

Will Your Next Library Director Have an MLIS?

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Introduction

Academic library directors are facing two unprecedented challenges as they strive to remain active participants in the university setting: the COVID pandemic with its vacillating user expectations, and demographic anomalies resulting in fewer high school students attending college. Now more than ever academic libraries need sound leadership to face the burdens of budget shortfalls, user needs, and decreasing college enrollment.

Internal factors also play a part in these uncertain times for libraries. Our profession is aging, and many have predicted a mass exodus of senior administrators from the profession (Wilder 8; Lewis and Orr 1). With a plethora of vacancies in senior positions, are there enough qualified candidates to fill senior library positions?

Furthermore, we are also seeing the influx of non-MLIS professionals in formerly MLIS positions. One only needs to observe the process in which the latest ALA Executive Director position was filled to appreciate the trials facing search committees seeking qualified director candidates. Perhaps search committees in the future will examine the possibilities of filling vacant director positions with non-MLIS professionals.

As a profession, we don't appear to have a strong desire to step into directorship positions (Hernon et al., "Next library" ix). As a result, we need to look closely at qualifications for directorship positions to ensure that there are enough skilled candidates within the search pools.

This study examines prior employment and degree attainment of midsize academic library directors with the focus of evaluating factors that enhance leadership development. This is a follow-up study to one published in *Library Leadership & Management* describing background characteristics and educational attainment of ARL directors (Condic). While that study examined traits of ARL directors, this study follows with similar observations for midsize academic library directors.

Senior most library administrators will be referred to as library directors even though many have the title of dean or university librarian. Additionally, the master's in library science degree will be referred to as the MLIS degree.

Literature Review

What qualities are valued in library leaders? In a seminal work, Hernon and colleagues identified desired leadership characteristics and pinpointed numerous skills that are necessary for innovative leadership including keen problem-solving attributes, budgetary experience, team building know-how, and a reasonable willingness to take risks (“University library” 121). More recently, Martin compiled results from 316 academic librarians and identified six themes that are necessary for future, successful library leaders: people first, visionary, change agent, experienced librarian, role model, and communicator (815).

So, where do future library directors develop these necessary skills? Work experience is the obvious answer along with mentorships, fellowships, and professional development. Wong concluded that everyday work experiences foster the development of leadership skills especially if librarians take the responsibility to seek opportunities that promote skill development (4). First, librarians need to be self-reflective to discover inherent leadership strengths and weaknesses. Second, they need to be open to engage in library activities which will promote self-awareness and responsibility. Third, they need to honestly evaluate their own interest in becoming an academic library leader (Wong, 4).

Mentorships are a viable component of leadership development. Ross surveyed the literature and discovered that informal mentorship, consisting of peer or group mentorship, can be effective and beneficial to the mentee as well as the mentor (415). In addition, this setting acts as a safe environment for mentees to question established norms and learn best practices in dealing with colleagues in difficult or unfamiliar situations. Mentorships provide opportunities for librarians to expand their knowledge and learn new skills. It is a sound and effective way to build relationships and work with colleagues on shared priorities. These experiences, in turn, provide a good foundation for dealing with future personnel encounters.

Numerous professional development leadership opportunities exist for academic librarians with two of the most popular being the Harvard Leadership Institute and the ARL Leadership Fellows program. Banush examined positions of former ARL Libraries Leadership Fellows Program participants and found that 41% became library directors after program participation. Another 26% were either promoted or switched to a new role. “Overall, program participation does seem to correlate with professional advancement” (Banush 401).

While work experience and mentorship activities can stimulate growth in leadership development, another background characteristic is the attainment of graduate degrees. What graduate degrees do existing directors possess?

Graduate Degrees

Condic examined ARL websites and found that 90% of the 125 ARL library directors had earned a library science degree (7). Of the remaining 10%, two directors have earned doctoral degrees in areas of leadership, while the other 11 directors had attained graduate degrees in the social sciences, humanities, or the sciences. Regarding the MLIS degree, 34% of the library directors had the MLIS and no other graduate degree, another 34% had the MLIS and an additional master's degree, while 31% had earned doctorate degrees. The discipline of the subject level master's degrees was examined, and 26% had attained master's in management or leadership disciplines (Condic 9). Presumably, these advanced degrees in management and leadership have played a part in the directors' growth in leadership development.

Do these directors believe that the MLIS degree fits into the leadership picture? Michalak and colleagues surveyed ARL directors asking whether the MLIS is needed to be a library director. Of the 79 respondents, 15 responded definitely yes, and 18 probably yes (758). Those supporting the need for the MLIS commented that the degree provides foundational information in the library science field to aid in strategic decision making. Additionally, they cited the need for the degree to help build trust among the staff.

By comparison, 13 library directors answered probably not, and another 13 answered definitely not when asked if the library degree is necessary for library leadership. Reasons given included the fact that the MLIS was attained too long ago, and that the MLIS was no longer relevant. This group "placed more importance on practical management skills than foundational library skills" (Michalak et al. 759).

Longevity of Employment

Stable leadership can lead to consistency and direction within the library, as a result the longevity of the library director's employment can play a factor in the library's health. If a director stays too long, the library may become stagnant and sluggish in adjusting to change. However, if the director does not stay long enough, the library may have a hard time developing priorities that move the library in the right direction. Metz discovered from a sampling of 215 academic librarians that library directors tend to stay in their positions on an average of eight years, dispelling previous studies indicating that their length of stay was much shorter (360).

Frequent turnover of library directors can lead to an increased number of acting or interim replacements as libraries gear up for lengthy search committee processes. Irwin and deVries examined experiences of 108 interim library directors and discovered that newly hired interims may have limited experience as supervisors or managers (238). The authors found that the length

of the interim appointment was longer than the interim first realized, however, their experiences were overall positive in that approximately half of the interims indicated their willingness to become interims again if asked (Irwin and deVries 246).

Methodology

For this purposes of this present study, midsize academic libraries were identified by the Carnegie classification R2 – doctoral universities with high research activity as opposed to the R1 classification - doctoral universities with very high research activity. Data for this study was initially gathered in August 2020 but was not completed. The final data set for this survey was re-visited, reviewed, corrected, and completed 19 months later in February 2022. Removing libraries that were not academic in nature, the final sample set included 131 libraries. Identification of the library directors and their titles was collected from library websites. Additional information, such as beginning date of employment, previous employment, and graduate degrees, was attained through library websites, news articles, blogs, and public Linked-In posts. Of the 131 libraries identified for this study, the researcher was unable to find information about the deans and their library degrees for four libraries, reducing the sample size to 127.

Results and Discussion

MLIS Degree

Ninety-five percent of directors from these midsize academic libraries hold the MLIS degree, one director has a library doctorate, and the remaining 4% do not have library degrees (Table 1).

Table 1: Directors from Midsize Libraries and their Library Degrees

Degree	Number	Percent
MLIS	121	95%
No MLIS but LIS PhD	1	1%
No Library Degree	5	4%
Total	127	100%

By comparison, the ARL study found that 89% of the directors had an MLIS, 1% had the library science doctorate, leaving 10% with no library degree. Using chi square, the difference

between these two groups regarding the attainment of a library degree was found to be (barely) significant at $p=.05$.

What could be a reason for this difference in library degrees held by academic library directors? Those overseeing search committees for directors in larger library systems may decide that a director with a doctorate will be viewed as being on par with their peer deans. Though the value of the MLIS could be beneficial in working with library personnel, the search committee may need to prioritize the need for a Ph.D. if the search pool is shallow. As a result, these search committees may value the attainment of a doctorate in any discipline as compared to the MLIS.

Subject Graduate Degrees

Regarding the number of graduate degrees, 36% of the directors from midsize libraries have attained one graduate degree – the MLIS. Another 34% have earned the MLIS as well as a subject master’s degree, and 29% have earned a doctoral degree. Of those library directors with doctorates, the vast majority have earned a subject doctorate along with the MLIS degree, while four library directors have attained a subject doctorate but have not received the MLIS degree (Table 2).

Table 2: Highest Degrees held by Directors from Midsize Libraries

Mid size Director Degree	Number	Percent
Master’s degree in Library and information science (MLIS)	46	36%
MLIS and 2 nd master’s degree	43	34%
Master’s degree, no MLIS	1	<1%
Doctorate	37	29%
• LIS doctorate and MLIS	2	>1%
• Subject doctorate and MLIS	30	24%
• LIS doctorate, no MLIS	1	<1%
• Subject doctorate, no MLIS	4	3%
Total	127	100%

These results are similar to those from the ARL director study (Condic). Among the ARL directors, 34% has attained solely the MLIS, another 34% had earned the MLIS as well as a second master’s degree, and 31% had earned a doctoral degree (Condic 8).

There are 34 directors from midsize libraries who have earned subject doctoral degrees, and approximately one third are related to leadership and administration – disciplines that could benefit the library director in becoming an effective leader (Table 3).

Table 3: Discipline of Subject Doctorate

Discipline	Number	Leadership or administrative concentration
Ph.D Educational leadership, higher education, or sociology of education	14	10
Ed.D – Ed tech, sec ed, or ed admin	5	1
Humanities (music, history, etc)	5	
Instructional Design/Program Design	4	
Juris Doctorate	4	
Science (biology fields)	2	
Total	34	11

On the other hand, the discipline of the additional master's is more varied than that of the doctorate degrees. Twelve of these master's degrees have a focus on leadership or administration while the remaining 55 are varied in discipline (Table 4). History and English are common second master's areas, similar to the disciplines found in the ARL directors' study with English and history being the predominant second master's disciplines (Condic 9).

Table 4: Discipline of Subject Master's

Discipline	Number	Leadership or administrative concentration
Humanities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History (8) • English (7) • Music (6) • Divinity (5) • Communication (3) • Other (5) 	34	
Education: Educ Tech or not specified	8	
Social sciences or area studies	8	
Public Administration	6	6
Business: MBA (3), others (2)	5	3
Organizational Development	3	3
Science: biology and another	3	
Total	67	12

In the past, candidates needed a second master's degree to qualify for many subject bibliographer and library director positions. In some cases, any second master's degree was sufficient to qualify for these openings. While the reliance of the second master's has diminished over time, many library directors nonetheless have obtained second master's, a few while working in their previous positions as associate or assistant directors.

The attainment of a second master's broadens the librarian's perspective and enfold them within a discipline separately from library science. This is beneficial as it broadens their base and helps them view the library from an external perspective – a useful outlook for library directors. By the same token, the attainment of a subject doctorate illustrates that the director can work with committees and complete long-term projects – another valuable skill for library directors. So, while additional graduate degrees may not be required for library director positions, these additional degrees certainly provide benefits in the development of leadership skills.

Turnover

A large portion of the data for this study was originally gathered in August 2020, however, in the middle of this project the author stopped gathering data to focus on a different study. As a result, the data was re-examined, corrected, and updated in February 2022. Within that 19-month gap, 19% of library directors (20/104) had retired, resigned, or moved on. This serendipitous glimpse at library director turnover during the COVID pandemic is intriguing. Though outside the scope of this paper, one wonders if the pandemic played a factor in the decision to leave.

A direct consequence of library director turnover relates to the number of librarians whose titles begin with Interim or Acting. Results from this study illustrate that 17% (22/127) of the library director titles began with Interim or Acting. As Irwin and deVries discovered, this population tends to have scant personnel work experience, so not only did they step into an unfamiliar role but also faced the COVID pandemic mayhem. Certainly, this was a challenging time for veteran directors to oversee a library but doubly challenging for those in interim positions.

Another data point corresponding to turnover is the length of time directors have remained in their positions. The average length of employment for this sample of directors is 5.4 years while the median is four years. This median indicates that 50% of these directors have been in their positions four or fewer years. This low median number compounded with the aging profession and predictions of high retirement rates results in the director candidate market being even more tenuous than previously realized especially when compared to the eight-year length of stay discovered by Metz (360).

Skill development of library directors

Much has been written about the value of the MLIS degree. Recall that Michalak and colleagues found that a number of directors did not believe that the MLIS was necessary to lead (758). However, what this question fails to capture is the realization that the MLIS was likely required as a qualification at the time these directors began their library careers, assuming that many have library careers. Earning the MLIS usually precludes the attainment of a professional position. Since most academic library directors in this study have prior library work experience, there will be quite a gap between library science master's education and the time that one becomes a library director. Therefore, it would stand to reason that many might not believe that their MLIS contributed to their efficiency as a library director – too much time has elapsed, and in that time these professionals have been employed in positions that help them develop skills to be directors. This reasoning reiterates the importance of previous work history as a main component of the development of leadership skills but it does not diminish the role of the MLIS degree.

Other graduate degrees have a role in leadership development especially those such as educational leadership, organizational development, public administration, and MBAs. Not only do these degrees provide appropriate content, but the potential to network with people in similar positions is priceless. However, even attaining any doctoral degree provides value as one negotiates with a dissertation committee, perseveres in the face of numerous obstacles, and completes a large and complex dissertation project.

Work experience is the primary way directors attain the skills needed to be effective leaders. In this sample of library directors, almost all were previously directors at other institutions; interim, associate, or assistant directors; program or department heads; or team leaders on special projects. In these capacities, they had appropriate and applicable experience with management, planning, budgetary, and personnel issues. Professional development opportunities are encouraged for those wishing to add to their leadership skills. As it happens, a number of library directors in this study had participated in the Harvard leadership program.

Conclusion

The profession is aging, senior administrator retirements are on the horizon, the challenges brought about by COVID are unprecedented, and the value of higher education is being questioned. This is a challenging time to find a new academic library director. Will search committees require successful candidates to have the MLIS degree even if the applicant pool is lacking in qualified candidates?

The MLIS degree has value. Refrain from being too harsh to discount its effectiveness because in many cases the degree was probably earned long before the librarian became a library director. Since attaining the degree, the librarian has a foundational knowledge of the profession that has continued to grow. However, if there are too few qualified applicants for a library directors' search requiring the MLIS, then it is better to expand the applicant pool to include non-MLIS candidates than to end with a failed and frozen search.

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