canadian Census estimate that a little under 10 percent of librarians are visible minorities (Leong, 2013). This is far below the levels found in the general population of either nation.

Alongside these quietly held statistics about the racial makeup of the profession has been a louder concern, growing loudest around the turn of the century, about the graying of the profession and the need to recruit more librarians, particularly for leadership positions. These concerns fed into the bloom of leadership development training opportunities. Leadership training generally began to trend around the 1980s, particularly within the field of librarianship. By the late 1990s several programs providing library leadership training were up and running, most centered on a residential model involving a several-day-long seminar. These offerings mostly focused on skill-building for managers at first, then began to focus on change management in the 1990s. Some were and still are focused on developing these skills for persons of color. Around the turn of the century opportunities “expanded dramatically” (p. 7) and began to diversify in model (Skinner & Krabbenhoeft, 2014).

The majority of current library leadership development opportunities are multi-day residential programs or long term fellowships, and the majority of opportunities are delivered face to face. Most leadership development opportunities feature common components, if not common goals or common modes of delivery. Guest speakers, discussions, mentors and case studies feature most prominently. Curricula tend to focus on change management and innovation (Jacobs, 2015). These opportunities are seen as a good launching point into management positions in libraries, which have a huge impact on the formation of policies, initiatives, and strategies within individual libraries and the profession as a whole, not to mention hiring practices.

Data from Library Leadership Opportunities

In January of 2017, I reached out to coordinators and contacts at 17 library leadership development opportunities: Aurora Institute, Pacific Northwest Library Association, Mountain Plains Library Association, North Carolina Library Association, Wyoming Library Leadership Institute, TALL Texans, Siena Leadership Institute for Academic Library Managers, Pennsylvania Library Association Academy of Leadership Studies, Michigan Library Association Leadership Academy, New York Library Leadership and Management Academy,

New England Library Leadership Symposium, Sunshine State Leadership Institute, Northern Exposure to Leadership, ARL Leadership Fellows, ALA Emerging Leaders, and Harvard Leadership Institute for Academic Librarians. I gathered these programs from the American Library Association's listing of leadership development opportunities (ALA, 2008), and chose those that included academic librarians and seemed to still be actively offered. The programs ranged from intensive face-to-face institutes to a series of separate face to face meetings to online-only brief experiences like webinars or short courses.

Each program had an active website at the start of 2017, and seemed to be recruiting or preparing for a new offering. Each website listed some learning objectives or intended outcomes for attendees at each offering. Every offering discussed building leadership skills extensively, and most gave specific examples like communication, team-building, change management or strategic planning. Seven mentioned networking/building a professional network as an explicit goal of their offering. Nine explicitly mentioned career advancement as an objective. Only six focused explicitly on libraries in connection with their offerings, and none focused explicitly on the values of librarianship. Many of the websites' descriptions of the intended outcomes of their experiences would have fit nearly any profession.

I asked the coordinators the following questions via email:

1. Is your leadership training opportunity still being actively offered?
2. About how many alumni does your event have?
3. How does your organization evaluate your opportunity? What evidence do you gather that shows you meet your objectives?
4. How do you evaluate/reevaluate the objectives of your opportunity, and make changes?
5. How well do you feel your opportunity meets the needs of your particular professional community, and librarianship as a whole? Do you wish you could reach particular elements of the community better (e.g., school library workers, early-career professionals, diverse populations...) or do you attract the attendees you set out to include?

It was my initial hope that this email would serve as an icebreaker and that I could then discuss further with each contact a bit more about my particular interest in how they were addressing issues of diversity and global change. However, I only heard back from 9 contacts

and most replies were terse. Part of the problem—and I mean this in every sense of the word—is that inclusion in these events is often promoted as exclusive access to content and a particular experience. At the residential institutes I have personally taken part in, there has been on the first evening some sort of ceremony or ritual describing that the experience we are all about to undergo should be held as confidential, and generally this is accompanied by much celebration of our elite status for being involved in the event. This is reinforced once more at the end, usually with some sort of commencement or initiation rite. The feeling of a closed society is very much created, which leads to a sense of secrecy and exclusion.

Most contacts informed me that the success of experiences were evaluated based on surveys/feedback forms gathered from participants at the conclusion of the event, with a few also soliciting answers for a six-month follow up survey. These evaluations are then used to retool or reaffirm the educational offerings. Below we will see that these responses are very typical for library leadership professional development experiences. One problem with this form of evaluation, particularly given the sense of joining an exclusive club, is the inclination to evaluate the experience based on personal satisfaction with the event and presenters rather than a more objective look at content, event goals, and probable effect on a participant's work-life.

Success of these nine events was also measured largely by the demand for the offering, according to my contacts—if they received more applicants than could be accommodated the offering was seen as successful. This overlooks the problem that, for most of the nine respondents' programs, applicants must either be nominated or collect letters of support/recommendation to attend. There is also a secondary problem that applicants and attendees pay money and often travel fees to take part in these events, which is limiting.

I found it interesting that every one of the nine respondents indicated that their offering meets the needs of their particular professional community and librarianship as a whole, my fifth question. All nine did so primarily with just a sentence affirming the statement and no further analysis, although one admitted that their efforts to attract persons of color were not as successful as they would like. This was the only time in my discussions with coordinators that diversity issues were mentioned.

Survey of Library Workers' Perceptions

To discover the perceptions generally of library workers of these leadership development opportunities, I posted links to an online survey, made available through the Qualtrics software at the University of Montana, on several library listservs and via Facebook and Twitter. I was interested in general perceptions of these institutes, and wanted to find out if my concerns about diversity topics and global issues in librarianship would arise organically. Over the span of two weeks at the beginning of 2017, I received 107 respondents. Nearly half of the respondents who identified years worked in librarianship had done so for 20 or more years, with 30% of the remainder working in libraries for 10-20 years and 23% working in libraries for less than 10 years. Respondents predominantly came from the Western United States although there were also respondents from Alberta and Singapore. 70% of respondents identified as female, 20% as male, 2% as non-binary/other and the rest declining to answer. 93% of respondents identified as White, and 5% as Hispanic/Spanish/Latinx.

Of my respondents, 66% (n=71) had themselves attended a library leadership training or event. They identified events spanning the gamut—online classes, weeklong institutes, half-day workshops, online academies, and so on. 66% felt the events directly advanced their careers. 34% thought maybe or probably not. No one felt the opportunity definitely did *not* advance their career. Surprisingly, 87% of respondents felt that these events directly advanced the profession of librarianship.

When asked about factors of their experience, most said the experience they took part in was sponsored by a library association (61% of respondents) and took place in person (85%). 82% felt the experience they partook was applicable to librarianship and 52% felt that the experience addressed issues of value to librarianship. Only 18% of the respondents felt their experience addressed issues of diversity, and a scant 9% felt like social justice issues were addressed.

When asked about desired outcomes for their experiences, the free-response entry form on my survey was filled with many skills-based responses focusing on management strategies. A vast majority of participants (97%) felt that their experience lived up to the stated objectives.

When asked if they themselves recommended or sent others to these events, 49% of respondents (n= 34) indicated they had done so. Here, only 49% felt that the experience definitely or probably directly advanced the careers of attendees, with 79% feeling that the experience definitely or probably benefited the profession. Interestingly, there was a much

stronger sense on the part of those sending people or recommending people for these experiences that diversity would be a focus of the event (32%) alongside social justice issues (14%). 71% felt the experience was probably or definitely beneficial for the person they supported, and 73% found it personally beneficial to support someone's attendance.

Overall, respondents were asked how favorably they considered library leadership training and events. Only 45 people responded to this question, but of those 86% were slightly to extremely positively disposed toward them. Only 11% of respondents were slightly to moderately negatively disposed.

When asked in a free-response question what library leadership trainings and events offered to the profession, respondents overwhelmingly listed personal skills-building activities like increasing productivity and project management, or personal transformation like building confidence and networking. One comment, however, echoed many informal critiques I've heard in my years of involvement in leadership experiences for librarianship: "The descriptions of 'leadership training' that I have encountered suggested that treating a library as a profit-seeking business is an optimum [sic] strategy. I am far more comfortable with a conception of a library as a service to present and future generations. I wish that 'leadership training' placed a strong emphasis on collaboration and a preference for retaining and supporting the professional growth of employees instead of treating employees as expendable consumables..."

When asked what library leadership training and events should do differently to be more beneficial to the profession, respondents again overwhelmingly focused on skills-building but expressed concerns about access barriers due to cost and time in the profession. A few responses hinted at but did not directly state a concern that has been informally expressed to me a few times—that these events are usually entirely partaken by those who are nominated and/or supported financially by employers, which reinforces systemic biases within institutions.

I had intended to hold some online focus groups with respondents to discuss more in-depth perceptions of library leadership opportunities, but due to low numbers of volunteers and some dissatisfaction with the survey and process on my part I ended up abandoning that idea. I hope instead to have some face-to-face discussions at library conferences and other professional events I attend in 2017 around the perceptions of library leadership opportunities and the role of structural inequality in these opportunities.

Looking Beyond Informal Critiques

The library literature surrounding leadership development opportunities, like the opportunities themselves, is predominantly focused on the practical aspects—what opportunities are available, what are the costs, and what skills are developed. I eagerly awaited the recent ACRL publication *Creating Leaders: An Examination of Academic and Research Library Leadership Institutes* (Herold, 2015) with the hope that there would be some global look at whether and how these events met the needs of the profession; there was not. It is, in essence, a guidebook of 18 programs offered in North America, written by past attendees and focused largely on their personal experiences. The concluding chapter pointed out that there is a dearth of evidence-based data supporting the efficacy of these programs generally, but that the value lies in building skills, increasing confidence, and entering into a professional network of named leaders in the profession (pp. 349-51).

This dearth of evidence-based data is also mentioned in Skinner and Krabbenhoef's review of 15 years of library leadership training. Focusing exclusively on the United States, the report mentioned the “notable lack of shared objectives or ‘leadership competencies’ driving these diverse offerings and evaluations of their successes/failures” (Skinner & Krabbenhoef, 2014, p. 9). The report also discussed the “personal influence of key players who have designed and facilitated multiple programs across more than a decade” (p. 27) as an area of instability around evaluating the efficacy of library leadership professional development. Their report concludes with several suggestions, among which is the need for library leadership development opportunities to operate in a more high-level, collaborative and coordinated manner (p. 29-30).

Another critique of library leadership training is that there are limited training slots available for the profession globally, and that most development opportunities are only offered face-to-face in economically developed countries. Thus leadership development opportunities are at a remove for the majority of potential participants (Jacobs, 2015).

Looking more specifically at critiques leveled at library leadership development, we can see two big areas of focus: gender and race. Examining gender first, the burgeoning #libleadgender movement has laid out that while librarianship as a whole is 80% female, library leadership still tends to be about 40% male (Olin & Millet, 2015). There is a view in the literature that leadership experiences must address competencies and skills that “align with

masculinized notions of management” and have “little consideration of the underlying conditions that shape leadership” (Neigel, 2015, p. 527). Gender is a “peripheral topic of discussion” in library leadership development experiences which reinforces the status quo (p. 531).

Librarianship itself, as a feminized profession, can explicate and reinforce structural sexism as performed particularly in higher education environments in areas focusing on student support (Sloniowski, 2016, Douglas & Gadsby, 2017). ‘Real work,’ in particular the work of management and organizational leadership, is seen as masculine, while the more relational work that librarianship often engages in, like collaboration, building connections, reducing barriers, and building consensus, is typically seen as female, and thus made invisible (Fletcher, 1995). The only way to improve this situation is to address it directly within and also outside our discipline: “We recognize movers, shakers, pushers, shovers, leaders, and change agents, but how do we acknowledge emotional labor and care work? We need to speak at more interdisciplinary tables, and we need to write precisely about our labor issues as well as about the politics of knowledge organization and how our work impacts the production culture of the academy” (Sloniowski, 2016, p. 663).

With regard to race, the issues for leadership development experiences are more varied due to the lack of diversity within the library profession. The field generally, library leadership professional development included, needs to deal head-on with the “tendency to tiptoe around discussing race and racism, and instead limit the discourse by using words such as ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘diversity’” as well as take on the perpetuation of white privilege inherent in the power structures surrounding and within librarianship (Honma, 2005). This goes beyond token inclusion of persons of color to a true evaluation of why there are so few persons of color in our profession and what role racism and power structures play both in our services we offer and in the content we curate, and move toward a transformation.

Looking at motivating what minority library workers we have in the profession to take on positions of leadership, a paper presented at the most recent ACRL conference discusses the need to demonstrate value both for the individual and for the particular organization the individual works in, focus on the chance to give back to a larger community, and to look beyond extrinsic rewards like pay (Olivas, 2017). Supportive programs for recruitment and retention of minority library workers help, but are often underfunded or lack variation (Davis-Kendrick, 2009).

One approach when looking at race in the profession is to examine the role that whiteness plays. As a profession that is profoundly white, we might examine from an ethnological perspective what that means for us within our libraries and for the communities that we serve. The concept of universalism can help illustrate: “[I]n a white-dominated society, standards are applied and are described as neutral, universal and true for all people. But in fact the criteria are not universal. They come from a white perspective” (Espinal, 2001, p. 141). The existing power structures, roles, and rules in the library and in the profession have an inherent bias. They are not ‘the norm’ that naturally applies to the human condition as a whole. There is no universal standard. An additional benefit of this approach is the reduction of the view of racial diversity in the profession as a problem that needs fixing, but rather that the whiteness of the profession needs to be addressed.

What Can Be Done?

Library leadership development has clear value when we consider the future of libraries generally and the future of our own specific libraries: we want to create dynamic environments that attract and nurture dynamic employees, in order to provide visionary services, collections and resources to our communities. To create these environments and support these employees, we need ongoing and proactive leadership development that addresses barriers to leadership (Miller, 2017). The barriers to leadership in librarianship are clear: sex (or gender), and race, which is even more basically a barrier to librarianship.

The current leadership development opportunities, however, seem to be reinforcing the existing structures within librarianship generally and within particular libraries. Attendees generally are nominated by supervisors who support them financially in attending what is usually an expensive experience away from home, where an exclusionary environment is built around the content presented at the experience. The content itself is often skills-based material based on furthering the status quo management structure. Issues of stated and demonstrable importance to librarianship and management/leadership in libraries and the profession, specifically issues surrounding racial and gender bias, are not even being addressed, let alone rectified.

My first recommendation is to talk about the problem. The more voices raised, the harder it is to ignore. My paper here is my first step to engage the profession in a more visible way in a

discussion on these informal concerns I have been hearing ever since my first professional leadership development experience. I am no mover or shaker, but as a mid-career professional, a library manager and someone who is involved in association work, my voice can speak up for those shut out of the conversation.

I would encourage those of us in the profession to talk bravely and directly about the problems of racism and sexism. My regret, as I began to write up my survey results for this paper, was that I did not address race and gender head-on in my surveys and discussions. Perhaps that would have reduced responses (my initial fear) but I would have gotten better results if I had been more direct, and perhaps would have opened up some minds. My further regret is that during the encounter in my introduction, I chose to walk out of the discussion rather than call out my racist and sexist peers.

I would further suggest that to those who create, curate, direct, contribute to, send personnel or personally attend library leadership development events that the content, activities, and attendance of these events need to better reflect our mission and values. We must go beyond management skills training if we want to move the profession forward on issues of race and gender. Reducing financial and structural barriers (i.e., employer support, residential programs) to participation is a doable first step. Directly, honestly and openly talking about race and gender in librarianship as part of these events may be more challenging, as witnessed by my own personal experience, but it is frankly necessary and it is just as frankly not happening.

Librarianship, with its social justice mission and embodied values of diversity, “is especially well-suited to model a more equitable profession” (Morales, Knowles, & Bourg, 2014, p. 441). In order for this to happen, a logical place to start is with the leadership of the profession, and leadership development training is an excellent venue for working for transformative change. Perhaps the time is right for this change, with the increased awareness that the critical librarianship movement has brought to the profession. However, the systemic biases at play certainly stack the deck against us, and it will require conscious effort and desire to implement positive movement toward social justice from the upper levels of librarianship for us to see any difference.

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