

# Career Paths and Perceived Leadership Development of Academic Library Directors at Baccalaureate Institutions: Positions, Department Experience, and Skill Development

## Colleen S. Harris\*

Much of the discussion of the academic library directorship focuses on ARL Libraries,<sup>1</sup> with little mention of smaller institutions. However, institutions at the master's and baccalaureate level have just as great a need for effective leadership, and there are notably more of these institutions than doctoral-granting institutions. Academic libraries must respond to the need for succession planning,<sup>2</sup> and in doing so be able to describe and evaluate the leadership skills and qualities of candidates. Gabrielle Kai Wa Wong conducts a thorough review of literature on academic library leadership and leadership development, and notes that there is little agreement on a definition of leadership in the library literature.<sup>3</sup> One area of leadership studies she notes is measuring leadership by competencies. Harris-Keith takes a competency approach to leadership development, focusing on the development of 25 skills and 25 qualities of library leadership.<sup>4</sup> Others have detailed what competencies should be examined for library leadership,<sup>5</sup> but we have little reference to when and where librarians develop these leadership competencies.

Professional leadership development opportunities abound, both within professional organizations and as stand-alone opportunities. Without an understanding of what leadership skill and quality development opportunities are lacking along the path to the academic library directorship, these opportunities are not likely to be of use. Leadership development is crucial for a profession that prides itself on promoting critical thinking, and is crucial as we choose those who will next lead our institutions in an era of digital transformation and budgetary uncertainty.

This study intends to illuminate the academic library work histories of library directors at baccalaureate institutions. While the leadership literature focusing on academic libraries is increasing, there is still little data to help guide the career paths of academic librarians at the beginning of their careers. Mentorship is one method the discipline depends heavily upon,<sup>6</sup> but personal grooming and "anecdata" do not necessarily represent the reality of the paths to directorship. While there is some work detailing what the application process is like and what being a new academic library director is like,<sup>7</sup> what the profession needs is evidence-based leadership skill development. Starting with the end goal in mind and building a plan for how to get there is the most effective way to get to an end goal.<sup>8</sup> For the library profession, knowing what leadership skills and qualities are essential to

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success in the directorship position should lead us to mapping the development of leadership skills and qualities on the way to the directorship so that aspiring directors can make good choices about professional development and career tracks.

# **Methodology and Demographic Data**

This article combines two studies, a study of the work histories and perceptions of professional development of academic library directors at master's granting institutions,<sup>9</sup> and the application of an abbreviated version of the same survey using baccalaureate institutions as the population of interest. The intent is to explore whether there are any differences in career paths and perceptions of leadership development between the two populations.

The study was designed to address five research questions:

- 1. Which of the respondents' last five positions previous to their directorship are most often represented on the path to the academic library directorship?
- 2. Which of the previously held positions are perceived to have helped prepare directors most for the leadership skills and qualities required of the position?
- Is the perception of leadership skill and quality development equal across departmental experience?
  a. If not, which departments are perceived to have offered better leadership development opportunity?
- 4. What leadership skills and qualities are *most* likely to be developed in the career paths of academic library directors at baccalaureate institutions?
- 5. What leadership skills and qualities are *least* likely to be developed in the career paths of academic library directors at baccalaureate institutions?

Of 724 master's granting institutions listed in the Carnegie data,<sup>10</sup> contact information was found for 666 library directors. Using Qualtrics survey software, the Academic Library Director Skills and Qualities Sur-

vey was distributed to 666 library directors, and 296 responses were received (a 40.66% response rate). Of the 811 baccalaureate institutions listed in the Carnegie data, 597 email addresses for directors were located. A slightly abbreviated version of the Academic Library Director Skills and Qualities Survey<sup>11</sup> was distributed, and responses were collected. Collected data were exported from Qualtrics into excel and SPSS software where calculations were run.

# Library Director Demographics

For the baccalaureate responses, a majority of the respondents identified as female (66% at baccalaureate institutions and 61.11% at master's institutions), belying Olin & Millett's 2015 assertion of a gender gap in library leadership.<sup>12</sup> An overwhelming number identified as White (85.22% for baccalaureate directors and 90.31% for directors at master's granting institutions), reflecting a profession that has had difficulty encouraging diversity in its recruitment and retention.<sup>13</sup>

TABLE 1Demographics of Respondents(Baccalaureate Institutions)			
Variable	Value	Frequency	Percent of Total
Gender	Male	75	32.61
	Female	152	66.09
	Prefer Not to Say	3	1.30
	Total	230	100
Ethnicity	African American	11	4.78
	Black	2	0.87
	White	196	85.22
	Hispanic	10	4.35
	Asian	3	1.30
	Multiethnic	3	1.30
	Prefer Not to Say	5	2.17
	Total	230	99.99
<i>Note:</i> The descriptive statistics for this table do not include responses left blank by respondents			

TABLE 2Demographics of Respondents(Master's Institutions)			
Variable	Value	Frequency	Percent of Total
Gender	Male	112	38.89
	Female	176	61.11
	Total	288	100
Ethnicity	African- American	10	3.46
	White	261	90.31
	Hispanic	6	2.08
	Asian	4	1.38
	Other (Please specify)	8	2.77
	Total	289	100
Note. The descriptive statistics for this table do			

Note. The descriptive statistics for this table do not include responses left blank by respondents

## Research Question 1: Positions Occurring Most Frequently on the Path to Directorship

Research question one asked which of the respondents' last five positions prior to the directorship are most often represented on the path to the academic library directorship. This question teases out commonalities in professional experience, and provides preliminary data for career path analysis. Respondents offered 533 open-ended survey responses about previous position titles and the library department associated with the position. The position (department head or chair, librarian, or staff, for example) and the department both carry crucial information about the experience. For that reason, titles were combined with corresponding department per the instrument.

Table 3 aggregates the collection of directors' previous positions organized by title and department. The table includes a list of all positions appearing in baccalaureate director work histories, and the frequency with which those positions appear across all directors' work histories. The 533 positions/titles/departments reported are listed in Table 4.

TABLE 3        Frequency Table of Baccalaureate Library Director        Previous Positions			
Position Title	Frequency	Percentage of Total	
Library Director	115	21.58	
Assistant Library Director	49	9.19	
(Administrator Positions, Total)	(164)	(30.77)	
Head, Access Services	6	1.13	
Head, Archives	3	0.56	
Head, Collection Development	5	0.93	
Head, Digital Library Services	3	0.56	
Head, Information Technology	5	0.93	
Head, Multiple Departments	12	2.25	
Head, Other	13	2.44	
Head, Public Services	19	3.56	
Head, Reference and Instructional Services	22	4.13	
Head, Special Collections	7	1.31	
Head, Technical Services	26	4.88	
(Head Positions, Total)	(121)	(22.70)	
Librarian, Access Services	6	1.13	
Librarian, Archives	2	0.38	
Librarian, Collection Development	2	0.38	
Librarian, Digital Library Services	2	0.38	
Librarian, IT	4	0.75	
Librarian, Multiple Departments	11	2.06	
Librarian, Other	16	3.00	
Librarian, Public Services	13	2.44	
Librarian, Reference and Instructional Services	84	15.76	
Librarian, Special Collections	2	0.38	
Librarian, Technical Services	23	4.32	
(Librarian Positions, Total)	(165)	(30.98)	
Staff	83	15.57	
Total (N)	533	100	
Note. Although 232 respondents completed the survey, the totals above reflect the number that answered. In addition, if respondents chose "Not Applicable/ No Previous Position," the programmed survey logic disallowed answers for positions further in the past. The descriptive statistics for this table do not include blank responses.			

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Table 4 aggregates the work histories of directors at master's granting institutions.

TABLE 4        Frequency Table of Master's Library Director Previous Positions			
Position Title	Frequency	Percentage of Total	
Library Director	150	17.10	
Assistant Library Director	75	8.55	
Head, Access Services	23	2.62	
Head, Advancement/Development	1	0.11	
Head, Archives	1	0.11	
Head, Collection Development	14	1.60	
Head, Digital Library Services	6	0.68	
Head, Information Technology	12	1.37	
Head, Multiple	24	2.74	
Head, Other	65	7.41	
Head, Outreach	1	0.11	
Head, Reference & Instruction	43	4.90	
Head, Special Collections/Rare Books/Manuscripts	7	0.80	
Head, Technical Services	34	3.88	
(Head Positions, Total)	(231)	(26.34)	
Librarian–Access Services	25	2.85	
Librarian-Administration	4	0.46	
Librarian-Archives	3	0.34	
Librarian–Collection Development	12	1.37	
Librarian–Digital Library Services	3	0.34	
Librarian–Information Technology	10	1.14	
Librarian-Multiple	40	4.56	
Librarian-Other	63	7.18	
Librarian–Outreach	1	0.11	
Librarian—Reference & Instruction	133	15.17	
Librarian–Special Collections/Rare Books/Preservation	4	0.46	
Librarian—Technical Services	53	6.04	
(Librarian Positions, Total)	(351)	(40.02)	
Staff	70	7.98	
Total (N)	877	100	

*Note*. Although 296 respondents completed the survey, the totals above reflect the number that answered. In addition, if respondents chose "Not Applicable/No Previous Position," the programmed survey logic disallowed answers for positions further in the past. The descriptive statistics for this table do not include the blank responses.

## **Research Question 2: Positions Perceived to Have Best Prepared Leaders**

Research Question 2 asked which of the previous positions held by the respondents are perceived to have helped prepare directors the most for the leadership skills and qualities required of the directorship? To answer this question, data was collected on the respondents' most recent three positions prior to their current directorships. For each of these positions, respondents chose on a Likert scale how often they exercised a particular leadership skill or quality in that position. Each leadership and quality skillset of 25 items was converted to a total composite score between 0 and 100, and responses were ordered highest to lowest for all academic library positions. Positions having higher reported composite scores (with maximum potential scores of 100) reflected the perception that those positions helped respondents better develop the leadership skills and qualities addressed in the survey. For the purposes of this research, a score of 90 points or higher indicates that respondents perceived a position to be highly likely to allow participants to develop their leadership skills and/or qualities. Table 5 summarizes this data for positions receiving scores of 90 or higher for the directors at baccalaureate institutions, Table 6 summarizes the data for master's granting institutions.

TABLE 5Composite Scores of 90 or Higher in PerceivedLeadership Skill Development (Baccalaureate)			
Position Title Frequency % of Total			
Director	2	33.33	
Assistant Director	1	16.67	
Head, Special Collections	1	16.67	
Head, Other	1	16.67	
Librarian, Other	1	16.67	

Surprisingly, for baccalaureate directors, despite 499 responses to the questions regarding leadership skill development, only 5 positions rose to the level of 90 points or higher in composite scores for baccalaureate directors. We might take this to mean that there is a distinct and concerning lack of leadership skill development opportunity in previ-

TABLE 6Library Positions with Composite Leadership SkillsScores of 90 Through 100 (Master's)			
<b>Position Title</b>	Frequency	% of Total	
Library Director	11	64.72	
Assistant Library Director	1	5.88	
Head, Access Services	1	5.88	
Head, Multiple	1	5.88	
Head, Special Collections	1	5.88	
Librarian-Other	2	11.76	
Total	17	100	
<i>Note.</i> Although 296 respondents completed the survey, the totals above reflect the number that answered. In addition, if respondents chose "Not Applicable/No Previous Position," the programmed survey logic disallowed answers for positions further in the past. The descriptive statistics for this table do not include the blank responses.			

ous positions along the career paths for academic library directors at baccalaureate institutions.

For directors at master's granting institutions, respondents indicated that 17 library positions reached high scores (composite scores of 90 and above) for the perceived opportunity to exercise leadership skills. More than 65% of those positions were academic library directorships, meaning that respondents perceived that the greatest opportunity to exercise leadership skills occurred only once they were library directors. It may be of note that the position of Head of Special Collections appeared in both master's and baccalaureate data as perceived to offer significant leadership skill development.

## Research Question 3: Positions Perceived to Offer More Leadership Skill Development

The data offer us the opportunity to distinguish whether there is a general perception by academic library directors that there are differences in leadership skill and quality development by department. Research Question 3 asked: Is the perception of library leadership skill and quality development equal across departmental experience? The service departments used in the analysis included Access Services, Administration, Archives, Collection Development, Digital Library Services, Reference and instructional Services, Information Technology, Public Services, Special Collections, Technical Services, Multiple, and Other. The Levene statistic was run in SPSS to test the assumption of the equality of variances, and there was no significant difference between the variances of the composite scores of the population. The Levene statistic is not significant, indicating that there is no significant difference between the variances of composite scores in the population. Given that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met, the ANOVA test can be used to determine if there are significant difference between library departments when it comes to perceived development of leadership skills, however there is no discernable difference between library departments when it comes to development of leadership quality development is equal across department experience; and no, perceptions of library leadership *skill* development is not equal across departmental experience. We might have expected this, given the uniformly high scores respondents offered for leadership quality development opportunities.

Using the post-hoc Bonferroni test, each pairing was reviewed to see which pairings have significantly different perceptions of leadership skill development opportunities. Only two pairings were found to have significant differences: work in administration was perceived to offer more development opportunity than work in reference and instructional services (p < .002), and work in administration was perceived to offer greater development opportunity than work in technical services (p < .000).

This does not differ significantly from the perceptions of directors at master's granting institutions, where positions in administration (director and assistant director) were perceived to develop leadership skills more effectively than positions in collection development, access services, reference and instruction, and technical services.

#### Research Questions 4 and 5: Leadership Skills Most and Least Likely to Be Developed

Research Question 4 asked what skills are most likely to be developed along the career paths of academic library directors, and Research Question 5 asked which skills are most likely to be developed. These questions can both be answered by finding the mean Likert value for each leadership skill and quality, which are listed in Table 9. As noted earlier, there is no significant variation in leadership *quality* scores—softer skills such as being approachable, flexibility, good listener; respondents from both populations indicated the ability to develop these qualities at high rates across the board regardless of position. There was only statistically significant difference in the opportunity to develop leadership skills.

Per Table 7, eight skills fall below the 2.0 mark for directors at baccalaureate institutions (Occasionally/ Sometimes according to the Likert scale measuring how often the skill was exercised in a particular position) in leadership skills, making them the least likely to be developed. These include Budget Management, Compliance Issues, Cultural Diversity, Facilities Planning, Fundraising/Donor Relations, Legal Issues, School Safety Issues, and Strategic Planning. While five of these (Compliance Issues, Facilities Planning, Legal Issues, and School Safety Issues) mirror the least-developed leadership skills in directors at master's-granting universities (Harris-Keith, 2016), of note is that Budget Management, Cultural Diversity, and Strategic Planning are considered weaker developmental points in the leadership skill development of directors at smaller institutions. According to the table, the leadership skills most likely to be developed along a baccalaureate director's career are Computer Technology, Decision-Making, Problem-Solving, and Time Management, which mirror the leadership skills most likely to be developed in the career paths of directors at master's granting institutions.

TABLE 7        Average Leadership Skill and Quality Scores			
Leadership Skill (Baccalaureate)	Average Score Across Past 3 Positions (Bacc)	Leadership Skill (Master's)	Average Score Across Past 3 Positions (Master's)
Allocating Resources	2.19	Allocating Resources	2.4
Budget Management	1.97	Budget Management	2.21
Building Community Partnerships	2.16	Building Community Partnerships	2.19
Building Teamwork	2.73	Building Teamwork	2.92
Business Ethics	2.24	Business Ethics	2.44
Community Relations	2.17	Community Relations	2.08
Communicating Expectations	2.71	Communicating Expectations	2.86
Compliance Issues	1.70	Compliance Issues	1.81
Computer Technology	3.06	Computer Technology	3.06
Conflict Resolution	2.14	Conflict Resolution	2.31
Cultural Diversity	1.94	Cultural Diversity	2.01
Decision-Making	3.18	Decision-Making	3.34
Enforcing Policies and Procedures	2.91	Enforcing Policies and Procedures	2.98
Faculty and Staff Development	2.14	Faculty and Staff Development	2.41
Facilities Planning	1.70	Facilities Planning	1.83
Fundraising/Donor Relations	.083	Fundraising/Donor Relations	0.85
Legal Issues	1.15	Legal Issues	1.23
Managing Change	2.53	Managing Change	2.84
Problem Solving	3.33	Problem Solving	3.39
Program Evaluation	2.09	Program Evaluation	2.15
School Safety Issues	1.00	School Safety Issues	1.01
Strategic Planning	1.88	Strategic Planning	2.12
Student-Focused Learning	2.22	Student-Focused Learning	2.33
Time Management	3.08	Time Management	3.33
Vision Articulation	2.10	Vision Articulation	2.3

## Discussion

The data clearly demonstrate that directors perceive development of important leadership skills to happen more often at the director level than at other positions in librarianship. Despite the fact that it is indeed what the data indicate, it seems unhelpful to recommend to aspiring directors that the best thing they can do to prepare for the directorship and develop crucial leadership skills is...to become a director.

It should greatly concern the profession that library directors at baccalaureate institutions perceive themselves as significantly weak in developing budget management, cultural diversity, and strategic planning skills. Budget management and strategic planning are essential elements of leading an organization like the college or university library. If we are to be prepared for the massive changes in technology and education delivery happening now and bound to happen in the future, our leadership needs to be able to plan to take advantage of these changes for the benefit of their institutions. The lack of preparation in cultural diversity skills is particularly crucial in a profession that is disturbingly white in its makeup, and for baccalaureate level directors whose constituents in terms of faculty, staff, and students are likely diverse in character. It is alarming that the bulk of directors find themselves ill-prepared to exercise skills related to diversity.

The data indicate that we are not growing our leaders as we should, and that our leaders are lacking in key skillsets—which means our libraries are lacking key skillsets as we engage with our stakeholders. We must insist that our profession associations take into account the skills required for leadership positions, that they map professional development offerings to those needs, and that they make the development opportunities available to those working at the librarian level, not just in higher administrative positions.

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