

Librarians as Academic Leaders: Uniquely Qualified for the Job

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Introduction

The 21st century academic librarian must embrace the role of campus leader, assertively pursuing leadership positions in strategic institutional initiatives. The academic library's mission demands direct support of the institution's educational mission, and therefore compels academic librarians to contribute as individuals to the institution's mission. "Successful librarians and library administrators keep their fingers on the pulse of the academy in its fullest and broadest sense."¹

Some may question why librarians should aspire to campus leadership roles in addition to traditional functions such as acquisitions, cataloging, reference, and library management. While these functions continue to be essential, they no longer suffice to fulfill the needs and growing expectations of students, faculty, and administrators. Academic librarians are innovative problem solvers, expert at working within financial, space, and time constraints, and skilled at collaborating in cross-disciplinary teams and working with diverse populations.

Like the profession of nursing, librarianship has by necessity adopted a more managerial and instructional focus. Excellent patient care is the ultimate goal for nurses just as excellent service to patrons continues to

be the librarian's goal, but the work each performs to achieve these goals has changed. Tasks such as changing dressings or answering directional questions are no less important whether performed by librarians or paraprofessionals. Expanding paraprofessionals' roles encourages staff development, increases productivity, and frees librarians to focus on more demanding professional work and take on new responsibilities.

No part of the academic library is immune to change, and librarians have become adept at managing that change. Our ability to lead change and assume increased responsibility within our professional environment prepares us to adapt to the challenges of leadership at the institutional level.

Obstacles to Leadership

While it is easy to recognize the potential benefits of taking on campus leadership roles, we must acknowledge possible barriers and weigh the associated opportunity costs. As librarians we recognize the need to rethink our professional roles as interpreters of collections and selectors and organizers of information. Similarly we must consider the consequences of adding responsibilities beyond our traditional roles.

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Library literature on leadership focuses primarily on management of libraries or library units and leading specific endeavors, such as implementing technology or information literacy. In their 1998 bibliographic essay on leadership in librarianship, Karp and Murdock echoed Gertzog's observation of 1989 that "leadership" was not used as a subject term in *Library Literature*, the major index to the literature of librarianship.² The same is true in 2006 for the online version, *Library Literature and Information Science*.³ Noting that the term "leadership" was used in other relevant indexes, Karp and Murdock suggested that the profession of librarianship did not appear to acknowledge leadership as a legitimate entity meriting "clearly defined discussion and definition."⁴

If we are not accustomed to viewing leadership in a holistic way within our profession, we may find it difficult to envision ourselves as campus leaders. Position descriptions for academic librarians often describe supervisory or managerial qualifications; however, they typically do not emphasize leadership itself as a qualification or the campus as the base of operations. Therefore we may conclude that our skills, training, and, indeed, our avocation prepare us to serve best within the library.

The reality of the daily workload may also discourage librarians from seeking leadership roles outside of the library. We often must cope with insufficient staffing and increasing service expectations while facing budget cuts. Even when library budgets increase, costs for subscriptions frequently consume any gains. We can become so caught up in day-to-day survival that it is difficult to conceive of adding significantly to our workload, particularly when it seems there is nothing we can give up to make room for additional responsibilities.

Institutional culture and expectations can be impediments to librarians' achieving campus leadership. Some institutions have few leadership opportunities for librarians. In smaller settings librarians may find it difficult to leave the library even to support core functions such as meeting faculty as liaisons or providing information literacy instruction. In larger institutions there may be more competition for existing opportunities, particularly when there are many librarians.

When librarians do not enjoy faculty (or quasi-faculty) status, the path to campus leadership roles can be more difficult. Librarians may not have the political status needed to gain entrée to faculty committees. Committee service is an important avenue to establish librarians in their roles as educators apart from their traditional functions. Academic librarians who are too

closely identified with support services rather than academic affairs risk being seen as tangential rather than central to the educational mission of the institution.

Librarians as Leaders

Challenges should not prevent librarians from achieving leadership roles. As campus leaders we can better position the library within the larger campus agenda and further the reputation of librarians as collaborators and valued contributors to the achievement of the institutional mission and goals. Additionally, we can more clearly assess faculty and student needs in order to improve planning for the services and collections that will most benefit our campuses.

Leadership is "an essential reality of librarianship."⁵ Successful academic libraries are not dependent on a single leader. While not every librarian wants formal advancement, and many institutions have relatively few formal leadership positions available, all librarians who exercise leadership can provide tangible benefits to the institution and achieve personal and professional satisfaction.⁶

Academic librarians possess many of the capabilities required of excellent campus leaders. We are trained as researchers whose curiosity and tenacity lead us to innovate and experiment as we continuously seek to integrate and improve the services we provide. We are expert at doing more with less. We are pragmatic collaborators partnering within and across institutions to provide access to collections and services, and we negotiate with vendors to make purchases of essential electronic resources affordable. All of these experiences and skills serve our institutions well within the library context, but can also serve in the broader context of the campus on committees, task forces, and projects.

Factors such as advances in technology, budget pressures, and accreditation requirements challenge us to redefine what it means to be a librarian and a professional and to adapt our work accordingly. None has affected our profession as radically as the ubiquity of technology. Consider mediated searching for example. Once the province of librarians, mediated searching is now a rarity in academic libraries. Librarians who envisioned a new service model led this transformation by spurring vendors to develop more intuitive search interfaces and provide systems that make access to electronic resources seamless.

Academic librarians' training, skills, professional values, and frequent interaction with students, faculty, administrators, and other campus departments provide

a unique vantage point from which to view institutional needs and trends. As Houbeck notes, "Our work brings us into close contact with the two constituencies within the university: students and faculty. Of all the people within the institution, librarians probably know more than anyone about the daily concerns and needs of these groups."⁷ As librarians, we appreciate the viewpoints of varied academic disciplines, "The education and work-life experience of the academic librarian makes one at ease with the totality of an institution's disciplinary components."⁸ We also have a high level of comfort in working with administrators. Unlike many teaching faculty, librarians have clearly defined administrative roles (for example, budgeting, payroll, contract negotiation, etc.). These roles help librarians to gain an understanding of campus administrators that complements our understanding of faculty and students.

The characteristics that define a successful academic librarian are often those that contribute to leadership ability. Metz⁹ and Meringolo¹⁰ make the case that the strengths and skills developed as librarians are those that support them in their leadership roles outside of the library. Metz describes librarians as systems thinkers who are constantly learning and who understand the power of information; he argues that because many of the problems facing universities are systems problems, librarians are well positioned to be of value to the campus as problem solvers. Librarians are integrative thinkers whose world view includes learning and problem solving as integral parts of planning and providing services to meet the needs of their diverse clientele.

Why Must We Lead?

What do we risk by clinging solely to our traditional roles within the confines of the library? According to Mech, "Unless more librarians lead and change the day-to-day reality of how our profession is defined and practiced, our skills will become obsolete and our future contributions to the academic enterprise will be marginalized."¹¹ While the library itself may remain the symbolic center of campus life, the political reality will tell a different story. Libraries do not generate revenue—they are cost centers and as such need to demonstrate their value at every opportunity. Gratch Lindauer contends that many academic libraries do a poor job of demonstrating their contributions to educational outcomes because they fail to adopt the measures, language, and documentation that are typically used by campus administrators and planners.¹² Competition for

scarce resources and lack of understanding of the value added by libraries and librarians may lead to decisions to cut resources and staff, possibly to outsourcing, and ultimately to closing libraries. Many hospital and special libraries have been eliminated to cut costs. When institutions such as the University of Phoenix prosper and are accredited without maintaining physical libraries, the potential for academic library closings does not seem farfetched.

Our contributions to the campus enterprise must be visible and widely recognized. If our functions are too closely identified with information technology, we risk being seen as redundant. Every campus administrator is aware that technology is indispensable to both the business and academic operations of the institution. The facts that technology requires continuous investment and upgrading and that student expectations cannot be fulfilled without it are also well understood. On the other hand, as many instruction librarians can testify, the differences between computer literacy and information literacy are not intuitive or necessarily well understood. Administrators may not grasp the need for librarians' involvement in teaching critical thinking and evaluation skills. They may see teaching as the sole province of faculty. Coupled with the erroneous beliefs that most information is freely available on the Web and that students already know how to use computers to find information, it might seem logical that the educational technology staff could fill the role of librarians in guiding students' online research, thus eliminating a major function of librarians. Participating in campus-wide endeavors enables us to demonstrate our value as professionals as well as the value libraries provide to the institution.

Making a Difference

Mech asserts that higher education and academic librarianship are being reshaped by the actions of professionals who see the relationships between their jobs and the larger environment and who take advantage of opportunities to be involved and innovative and to make a difference both personally and professionally. To him leadership is "like a pebble cast into a pond—even the smallest stone can create a ripple far from the point of impact."¹³ If every act of leadership has potential value to the person and the institution, then it is incumbent on us to become leaders at whatever level we can. "There are all kinds of leaders—some become directors and managers, some become technical experts, or subject specialists, some help teams to work well together, and

some are asked to contribute to professional organizations or serve on boards.”¹⁴

There are many opportunities to serve our libraries and our institutions that take advantage of our skills and specialized knowledge, help us build collegial relationships, and open the door to future leadership roles. We should not overlook seemingly unrelated campus projects such as fundraising drives. Participation on a capital campaign or United Way fundraising committee provides an opportunity to work with individuals from all parts of the campus, as well as an opportunity to try out a leadership role. Success in any campus project can pay off later when we seek more responsible roles. In addition, participating in these types of projects can directly benefit the library by giving librarians a voice in deciding how funds raised should be allocated.

Librarians can often exercise effective leadership by serving on institutional committees. As Metz observes, librarians know how to “get things done on a committee or a task force. We know how to be a member. We know how to be a chair. Librarians don’t seem to hesitate to become responsible for an assignment when others may. Every time we step forward and produce results we increase the likelihood of the success of the library. This is a skill that individual librarians have leveraged, but we could become intentional in our intent to influence a campus by doing this.”¹⁵ By serving on key campus committees, such as governance, technology, and assessment, librarians can broaden their perspective and reinforce the perception of librarians as able and collegial partners in campus endeavors.

Librarians are logical and necessary collaborators on strategic institutional endeavors such as accreditation self-studies, copyright/intellectual property, academic integrity policy development, and general education planning. Building reputations as capable and reliable contributors helps librarians to be seen and accepted as essential players in institutional decision making processes. This is especially true when librarians enjoy faculty status and participate in governance.

Reality Check

Leadership may not appeal to every academic librarian. Many of us chose our profession with plans to specialize in aspects of librarianship that bring us personal and professional satisfaction. To some leadership may seem an impossible goal due to staffing and time constraints or a campus climate that is not receptive to the notion of librarians as collaborators and peers. Nevertheless we need to do all we can to develop ourselves as leaders and

to establish ourselves as colleagues and peers or face irrelevance. Leadership can be accomplished in a variety of ways. It is not only leadership at the highest level of the institution that matters, nor is the library well served with only top-down leadership.

Recognizing that taking on additional responsibilities does not diminish our commitment to our daily work, we need to be selective and strategic in choosing projects. A key component to maintaining credibility is the ability to meet commitments and deadlines, therefore it is essential to choose and pursue projects that fit our individual strengths, interests, and the time available. We cannot wait for opportunities to come to us—we need to seize opportunities or create them for ourselves. We can do this in part by capitalizing on good will and positive image of the profession. Librarians are often seen as intelligent and trustworthy individuals committed to helping others. It would seem natural for librarians to volunteer their services rather than wait to be asked. Likewise, it would be seen as a natural extension of our work to partner with other units on campus projects such as copyright education or developing an academic integrity policy. We should seek or create opportunities to collaborate to present and publish with faculty. This task does not need to be onerous; rather, it can grow out of our regular contact with faculty as we provide library services.

The academic library is a physical and virtual confluence of diverse fields of intellectual inquiry serving the needs of the entire institution. “Those who lead libraries must establish themselves as academic leaders on campus, leaders who understand campus culture, understand and appreciate the mission and program of the university, and are always willing to contribute their energy, expertise, and ideas to the general well-being of the campus.”¹⁶ We must strategically position ourselves as professionals and demonstrate the value of libraries as assets, actively contributing to institutional goals and initiatives. Many academic librarians have already accepted this reality and have begun to actively seek strategic and achievable leadership roles matched to their personal strengths, and their institutions’ political realities. They can serve as role models and mentors to their colleagues who are newly considering ways to extend their own leadership roles from the library to the institution.

Next Steps

Any librarian can be a leader, and academic librarians should be leaders. Library administrators must encourage, empower, and mentor librarians to identify appro-

priate leadership opportunities. Librarians new to seeking leadership opportunities should ask themselves:

- What leadership skills or interests do you possess that could benefit your campus as a whole?
- Does your campus have a leadership “vacuum” that either you or the library could fill? For example, copyright policy, digital repository, or assessment.
- How well is the librarian’s role as a collaborator in the academic mission of the institution understood? What could you do to facilitate communication of the library’s impact on educational outcomes and the value added by librarians?
- If librarians on your campus enjoy faculty or quasi-faculty status, are they included on all campus-wide faculty committees? For example, faculty senate, curriculum, or institutional review board.
- If librarians on your campus do not enjoy faculty status, are they included in campus-wide administrative committees? For example, educational technology, budget, or benefits.
- How can librarians gain committee appointments? Could you volunteer? How is committee membership decided?

Librarianship provides us with many opportunities to make a difference if we are willing to take risks and be leaders.¹⁷ Academic librarians are uniquely qualified to exercise leadership both within the libraries and the institutions we serve by virtue of our education, skills, knowledge, professional values, and access to all constituencies within the institution. Aversion to risk and failure to cross campus boundaries denies our institutions and our profession the full benefit of our expertise.¹⁸ By accepting the role of campus leader we can best serve our libraries and contribute fully to the educational mission of our institutions.

Notes

1. Torre Meringolo, “Supporting the Institutional Mis-

sion; Libraries Leading the Way,” *C&RL News* 67, no. 9 (2006): 544.

2. Rashelle S. Karp and Cindy Murdock, “Leadership in Librarianship,” in *Leadership and Academic Librarians*, eds. Terrence F. Mech and Gerald B. McCabe (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1998), 251–64.

3. *Library Literature & Information Science*, <http://web.ebscohost.com/indexes/subjects>; accessed December 29, 2006).

4. Karp and Murdock, “Leadership in Librarianship,” 251–64.

5. Susan Fifer Canby, “Librarians and Leadership,” *Information Outlook* 8, no. 5 (2004): 24.

6. Terrence Mech, “Leadership and the Evolution of Academic Librarianship,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 22, no. 5 (1996): 346.

7. Robert L. Houbeck, Jr., “Leveraging Our Assets: The Academic Library and Campus Leadership,” *The Bottom Line: Managing Library Finances* 15, no. 2 (2002): 57.

8. Meringolo, “Supporting the Institutional Mission,” 544.

9. Ray Metz, “A Librarian’s Awareness,” *C&RL News* 67, no. 11 (2006): 672.

10. Meringolo, “Supporting the Institutional Mission,” 546.

11. Mech, “Leadership and the Evolution,” 345.

12. Bonnie Gratch Lindauer, “Defining and Measuring the Library’s Impact on Campuswide Outcomes,” *College & Research Libraries* 59, no. 6 (1998): 546.

13. Mech, “Leadership and the Evolution,” 345.

14. Canby, “Librarians and Leadership,” 24.

15. Metz, “A Librarian’s Awareness,” 673.

16. Delmus E. Williams, “The Library Director as a Campus Leader,” in *Leadership and Academic Librarians* (see note 2), 39–54.

17. Canby, “Librarians and Leadership,” 27.

18. Mech, “Leadership and the Evolution of Academic Librarianship,” 346.