The Perceptions of Academic Librarians in Texas regarding Library Leadership

Yumi Shin and Kaye Shelton

abstract: The purpose of this phenomenological narrative study was to investigate the perceptions of academic librarians in Texas regarding their experiences with leadership development. The participants in the study were 10 librarians who had varying levels of library leadership experiences. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or virtually, with in-depth questions about leadership training. The interviews were analyzed to see the differences among levels of librarians and the impacts of their participation in leadership development. The findings revealed the participants' perceptions regarding library leadership development, including what they saw as the most and least necessary leadership skills, obstacles to leadership development, and impacts on their personal and professional life of such training. Possible implications of this study might influence the design of leadership programs and succession planning at university libraries.

Introduction and Research Questions

Academic libraries today face constant changes, including budget cuts, the introduction of new information technology, more online learning opportunities, and globalization.[1] Training qualified librarians to become effective leaders is one way to help libraries and staff manage these changes and to ensure the success of libraries and their continued growth.[2] In fact, the need for strong, competent leadership in academic libraries has gained increased attention because of the new roles of librarians and the unique needs of academic institutions. As Roisin Gwyer explains, new librarianship is required to manage organizations successfully amid chaos and complexity.[3] Furthermore, academic

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libraries have anticipated a shortage of next-generation librarians since 1986 due to the retirement of baby boomers, but they have struggled to find qualified librarians with leadership experience.[4]

Peter Hernon and Nancy Rossiter suggest that librarians should utilize current technology effectively to deliver the resources that meet patrons' needs.[5] Academic librarians' roles should move toward teaching and facilitating due to increased remote access to library collections and the changes in classroom teaching and learning behaviors.[6] In addition, library organizations face the "graying" of librarianship as the baby boomers grow older.[7] Cultivating the next generation of effective library leaders is essential to facilitate the success of today's as well as tomorrow's libraries.[8] Library leadership development should focus on essential skills, such as recruiting, educating, and retaining librarians.[9]

A number of articles dealt with the need for leadership development and emphasized that every employee should be trained in leadership techniques.[10] Although various studies described leadership and professional development, few addressed how academic librarians experience and perceive the impacts of their participation in such programs.[11] This phenomenological narrative study explored the perceptions of academic librarians in Texas regarding their experiences with leadership development. The study drew its subjects from regional universities, institutions that offer a full range of bachelor's degrees and some master's programs but few doctoral degrees. The following research questions guided this study:

- What are the differences in library leadership development experiences among the levels of librarians in regional universities in Texas?
- How do library leadership experiences affect librarians in regional universities in Texas, personally and professionally?

Literature Review

Impacts of Library Leadership Development Programs

Many institutions have tried to evaluate library leadership development programs by various methods.[12] Helen Fallon, Jane Maxwell, Ciara McCaffrey, and Seamus McMahon noted that many programs use summaries or feedback from participants to evaluate their offerings.[13] Fallon and her coauthors also discussed the impacts of the United Kingdom's International Library Leaders Programme and reported that participants had significant improvements in their professional practice, such as better vision, strategic thinking, and leadership skills.[14] Sally Kalin provided anecdotal data about the positive impacts of leadership programs through her personal experience with the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)/Harvard Leadership Institute.[15] She reported that it taught her about the critical thinking process, reframing, and self-awareness of her leadership styles.[16] Carolyn Sheehy described the

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impacts of the Synergy program, an effort in Illinois to cultivate the next generation of library leaders, from the perspectives of academic librarians, mentors, and supervisors.[17] All participants agreed that the program helped them become effective leaders.[18] Mentoring provided three advantageous aspects of the program: self-assessment, networking, and empowerment. Supervisors also favored the opportunities to work with other library professionals.[19] Overall, many researchers indicated a plethora of positive impacts from library leadership development programs.[20]

Barriers to Developing Library Leadership Skills

Numerous researchers have investigated barriers to effective library leadership. Ethel Auster and Donna Chan divided the obstacles into two types: work-related and non-work-related.[21] Work-related constraints included inadequate information, lack of equipment, materials, or financial support; and difficulties with time allocation in the workplace. Among the non-work-related barriers are personal issues, lack of information and resources, insufficient time, lack of convenience to participate in professional development, and a shortage of good quality programs. Kaetrena Davis Kendrick, Echo Leaver, and Deborah Tritt examined obstacles for small and rural academic librarians,[22] concluding that barriers in those institutions involve funding, travel distance, time, staffing, and budget cuts.[23]

Kathleen De Long focused on new library professionals who have worked less than five years in the profession.[24] She determined that the strongest barriers to leadership development for new entrants are strategic planning that fails to include training for potential leaders, a shortage of resources for projects, a rigid hierarchical structure in institutions, and a lack of compensation or encouragement for leadership development.[25]

Succession Planning

Succession planning is useful for libraries to prepare for a shortage of qualified library leaders.[26] William Curran emphasized that succession planning should be strategized to fill massive vacancies of qualified academic librarians.[27] Succession planning is not limited to larger libraries; it is also important in organizations of lesser scope and size[28] and could provide opportunities for mid-level management librarians to enhance their leadership skills.[29] Judith Nixon described four basic steps of succession planning: (1) investigate the demographics, (2) classify potentially qualified employees, (3) evaluate candidates' strengths and weaknesses, and (4) develop an appropriate program to train staff.[30] Vicki Whitmell introduced additional succession planning strategies she believes effective: formal training, job exchange among departments, more funding, a potential candidate database, formal and informal feedback, mentoring, encouraging contributions, compliments for achievements, and more communication.[31] Kimberley Bugg outlined best practices for succession planning, such as a process open to all employees and an analysis of an organization's workforce.[32] Moreover, library schools and professional organizations should ensure that academic librarians are prepared to satisfy today's leadership needs.[33] Unlike other researchers, Whitmell examined the challenges of succession planning in libraries: the shortage of qualified librarians, lack of funding, and convergence of archives and records management professions within the libraries.[34]

Methodology and Research Design

Phenomenological narrative research was conducted to investigate the perceptions of academic librarians at regional universities in Texas about leadership development through in-depth interviews. According to John Creswell, qualitative research is conducted with assumptions and theoretical frameworks to examine human problems related to individuals or groups.[35] Narrative research should begin with the experiences of individuals and collect data from the people who encountered the phenomenon being investigated.[36] Clark Moustakas specifies two main questions in phenomenological research, focused on gathering data that describe the phenomenon the participants have experienced and what situations affected their experiences.[37]

The participants for this study were librarians in regional Texas universities who were selected after a thorough review of their answers to an e-mail questionnaire (see Appendix A). The e-mail questionnaires were initially sent to 20 librarians, and 10 were chosen after excluding librarians with no leadership development experiences. The researcher purposefully selected librarians who had taken part in all types of library leadership development to gather as much insight as possible into the subject. A guided interview protocol that included demographic questions and research questions about library leadership experiences was created and used. Letters of invitation and consent forms were sent to the selected librarians explaining the purpose of the research. The participants were interviewed face-to-face or virtually with detailed questions about their leadership development experiences.

As Creswell explains, qualitative research should be ideally conducted at the site where participants experience the phenomenon.[38] The researcher did one interview on site at a library and carried out the rest with a video conferencing tool, Blackboard Collaboration Ultra. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and interpreted to generalize the themes from the experiences of the participants. A guided interview protocol (see Appendix B) was used throughout the questioning to maintain consistency.

Creswell explains that data analysis in qualitative research includes three steps: (1) preparing and organizing data, (2) sorting the data into themes through a process of coding, and (3) presenting the data.[39] For this study, the researcher asked participants open-ended questions to collect in-depth personal opinions. Then, she transcribed, coded, and analyzed the data to determine the themes from the interviews. After coding all the transcripts, she reviewed the transcribed interviews to discern patterns and trends. The researcher divided the data into themes to examine the perceptions of the librarians regarding leadership development. Categorizing themes was essential to generalize patterns and identify shared experiences of the participants.

Results

The results indicated that all participants experienced various forms of leadership development, such as training programs, workshops, conferences, webinars, and classes, ranging in length from one hour to multiple days. The leadership experience most often mentioned was the TALL Texans Leadership Development Institute (TALL Texans) program provided by the Texas Library Association. Five participants attended this

program. The institute has provided leadership and management education to Texas librarians for over 25 years. This program offers training to enhance the participants' potential to take on new roles in their organizations.

The first research question focused on the differences among levels of librarians regarding leadership skills. The participants in the study came from all levels:

- Two participants were library deans.
- Five participants held either head or director positions.
- Two participants were research and instruction librarians with more than 15 years of experience.
- One was a collection development librarian with five years of experience.

The following themes emerged: communication as the most necessary skill, practical skills as the least necessary, and money and time as the most desirable element of institutional support.

The majority of the participants chose communication as the most necessary leadership skill. Eight of 10 participants agreed that good communication skills are critical for leaders to ensure the success of their libraries. Barriers and support factors were discussed as well. All the participants described obstacles to effective library leadership, indicating that they would like institutional support to expand their leadership development. The following factors were mentioned as desirable: money and time, workforce, mentors, and administrative support. Seven participants specified money and time as the most important form of support from their institutions.

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The second research question explored the effects of library leadership development. All the participants strongly agreed that their library leadership experiences affected them positively. Two themes emerged: (1) confidence as the primary personal effect, and (2) professional impacts. The personal influences mentioned were confidence, networking, respect, and ethics. Nine participants asserted that they gained self-assurance from their leadership development experiences. Although not all the participants cited personal influences resulting from their library leadership development, all had professional impacts. Multiple career ramifications were identified, including job promotion and improved problem-solving skills, vision, accountability, and strategic-planning skills.

Implications and Further Study

Based on the findings and conclusions of this qualitative phenomenological narrative study, the researchers propose the following implications for potential administrators in higher education libraries:

- Despite insufficient time and money, libraries should recognize the need for staff and professional development to help library staff stay relevant and embrace change.[40] Low-cost professional development programs might include in-house

training, local conferences, virtual conferences, lunch talks, journal clubs, mentoring programs, and self-directed readings.[41] Such efforts could help librarians develop their leadership ability with limited expenditures. Further, librarians could hone their leadership skills even before they are needed.

• Libraries should create effective ways to cultivate staff leadership skills to deal with tightened budgets and insufficient time. Succession planning is efficient in providing opportunities for mid-level librarians to develop their leadership skills.[42] Such planning is also useful for libraries to prepare for a shortage of qualified library leaders and especially important for smaller libraries with a lack of resources.[43]

The library profession has undergone many changes over the last several years, including how leadership is viewed. Numerous articles in the literature have stressed the need for library leadership for all levels of library employees to manage ongoing changes successfully.[44]

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This study focused on academic librarians at regional universities in Texas who experienced leadership development. Further study might expand to librarians at large public libraries to investigate their perceptions. Then, additional research might compare the differences between academic librarians and public librarians or extend the setting to other states in the United States.

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Appendix A

E-Mail Questionnaire

Dear Participant:
My name is Yumi Shin, the coordinator of reference/access services at the library of Lamar State College in Port Arthur, TX. As a doctoral candidate at Lamar University, Beaumont, TX, I am conducting a study for my dissertation to understand the perceptions of librarians in regional universities in Texas regarding library leadership and reveal the ways of improving library services. The purpose of this phenomenological narrative study was to examine Texas regional university librarians' perceptions of leadership development experiences to provide better library services to all types of patrons. The results should be of interest and value to all involved in learning and teaching.

I would like to ask you to participate in my research and provide me with your valuable comments. My tentative schedule would be from 7/29 to 8/16, and if this schedule would not work for you, I could change the time and date to when you are available. The interview will be done via face-to-face or virtual interviews.

If you are interested in participating in this research, please e-mail me with answers to the below questions.

1. What is your current position at your library?
2. What is your role [or] your title?
3. How long have you been working at your place?
4. Have you had any types of library leadership developments? If so, what kinds?

Thank you in advance,
Sincerely yours,
Yumi Shin

Appendix B

Interview Guided Protocol Questions

Purpose Statement: The purpose of this phenomenological narrative study was to examine Texas regional university librarians' perceptions of leadership development experiences to provide better library services to all types of patrons.

Background Questions:

1. Tell me about yourself. What is your current position at your library? What is your role [or] your title? How long have you been working at your place?
2. What did you do before you stepped into your current position? Have you worked at different positions in the same organization? If so, what, where, and how long?
3. Where did you work before this organization? Have you worked at another library? If yes, where, what, and how long?

Research Questions:

1. What are the differences regarding library leadership development experiences among various levels of librarians in regional universities in Texas?
   a. What leadership skills do you think you need the most and the least, and why?
   b. What leadership skills do you want to attain now in your current position the most and the least, and why?
   c. What leadership skills do you think [are] the most important as a leader and why?
   d. What types of support do you wish to get to obtain leadership skills?
   e. What are the challenges to get support from your institution?

2. How do library leadership experiences affect librarians in regional universities in Texas personally and professionally?

    a. What was the biggest change before and after the library leadership experiences personally and why? Describe the personal impacts of your leadership experiences.

    b. What was the biggest change before and after the library leadership experiences professionally? Describe the professional impacts of your leadership experiences.

Notes

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