Developing Prospective Interim and Future Academic Library Leaders:
Reflections for Leadership Practice

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Introduction

The topic of interim leadership in academic libraries often manifests as the need to ensure the stability and continued advancement of the organization when an incumbent leader departs. While interim or acting leadership is inherently temporary, the stakes are high because these leaders may operate at a time of change, some of which may be disruptive. In this context, the interim leader is a change leader as well as an organizational stabilizer.[1] Further, the discussion of interim leadership is closely linked to the subject of succession planning because the latter is inherently focused on preparing for and minimizing the potential loss of organizational knowledge and expertise to talent attrition.[2] Whether the goal is to select and develop targeted leader capacity or to build library-wide leadership acumen,[3] succession planning is a means of preparing people to fill

gaps and assume new roles over time. Intentional approaches to implementing succession strategies that enable the growth and retention of promising rising leaders represent an organizational strategy for building a cohort of capable interim or permanent leaders.[4]

This chapter offers a reflective perspective about my experience as interim leader in an academic library, grounded in relevant discussion from the literature to present the case for the intentional practice of preparing future interim and ongoing leaders through support for developmental programs, leader modeling, mentorship, and operationalizing the role of leadership in organizational life.

Looking Back at the Journey to Interim Library Leadership

My path to academic library leadership began with directed mentoring and investment in leader development by multiple leaders at the University of Virginia. Unaware that I had caught the attention of senior library leaders as an early-career librarian with leadership potential, I did not initiate the change in professional direction. In the mid-1990s, I was summoned to meet with then Associate University Librarian Kendon Stubbs, who offered me the opportunity to develop and lead a new digital service program in spatial data services. I was an early-career librarian with several years of pre-MLS academic library experience in research services. Stubbs' interest in approaching me about the opportunity was unexpected but in line with my background and interests. During the following three years in the role of developing and implementing a new digital service, I gained experience in program design, management, budgeting, strategic communication, stakeholder relationships, technology procurement, and other skills. A few years later, in 2007, I was a participant in the inaugural Leadership and Career Development Program (LCDP), a new program offered by ARL. Associate University Librarian Gail Oltmanns encouraged my participation, and University Librarian Karin Wittenborg shared her belief in my leadership qualities and encouraged further development. The LCDP experience was inspiring, focused on exposing early- to mid-career librarians from underrepresented groups to the foundations of leadership and leader behavior. Since the early cohorts, the LCDP has sought to increase the presence of underrepresented groups in library leadership at all levels. However, at the time of the inaugural cohort, the program was more focused on building a pipeline of capable leaders to eventually rise to the top job.

On the Path

During the years that followed, my interest in leadership evolved from a modest interest into a commitment to prepare for future roles that would influence the direction and outcomes of the academic library. Supported by the library with

professional development funding, I pursued additional learning opportunities that developed a leadership knowledge base still useful today. These included management skills training in the Library Management Skills Institutes, facilitation training, and negotiation skills training offered by ARL. In addition to the ARL leader development opportunities, I participated in the 2002 offering of the Association of College and Research Libraries/Harvard Leadership Institute.[5] At that point, I was not specifically committed to ascending to the top leadership role. However, I was strongly committed to positioning myself to influence the library and institutional context, whatever the role.

Prior involvement in leader development opportunities played a material role in my unanticipated service as interim university librarian at Syracuse University. Greater professional visibility that came with being among the early LCDP participants and the developmental learning I acquired encouraged me to pursue higher-level leadership roles. Banush's review of the career progress of the ARL Research Libraries Leadership Follows program suggests that, like others who participated in focused leadership development programs, I had not only gained greater insight into the role but also greater professional mobility and access to vertical advancement.[6] I found the experience and skills from this leadership training applicable in the new role of associate university librarian (AUL) at Syracuse. With oversight of public services and technology services programs, I had significant scope and interaction with five departments across the library.

Working under the guidance of University Librarian Peter Graham during my role as an AUL was the most impactful and developmental period of my career. Graham's participatory leadership style and leadership team created a space within which we associate university librarians were each fully authorized and trusted to carry full responsibility for major areas of the library organization. He shared institutional context, risks, and strategy as part of routine leadership team discussion and planning. He also challenged us to be imaginative and bold in leading our respective library divisions. We were a collaborative and mutually supportive management team, benefitting from Graham's coaching and high expectations. His request that I serve as interim university librarian when he took leave due to a serious illness was a surprise. I had only two years of experience at the senior management level. Though I had a considerable amount of leadership development behind me, and a seat at the leadership table during a time of considerable change in the library, I was initially uneasy about accepting the interim appointment for a period of three to six months.

Graham expressed confidence in my ability to manage the challenge and instructed me to perform the role as though it was mine—that is, I was directed to move the library and to advance major initiatives underway at the time and to respond to challenges and opportunities using my judgment and the counsel of trusted others. I considered myself, therefore, fully in charge and fully responsible.

This clarity about expectations related to the scope of authority and discretion was essential and influenced my approach to the interim role daily. I was encouraged by Graham's optimism in his own full recovery and his eventual return to his position. Further, Provost Deborah Freund reached out and conveyed her support and confidence in the idea, echoing the expectation that I took full charge, while offering her support and counsel whenever needed. Feeling reinforced, I accepted the appointment with a combination of cautious optimism and concern about holding the library together under the cloud of uncertainty associated with the university librarian's health. I became interim university librarian in January 2003. Graham and I conferred often during his leave, and he provided important counsel, constructive criticism, and encouragement for much of the eighteen months of my interim service. Our interaction became less regular and waned as his illness advanced. However, we continued to engage until his passing in August 2004, after which I continued to serve in the interim leader role until my departure in June 2005. Following Graham's death, the most difficult role I played was organizational consoler, followed by morale builder until the recruitment of the successor university librarian in late 2005.

In retrospect, I believe earlier leadership development and managerial training programs were highly beneficial in my path to leadership. They provided focus and context for understanding the role and importance of leadership at various levels in libraries. However, the most impactful learning about the work of being a leader came from the formal mentoring partnerships with other academic library leaders affiliated with the LCDP and the emphasis the LCDP placed on mentor-protégé pairings. In my case, these mentor relationships lasted years after the LCDP experience. My experience, in hindsight, aligns with the literature suggesting the importance and influence of mentoring in leader development.[7] Mentors provide the protégé access to discussion about how the academic library leader formulates, communicates, and implements strategy for addressing issues in the environment. In my case, that learning was through daily, first-hand observation of the leader's work as modeled by Peter Graham and engagement with other leaders in the field. The understanding I gained from Graham's transparency about his assessment of the environment, stakeholder relationship management approaches, challenges, opportunities, and risks, and promotion of the library's institutional positioning painted a comprehensive picture of the leader's work. This access, in my perspective, made it feasible for me to approach full-charge interim leadership with the assurance that I understood what I had agreed to do for both the library and for the university. Research suggests that role modeling, as direct observation and interaction with the leader's work, was most helpful in preparing me to carry out the full role of university librarian while serving as the interim. It may have also played an influential role in shaping and sustaining my commitment and goal to lead from the top position since that time.[8]

DEI: Race and the Path to Leadership

The full context of leadership development in academic libraries requires attention to the issue of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in library organizations and as a factor in access to developmental opportunities. My access to the significantly impactful ARL LCDP program was due to its focus on leadership training for under-represented populations. African Americans and other under-represented communities were decidedly few among professional academic library staff when my journey began. Unfortunately, this remains the case. In FY 2019–2020, 16.7 percent of reporting ARL libraries' professional staff were from under-represented populations.[9] Progress has been slight since FY 2010–2011 when 14.2 percent of ARL libraries staff reported as members of under-represented populations.[10] My membership in the LCDP target population was an eligibility factor for consideration. My professional experience was another. I was not quite mid-career with less than five years of post-MLS experience. However, I had more than ten years of academic library experience. I believe my visibility to senior management was also an important factor. They identified me as an emergent leader and acted to promote my access to leadership development. Without the intervention of my library leaders, I am not confident I would have been aware of, or sought, the opportunity.

Access to transformative leadership development opportunities is limited. They may be inaccessible to target population members who are *not* visible to their library organizations due to their low prevalence in visible roles. Further, the possible (un)conscious bias of senior leaders may inhibit their envisioning women or people of color as future leaders. My career took a turn toward leadership because of the proactive intervention and commitment of senior library leaders. Current senior leaders need to consider how they might better identify and develop promising under-represented staff to assume leadership roles. Where organizational or institutional developmental resources are lacking, leaders should encourage and support the participation of women and people of color in established leadership development programs offered by national and state-based organizations. Now is an important opportunity for those in top leadership positions to seek emergent leaders who may otherwise remain invisible.

In 2020, ARL data on the demographics of roles immediately subordinate to the top position (associate and assistant director, associate and assistant dean, or associate and assistant university librarian), forty-four professionals reported as being in under-represented populations among the ninety-nine reporting institutions.[11] Persons in these roles are prominent in their organizations. The comparative visibility of professional staff in lower-echelon roles (by positioning or participation in organizational life), is less obvious. Absent reliable data, it is difficult to link visibility to senior leadership with staff roles throughout the organizational hierarchy.

This does raise the question of how we in lead roles engage with our staff and create practice around broadly promoting leader development in the library.

The Need for Prepared Prospective Library Leaders

Academic libraries are facing a period of increasing retirements among top leaders, making the need for prepared successors more pressing. Wilder's study of ARL leaders' retirement patterns indicated that 45 percent of directors in the US were sixty-five years of age or older, using 2015 data.[12] While projections of the number and timing of leader retirements are not available, it is impossible for the delayed retirements stemming from the Great Recession and other factors to persist indefinitely.[13] The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting recession have had significant impacts on universities, where hiring freezes halted even faculty recruitments and prompted furloughs and reductions in hours for library staff members.[14] Yet, national recruitments for library leaders are occurring while concerns about the availability of qualified candidate pools and questions of how to increase qualified candidates in recruitments across positions persist.[15] At the time of this writing in late March 2021, a cursory search of the Association of Research Libraries jobs list yielded nine executive-level library searches.[16] Among these were three premier research universities (Michigan, Notre Dame, and Washington). On the same day, a brief search of the American Libraries Associations jobs site yielded nineteen similar positions across academic libraries of all kinds.[17] The number of recruitments, large or small, is less concerning than the fact that numerous institutions are tapping into the same small pools for viable candidates. There is little current research on the characteristics and outcomes of academic library leader recruitments, which makes it difficult to describe with confidence how competitive these searches may be. Nonetheless, identifying and preparing potential leaders with the experience and skills relevant to times of change and complexity, or "complexity leadership," may be essential to supporting organizational growth and adaptation organization.[18]

Performing the Job of Interim Leader

The academic library leader operates within a larger institutional setting, which is changing and sometimes conflicted about its future. The lead role carries significant challenges, including that of facilitating the alignment of library and institutional strategies. Salisbury and Peseta explore the concept of the evolving university and the need for effective library positioning within that ecosystem.[19] To help the university understand the role of libraries in its future, the library is challenged to add its perspective to the "interdisciplinary dialogue that can help to position the academic library on the contradictions of the future university."[20]

Another driver affecting the need for prepared interim leadership is the increasing emphasis among universities to expand research activity and impact. Promoting and sustaining the library's capacity to contribute to the research mission is the leader's role and is a matter of library relevance in the larger institutional picture.[21] Considering this dynamic, academic libraries, individually and collectively, are actively discussing strategies for anchoring themselves as contributing partners in the institutional research ecosystem.[22] The leader must guide the library to meet this challenge—even as an interim leader, hopefully supported by executive leadership and the counsel of experienced peers. During my interim leadership experience, I learned quickly that the library needed a visible and clear leader voice at a time the institution was undergoing significant administrative systems implementations and planning for a new budget model. Whatever hesitation I may have felt as an interim leader was secondary to the need to ensure the library's perspective and engagement on developments carrying potentially significant impacts. It was necessary to have an external emphasis under the circumstances.

An interim leader who is unclear as to how much of the responsibility for leadership is expected under a temporary appointment may have significant challenges in role execution.[23] Clarity from the provost or supervising executive about the administrative scope and the priorities associated with the interim leadership position is essential. It meant that during my service as interim leader, I had to represent the library's interests to influence institutional developments like ERP (enterprise resource planning systems) implementations, new budget processes, donor relations, campus governance, and other stakeholder-facing activities. Internally, there was a wide range of organizational matters and processes requiring attention, including restructuring, strategic planning, assessment, performance management, and other issues. I had clear expectations to fully perform the role. I also had the benefit of considerable development and role modeling prior to serving in the interim role. These experiences and effective mentoring were significant assets that directly influenced my leadership behavior and solidified my intention to pursue the top leadership role in the years after leaving Syracuse. Irwin and DeVries studied the experiences of librarians who served as interim leaders and found that while 37 percent applied for the permanent appointment, 80 percent of them were successful in getting appointed.[24] I did not seek to retain the position permanently, and a national search to recruit Graham's successor began in 2005. In my case, the extraordinary growth resulting from service as interim leader was a springboard to attaining the lead role at other institutions.

Credibility Matters

Interim leaders are not permanent leaders. Yet, however long the duration of service, the role of interim leader brings certain challenges to the incumbent's ability to effectively carry out the responsibilities of the position. One such

challenge is that of perceived credibility. The reactions of former peers and others in the organization to the interim's perceived abilities may strain relationships and can produce alienation and tensions persisting beyond the interim appointment. Because the interim leader may be chosen and appointed outside of routine selection processes, perceptions may vary about the qualifications or worthiness of the appointee. The field literature is scarce on these two issues. Research is needed on organizational reactions and sense of fair play where accessibility to, and selection for, leader development is concerned. Another question—how individuals may be identified as emergent leaders who would benefit from leader skills development—is also important. Cao et al. tested a model's efficacy in determining how perceived intelligence, credibility, and talkativeness help to identify emergent leaders.[25] The three traits act together in the model. However, talkativeness was found to be a significant indicator of how people may emerge from the collective as perceived leaders.[26] In the organizational context, might this mean that we take notice of and interpret engagement, curiosity, and character as evidence of leader potential? More research may answer this question.

Interim leaders must demonstrate credibility in the eyes of the organization, stakeholders, and themselves to effectively carry out the role. In an analogy to succession in a family business, Keyt suggests that ascending leaders first understand their own identities and "learn to be guided by their own rudder."[27] This mirrors my initial concern to avoid being a mere copy of my predecessor and to establish my own leader identity in carrying out the interim role. Thought leaders on leader credibility, Kouzes and Posner, assert that "credibility is about how leadership earns the trust and confidence of their constituents. It's what people demand of their leaders as a prerequisite to willingly contributing their hearts and minds to a common cause."[28] To this point, the authors' discussion of character (integrity, competence, and leadership behavior) in shaping perceptions of leader credibility was consistent with my experience. As interim leader, I was conscious of staff skepticism and stakeholder questions about how the library would be managed. I had to demonstrate that I was competent, trustworthy, and capable of acting as a leader would be expected to act. My interim status did not diminish these requirements.

Developing Credible Leaders

The intentional preparation of leaders ready to assume responsible roles is a means of cultivating competent library leaders. External leadership programs offered through library associations and consortia, like the ARL Leadership Fellows Program, can deliver formal leadership skills, networking, reflective exercise, research projects, and mentoring to prepare senior managers for top-level positions. Yet this kind of development may not be accessible, nor entirely sufficient, to everyone preparing for a leading role. The willingness to

invest one's commitment to becoming a leader is also critical. In a study of the career development of health sciences library directors, Fought and Misawa found that the leaders credited focused preparation, along with mentoring, recognition of potential, and breadth of experience across library functions as key to their ascent to the top role.[29] Respondents also noted the importance of their personal investment and commitment to building leadership skills in addition to their domain library expertise.[30] Since my earlier experience in an interim library leader role, I have transitioned my focus from learning how to exercise leadership to developing leadership practice that promotes the development of other leaders capable of stepping into significant roles.

The field literature has given attention to the need for preparing future library leaders. Galbraith et al. found that while there has been much discussion of trends toward increasing library director retirements, few library organizations practiced the succession planning that may help promote the preparation of library professionals capable of ascending to leadership roles.[31] Wong's review of the literature suggests that while numerous leadership training programs exist, a "coherent comprehension of leadership among the library profession has not been formed."[32] This lack of generalized understanding of the role leadership plays in the library's effectiveness and culture may have adverse impacts on organizational capacity and readiness for transformative change and strategic advancement. Current leaders can enable library structures and practices supporting internal leadership development programs, mentoring, and succession strategies. These practices build paths for those interested in ascending to leadership roles and enable developmental opportunities that broadly distribute leadership skills. The role of current library leaders to cultivate future leaders is a matter of leader responsibility and organizational sustainability. It is facilitating a future through succession planning as a means of enabling talented staff to realize their potential and to deliberately act on it.[33]

Succession Planning to Build Depth of Credible Leadership

We are witnessing the forecasted turnover in leader positions due to retirements driven by the age demographics of the country as well as the generational turnover of the workforce. This is problematic for library leaders due to uneven preparation and readiness for younger generations to assume the leadership role. Lewis and Orr's examination of the generational profile of the library workforce noted that while baby boomers are exiting the workforce in large numbers, with GenX and millennials following, "It is unclear if there are a sufficient number of seasoned leaders in these generations. The result could easily be a large number of inexperienced new academic library leaders who will face steep learning

curves."[34] Succession planning as a practice in libraries may now be an essential strategy and a sustainable framework for addressing the challenge of preparing leaders to step into lead roles. Hall-Ellis and Grealy suggest succession planning as an intentional practice to "identify, train, and reassign personnel in antici-pation of changes in the library staff."[35] Given the challenges of placing interim leaders, incumbent leaders need to plan for how we may lay the groundwork for systematically developing leaders across our organizations and as a means of enabling the ascent of prepared future interim and continuing leaders. Nine years ago, Galbraith et al. sounded the urgent need for succession planning.[36] They noted that anticipated retirements among then-sitting library leaders would draw from the ranks of senior managers poised to replace them. They also warned of the downstream prospect of library managers insufficiently prepared to assume vacated senior manager roles.[37] Succession strategy and the readiness of mid-level leaders to advance into senior management roles offer personal professional growth while propagating leader capacity across the organization.

Leuzinger and Rowe examined the prevalence of succession and mentoring programs in library organizations and noted that while succession planning and mentoring are distinct activities, the presence of mentoring in leader develop-ment appeared to have an enhancing effect on succession planning.[38] Mentors may experience feelings of increased professional and social recognition them-selves while protégés and mentors share a greater likelihood of retention. Of note is the reported interest of 55 percent of participating employees in taking leadership roles.[39] This reported outcome is consistent with my own experience. It was after participation in leader development programs with a mentoring component that I began to have an interest in leadership work. I began to imag-ine myself as a leader.

Conclusion: Interim as a Path to Permanent Leadership

My career did not start with ambitions to lead any organization. The interest of observant leaders and their encouragement to pursue developmental opportu-nities to build leadership skills played a large role. Participating in formal leader development programs, informal mentoring relationships, and targeted skill training defined and influenced my professional formative years, such that by the time I completed service as interim leader, I no longer asked myself whether or why I should lead. I self-identified as a leader. Leadership had become my vocation. Recollecting and reviewing my journey through the lens of thought leaders and the literature has sharpened my perspective about the role I play today when the need for prepared leaders has never been greater. As retirements and inter-institutional attrition continue to place pressure on libraries' capacity

to evolve with a changing institutional environment, we need to develop leaders in the practice of developing our organizations.

Interim leaders are legitimate leaders, whether they share the load as co-interims or shoulder the burden alone, for short durations or long. In considering the process for filling the gap left by the departed library head, it is important to avoid overlooking the potential within, where emergent leaders may be prepared and ready to assume the top role or other roles that are vacated throughout the management tiers. It is important to recognize emergent leaders among us who routinely demonstrate credibility through engagement, character, and competence. The next interim leader—or ongoing leader—may be sitting across the table.

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