

Attributes for the Next Generation of Library Directors

Arthur P. Young, Ronald R. Powell, and Peter Hernon

Abstract

This paper identifies the attributes (traits, skills, and knowledge) that the next generation of academic and public library directors need to possess, and it compares those attributes across type of library.

Research has shown that the number of librarians retiring or leaving the profession exceeds the number of graduates in programs of library and information studies. Furthermore, the average age of academic librarians is older than their counterparts in other types of libraries. It has also been shown that the turnover of library directorships will continue at a high rate for the foreseeable future. Although, at present, there is no crisis regarding the pool of individuals qualified for senior positions as leaders and managers, such a crisis could loom. Against this stark background, the paper expands on our reporting of the attributes that directors whose libraries are members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) need to possess. At

the same time, the paper explores the attributes essential for directors of non-ARL libraries, including those whose institutions are part of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), and directors of medium and large-sized public libraries.

Procedures

The Delphi technique uses sequential surveys to obtain the opinions of a group of experts “on issues that are essentially non-factual.”¹ It is designed to generate consensus by refining systematically the prior responses of those experts. For this study, we conducted a series of sequential surveys with library directors of:

- universities that had membership in the ARL;
- academic institutions that are part of ACRL;
- public libraries.²

Individual interviews were held with some of these directors as well as with directors who did not participate in one of the surveys, and independent commentaries provided by other directors provided additional

Arthur P. Young is Dean, University Libraries, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois, email: ayoung@niu.edu; Ronald R. Powell is Professor, Library and Information Science Program, Wayne State University, email: ad5328@wayne.edu; and Peter Hernon is Professor, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Simmons College, Boston, Massachusetts, email: peter.hernon@simmons.edu.

insights into the lists of attributes that emerged. In total, more than sixty ARL, ACRL, and public library directors participated in one of the various surveys or interviews.

Findings

Since the collective findings are reported elsewhere,³ this section provides a new framework for viewing and interpreting the attributes identified by academic library directors, both those in the ARL and ACRL. Suzanne H. Mahmoodi and Geraldine King identified the attributes for public library directors, and their grouping of attributes provides a general framework that can be adapted to academic librarianship. In addition to listing competencies, they also identified the major responsibilities of public library directors and labeled them “Key Results Areas.”⁴ We have also adapted those areas to reflect the responsibilities of academic library directors.

Common Attributes

Neither the ARL directors nor the ACRL directors saw or reacted to the list generated by the others. Thus, the following depiction and analysis are suggestive and the full extent to which they differ have not been explored. Furthermore, the complete list of attributes suggested by both groups will be highlighted and not fully reported here.⁵

Mahmoodi and King defined six categories and various subcategories. We modified them thusly:

1. Leadership Abilities and Skills: Taking initiative, making things happen through the effective action of others.

- Vision-future;
- Community role/involvement;
- Political/negotiating/networking/motivating skills; and
- Fund-raising.

2. Management Skills: Structuring one’s own activities and those of others; coordinating the use of resources to maximize productivity and efficiency.

- Personnel, including staff development;
- Planning and budgeting; and
- Operations.

3. Knowledge Areas: Applying the technical knowledge needed to do the job, including competence in library and information management.

4. Cognitive Skills/Abilities: Processing information effectively to learn new material, identify and define problems, and make decisions. How a person thinks and analyzes.

5. Interpersonal Abilities: Interacting with others.

6. Personal Traits.

Although the first four categories subdivide, Figure 1 only highlights the general categories. We shifted some of the topical areas that Mahmoodi and King used to other categories. For example, because both “community role” and “fund-raising” relate to the external role of the leadership, we listed them under “Leadership” and not “Knowledge Areas.” Furthermore, consistent with the other depictions of the attributes that we have generated, the first two, “Leadership Abilities and Attitudes” and “Administrative Abilities,” are the foundation that other attributes support.

Key Results Areas

These areas, which represent a refinement of the attributes, identify major responsibilities for academic library directors of today and the next decade. The following nine areas correspond to those of Mahmoodi and King, but the items listed under each differ:⁶

1. Fiscal Management

- Responsible for business operations of library.

2. Planning

- Maintain planning cycle; and
- Develop shared vision.

3. Personnel management and development

- Oversee human resources program; and
- Ensure opportunities for development.

4. Community involvement and representing library

- Increase visibility of library;
- Represent library to external and internal community;
- Maintain productive relationships with consortia and networks;
- Develop and foster partnerships; and
- Work collaboratively with the above groups.

5. Fund-raising

- Be involved in fund-raising efforts and in exploring alternate funding sources; and
- Develop a strategic fund-raising plan.

Attributes for the Next Generation of Library Directors

6. Program and service design, coordination, evaluation

- Ensure library materials and services meet the needs of communities; and
- Plan and evaluate services and programs (nurture the development of new programs and services/refine existing ones as needed).

7. Work environment: Organizational structure, operations, culture

- Provide atmosphere that encourages diversity, team-building, accountability, professional growth of staff, trust, and productivity;
- Articulate, support, and keep focus on organizational mission and vision, including innovation, trust, and staff participation; and
- Manage change and ensure staff acceptance.

8. Management of facilities and technology

- Direct facilities projects and technology (in context of “planning”);
- Ensure effective use and replacement of technology; and
- Plan and oversee maintenance and improvement of library facilities and property.

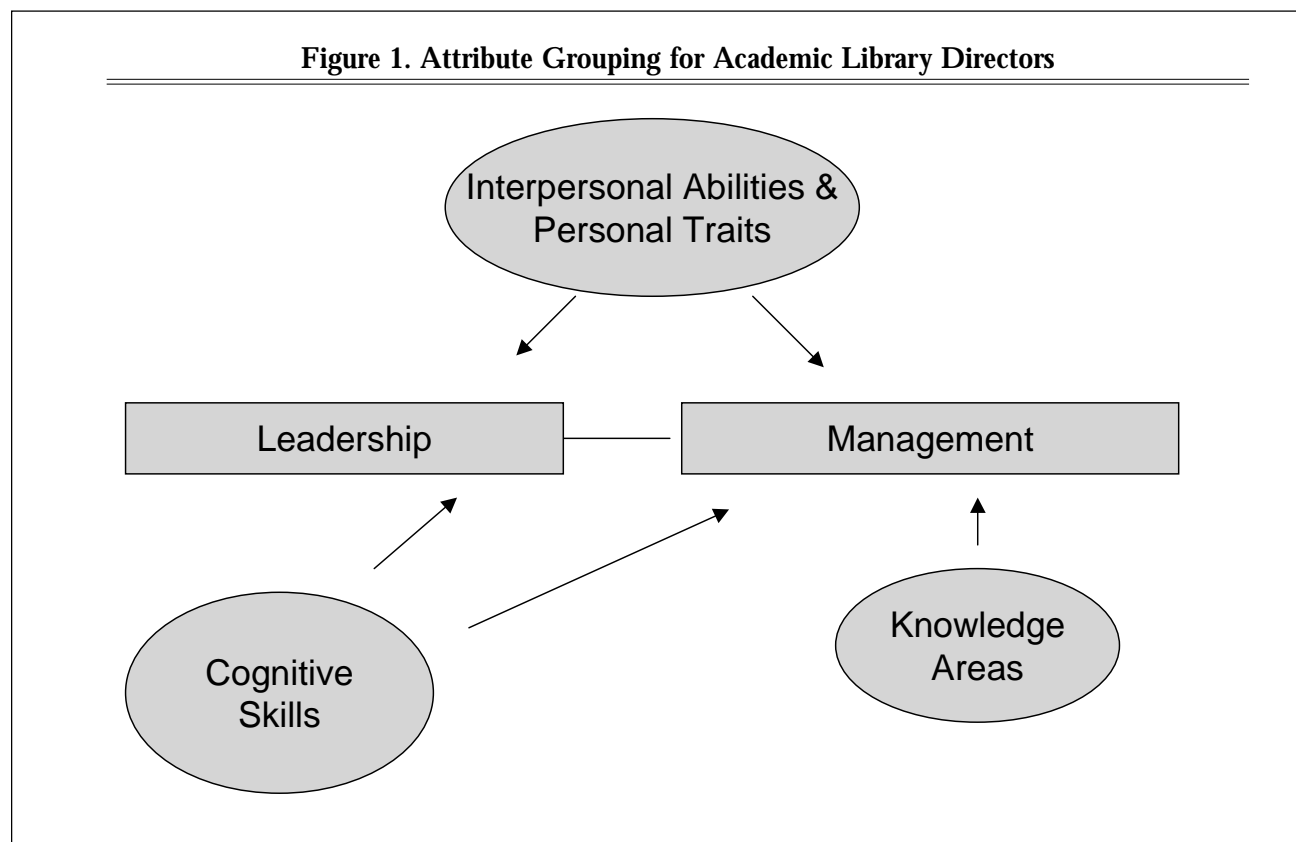
9. Personal and professional development

- Allocate one’s time efficiently;
- Work on multiple tasks simultaneously;
- Respond appropriately and confidently to the demands of work challenges when confronted with change, ambiguity, adversity, etc.; and
- Establish career goals that maximize personal productivity and fulfillment and that build on strengths and minimize weaknesses.

Comparison of Attributes between ARL and ACRL Directors

Given that ARL directors guide larger and often more complex organizations than ACRL directors are likely to lead, it is not surprising that ARL directors suggested more than twice as many attributes as did their counterparts. Only the ACRL directors referred to degrees: the need to have the master’s degree in library and information science and a second advanced degree. Furthermore, those ACRL directors participating in the Delphi study tended to ask for “demonstrated ability” or “proven record” in that attribute.

Figure 1. Attribute Grouping for Academic Library Directors



As for the similarities, both ARL and ACRL directors identified “leadership,” “changes/shapes the library’s culture,” “develops a vision for the library,” “fund-raising,” and “conveys that vision to the external and internal communities.” Under “Administrative Abilities,” the common topics were a commitment to staff diversity and promoting the professional growth of staff. For “Interpersonal Abilities,” both groups mentioned strong oral and written communication skills and being a good listener. Common “Personal Traits” were integrity and a sense of humor. Finally, the shared “Knowledge Areas” were information technology, program assessment and evaluation, information literacy, and scholarly communication.

Attributes of Public Library Directors

Academic librarians are not the only ones worried about the adequacy of the pool of future directors and the extent to which library directors have acquired the necessary attributes. Public librarians, for instance, are also concerned about these issues. According to Laurence Corbus, “In the search for a library director, nearly every public library board seeks several key attributes. While these attributes vary, nearly every public library board of trustees seeks the elusive W.O.W., a director who Walks on Water.”⁷ Consequently, we decided to ascertain optimal attributes for public library directors and to compare attributes between public and academic library directors.

To facilitate a comparison of the desirable attributes of public library directors with those of directors of libraries belonging to ACRL and ARL, the authors limited this part of the study to attributes of directors of large and medium-sized public libraries.

As was the case with the consideration of attributes for directors of libraries belonging to ACRL and ARL, the purpose of this phase of the study was to identify desirable attributes and to achieve a consensus on the most important ones. In order to accomplish this objective, the Delphi technique was once again employed as the primary method. The twelve members of PLA’s Small and Medium-Sized Libraries Committee and the thirteen members of its Metropolitan Libraries Committee served as the panel of experts for this Delphi study.

For the first round of the study, eligible directors were e-mailed an unranked list of attributes of possible importance to present and future directors of

medium and large-sized public libraries. The attributes had been identified through a content analysis of job ads in *American Libraries* for the previous five years as well as an examination of the professional literature. The attributes were organized into three categories: managerial attributes, personal attributes, and areas of knowledge. The directors were asked, where desired, to add attributes, delete attributes, and/or move attributes to different categories.

The list of attributes was revised accordingly and then mailed back to the participating directors for the second round. The attributes were again listed within categories in no particular order. The participants were asked to assign a value of 1–10 to each attribute, with a 10 representing maximum importance.

Based on the values/importance assigned to the attributes in the second round, for the third round the attributes were ranked by mean scores within groups. In this round, the participants were to check the list to determine if they wished to change the relative positions of any attributes within groups. (To help the participants make such decisions, the attributes were broken down by quartile within groups.) With only one change (moving “able to communicate effectively with staff,” in the list of managerial attributes, from seventh to second place), the researchers were satisfied that a consensus on desirable attributes for directors of medium and large-sized public libraries had been reached among the participants, and that no further changes were necessary (see Figure 2 for the final list).

Managerial attributes receiving a mean score of 9.0 or higher were:

- Able to work effectively with library boards;
- Able to work effectively with staff;
- Be an advocate for the library with community/civic and governmental agencies/organizations; and
- Able to articulate/communicate the vital role of the library to the community.

Only one personal attribute—has integrity—received a mean score of at least 9 even though that grouping received the highest mean value. No area of knowledge received a score of 9.0.

In summary, the public library participants in the Delphi study eventually generated a list of 64 items in three categories: managerial attributes, personal attributes, and areas of knowledge. The top-ranked

Attributes for the Next Generation of Library Directors

managerial attributes tend to emphasize the director's ability to work with other groups and individuals (library boards, library staff, community and governmental agencies, friends groups, and public officials). So not surprisingly, communication skills are deemed important. Integrity tops the list of personal attributes, but vision and communication skills also get high marks. A theme for the areas of knowledge is not apparent. Highly rated attributes include knowledge of trends and innovations, current library practices, long-term planning, financial management, and intellectual freedom.

Ways to Acquire the Attributes

There are a variety of options to diagnose one's leadership inventory and to acquire various leadership attributes. A number of psychometric assessment tools are designed to explore the extent to which those individuals completing an inventory possess leadership or managerial abilities. They also measure ability and personality. Individual scores can be used to measure oneself against a larger pool of respondents and to gain a general impression of their leadership or management capabilities. Among a number of such diagnostic tools are the multiple assessment inventories offered by the Center for Creative Leadership, founded in North Carolina in 1970; and the Leadership Assessment Survey, a 360 inventory that "focuses upon an individual's leadership skills and abilities," developed by the CCI Assessment Group. The purpose of a 360 assessment is to provide participants with feedback on their approach to management of the workplace. In such assessments, supervisors, peers, customers and other stakeholders provide the feedback. They complete the same tool or inventory as the participant does, and the results are compared to highlight someone's job-related strengths and to identify areas for further development.

A number of leadership institutes are available at the national level. Some of the more prominent ones are the Senior Fellows program at the University of California, Los Angeles; the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)/Harvard Leadership Institute; the Snowbird Leadership Institute; the Frye Institute; and the Executive Leadership Institute of the Urban Library Council. For those seeking to understand their leadership potential and to hone their abilities, there are the many opportunities offered at

the regional and state level. Regional leadership development programs include those sponsored by the Mountain Plains Library Association and the Southeastern Institute for Collaborative Leadership, a multi-sponsor project supported by the Council on Library and Information Resources, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, SOLINET, and each of the ten southeastern state libraries. More than a dozen individual states have launched leadership training initiatives. Training institutes are general two- to five-day experiences that are conducted by prominent leadership consultants, both from within the library profession and from other areas.

Another component of the leadership continuum is the role of headhunters in facilitating job seeking for both employers and candidates. Although outside the scope of this study, the literature on headhunters and their increasingly prominent role in the job hunting process is important to consider.⁸ One long-time corporate headhunter, for example, has identified a top-five list of attributes from his experience, and at least on two counts it differs considerably from those identified in the present study. In descending order, his list identifies honesty and integrity, intellectual firepower, energy and passion, leadership, and humility.

Conclusion

Our study focuses on leadership attributes as defined by library directors in three cohort populations—mid-size and research level academic libraries, and public libraries. The Delphi process was used to refine the essential characteristics for the next generation of library leaders. Attributes were grouped under three headings—"Managerial Attributes," "Personal Attributes," and "Areas of Knowledge." We found a close correspondence of attributes in the three areas between and among types of libraries. Most attributes were separated by small increments on a 10-point scale. It is our hope that this modest first effort will be followed by more analyses by others in the future. A longitudinal analysis of leadership institute participants might well be beneficial, and more research about the value of self diagnostic tools would certainly make a contribution. Only time will tell if we are facing a grave leadership crisis, but we do know that the demographics pinpoint an escalating percentage of experienced personnel retiring and not being replaced

Figure 2. Attributes for Public Library Directors

Managerial Attributes

First Quartile

- Able to work effectively with library boards 9.9
- Able to work effectively with staff 9.3
- Advocates for the library with community/civic and governmental agencies/organizations 9.2
- Able to articulate/communicate the vital role of the library to the community 9.0
- Able to engage in effective problem solving 8.9
- Able to work effectively with community/civic organizations 8.9
- Able to communicate effectively with staff 8.9 (later moved to second position)

Second Quartile

- Able to work effectively with friends groups 8.6
- Able to work effectively with state and local public officials 8.6
- Has willingness to involve staff in planning and development of services 8.5
- Able to develop long-range plans in collaboration with library's community 8.4
- Has good team-building skills 8.3
- Has willingness to further the professional development of staff 8.1
- Has willingness to encourage board and other community members to be advocates 8.1

Third Quartile

- Able to work effectively with a union 7.5
- Advocates for the library with individual constituents 7.3
- Able to work effectively with the general public 7.3
- Has good time management skills 7.1
- Has good understanding of job assignments and workflow 6.9
- Appreciates importance of marketing/public relations 6.8

Fourth Quartile

- Able to manage all facets of library operations 6.5
- Has progressive administrative/managerial/supervisory experience 6.5
- Able to integrate technology into the library 6.2
- Has a good sense of when to pitch in 6.1
- Has an appropriate number of years of professional experience 6.0
- Able to design outreach services 4.1

Personal Attributes

First Quartile

- Has integrity 9.5
- Has a vision of the vital role that the library plays in the community 8.8
- Demonstrates effective oral and written communication skills 8.6
- Demonstrates excellent interpersonal/people skills 8.6

Second Quartile

- Exhibits a strong commitment to public service 8.5
- Is comfortable with diverse populations 8.4
- Has good collaborative skills 8.3
- Able to motivate/inspire staff 8.3

Figure 2. Attributes for Public Library Directors (cont.)

Has good organization skills 8.3

Third Quartile

Projects a professional manner 8.1

Able to demonstrate innovative leadership 7.9

Has willingness to further own professional development 7.5

Fourth Quartile

Is active professionally 7.3

Has willingness to engage in community service 6.8

Areas of Knowledge

First Quartile

Trends and innovations in libraries 8.7

Current library practices 8.4

Long-term planning 8.4

Budgeting and financial planning 8.1

Intellectual freedom 8.1

Law and public policy issues relevant to public libraries 7.9

Second Quartile

Demographic changes in the community 7.8

Economic changes in the community 7.8

Functions of library boards 7.7

Roles of state/local public officials 7.5

Business administration 7.3

Third Quartile

Functions of friends groups 7.1

Knowledge of the general public 7.1

Community analysis 7.1

Emerging technological trends 6.9

Building and remodeling 6.8

Concepts of collection development 6.7

Project management 6.7

Current human resources administration/personnel administration 6.7

Fourth Quartile

Measurement and evaluation methods 6.4

Library public services 5.9

Library technical services 5.7

Trends and innovations in education 5.5

Major foreign language(s) of community 5.2

at the same rate. We must all embrace this issue with serious reflection. There is an urgent need for library educators and practitioners to join in projects and programs which will explore leadership issues and to develop facilitative resources which will nurture the next generation of library leaders.

Notes

1. Robert M. Hayes, *Use of the Delphi Technique in Policy Formulation: A Case Study of the "Public Sector/Private Sector" Task Force* (Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, 1982), 1.
2. For the specifics of each set of surveys, see Peter Hernon, Ronald R. Powell, and Arthur P. Young, *The Next Library Leadership: Attributes of Academic and Public Library Directors* (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, in press), chapters 3–5; Peter Hernon, Ronald R. Powell, and Arthur P. Young, "University Library Directors in the Association of Research Libraries: The Next Generation. Part One," *College and Research Libraries* 62 (March 2001): 116–45; ———, "University Library Directors in the Association of Research Libraries: The Next Generation. Part Two," *College and Research Libraries* 63 (January 2002): 73–90.
3. Hernon, Powell, and Young, *The Next Library Leadership*, chapters 3–6.
4. Suzanne H. Mahmoodi and Geraldine King, "Identifying Competencies and Responsibilities of Top Management Teams in Public Libraries," *Minnesota Libraries* 30 (autumn/winter 1991–92): 26–32.
5. For the complete lists, see Hernon, Powell, and Young, *The Next Library Leadership*, chapters 3–6.
6. Mahmoodi and King had a tenth category, "Board relations and development." See Mahmoodi and Geraldine King, "Identifying Competencies and Responsibilities of Top Management Teams in Public Libraries," 32.
7. Laurence Corbus, "Key Attributes for Library Administration," *Public Libraries* 37 (November/December 1998): 355–56.
8. See Jeffrey E. Christian, *The Headhunter's Edge* (New York: Random House, 2002).