

Traits and Training

Attributes and Skills of Pennsylvania Academic Library Managers

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What makes a good library manager? Is a good library manager born or bred? To find out, Pennsylvania academic library managers were surveyed to determine their education and training backgrounds. The results illuminated the skills and personal traits these managers find most important in managing an academic library. Interpersonal skills and integrity were found to be the most important traits for an academic library manager to possess. Human resources and personnel issues were found to be the most difficult issues faced by academic library managers. In addition to presenting a snapshot of what today's academic library leadership qualifications look like, the study also provides future managers with an idea of what sort of training they should be seeking.

Introduction

Whether it is guru wisdom from a Fortune 500 CEO or an American Library Association (ALA) publication, there is no shortage of writers ready to hold forth on how to be an excellent manager. The assumption is that by reading their advice anyone can improve his or her managerial skills. However, it might be necessary to question this presupposition. Is it possible that some people, due to their innate personalities, are better managers? Are there some aspects of management that cannot be taught? This then begs the question—are library managers born or bred? In order to gain more insight into the real lives of library managers, this study surveyed academic library managers working in Pennsylvania to determine what training, personal qualities, and abilities they find important in being an effective library manager.

Literature Review

Among the American Library Association's *Core Competencies of Librarianship*, "Administration and Management" is the eighth and final competency (American Library Association, 2009). There are five sub-headings under this competency: planning and budgeting, personnel practices and human resources, assessment and evaluation, developing partnerships with stakeholders (perhaps conceived of as outreach), and transformational leadership. All of these areas are important for being a good manager.

While leadership is a different concept than management, managers should also strive to be good leaders. As stated by Jim Collins (2008, p. vi), "*the very best leaders are first and foremost effective managers*" (emphasis his). Though management and leadership are different, they are not mutually exclusive. Ideally there should be significant overlap in these areas (often called managerial leadership).

In contrast to this, writing from a psychoanalytic perspective, Abraham Zaleznik (1977) writes that "managers and leaders are very different kinds of people. They differ in motivation, personal history, and in how they think and act" (p. 70). For Zaleznik, managers and leaders are opposites in all three of these categories. Leaders are risk-takers, change agents, and passionate visionaries who come from turbulent early backgrounds. Managers, on the other hand, tend to be reactive problem-solvers who focus on process and maintaining the status quo and come from harmonious early backgrounds (Zaleznik, 1977, p. 68-75). In this conception, managers and leaders are different personality types and very much tend to be "born" of their early social and family experiences, rather than bred through education and training.

Management guru Peter Drucker's position stands in opposition to Zaleznik's psychoanalytic view. Instead of managers and leaders being two very different types of people, managers must be leaders. Drucker (2008) states, "*One does not 'manage' people. The task is to lead people. And the goal is to make productive the specific strengths and knowledge of each individual*" (emphasis his) (p. 73). With the exception of integrity, which is "one absolute requirement of managers," "what a manager has to be able to do can be learned" (Drucker, 2008, p. 281, 10). To sum up a position that puts nurture ahead of nature, Drucker states that "if we know one thing today, it is that managers are made and not born" (p. 251).

Building on James MacGregor Burns' ideas of transactional and transformational leadership, organizational psychologist Bernard Bass details how transactional leaders rely on assigning tasks to employees and rewarding them for successful completion of these tasks (Bass, 1990, p. 20). Bass's research shows that "transactional leadership is a prescription for mediocrity" (1990, p. 20). Transformational leaders, "broaden and elevate the interests of their employees . . . generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group . . . and stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group" (Bass, 1990, p. 21). Transformational leaders are superior to transactional leaders: "[M]anagers who behave like transformational leaders are more likely to be seen by their colleagues and employees as satisfying and effective leaders than are those who behave like transactional leaders" (Bass, 1990, p. 21). Bass's research shows that,

[d]espite conventional wisdom to the contrary, transformational leadership is a widespread phenomenon. True, more of it occurs at the top than at the bottom of an organization, but it has also been observed by many employees in their first level superiors. Transformational leadership can be learned, and it can—and should—be the subject of management training and development (1990, p. 27).

This is another argument in favor of learned skills for managers.

Peter Hernon, one of the most widely known researchers in library leadership, often uses Delphi methodology or interviews to determine leadership traits for library leaders (Hernon, Powell, & Young, 2003; Hernon & Rossiter, 2006). Not only did Hernon look at high-level administrators such as Association of Research Libraries (ARL) library directors, but he also examined other leaders, notably Generation X (Young, Hernon, and Powell, 2006). In all of these studies, qualities such as building working relationships with others, vision, honesty, and strong communication skills were in the first quartile of results.

In *The Accidental Library Manager*, Rachel Singer Gordon (2005) lays out a nearly chapter-by-chapter list of what skills one needs to be a good manager. Gordon tackles the subjects of personnel, communication, facilities, technology, money, ethical issues, and many other topics in her wonderful book. The topics reviewed by Gordon were used as source material for the current study.

Michael Rooney's (2010) study of middle management training found that 36% of first-time department heads had no training at all or no formal management training other than library school classes. Library school classes were determined to not be enough training "because what is learned in one management class is not sufficient knowledge to manage a department and is often forgotten before one is in a position to manage a department" (Rooney, 2010, p. 390). His results also show the importance of training because "management experience is valuable in addition to training, but is often not sufficient without training" (emphasis his) (Rooney, 2010, p. 391). Rooney also found that "management workshops and seminars were the most used method of formal management training" (2010, p. 386). Additionally, library administrators and department heads agreed that "management workshops and seminars, committee assignments, task force assignments, special projects, and mentorship" are the best methods for training managers (Rooney, 2010, p. 392).

Methodology

From the studies in the literature review above, a list was created of the skills and personal attributes of library managers (see Appendix A). The list collated and consolidated the skills and attributes put forth in works in order to have a manageable list for responses by surveyed managers. The list of personal attributes was largely taken from Table 11.2, "Attributes for Non-ARL Academic Library Directors: Quartiles Based on Average Scores" in Young (2006, p. 152-153). The list of management skills is an amalgam of those found in Hernon and Rossiter (2006) and Gordon (2005).

Rather than conduct a nation-wide survey of library managers, Pennsylvania library managers were selected as a population of convenience. First, using the Pennsylvania Department of Education website, institutions that grant bachelor's degrees were noted (2007-2008 data was the most recent available) (Pennsylvania Department of Education). Next, an effort was made to determine who the managers were at each institution. For the purposes of this study, the following were considered academic library managers: deans (including assistant and associate ranks), directors, head librarians, department heads, and those with the title of college or university librarian. This meant that the larger institutions had many more library managers in the population. However, it is unlikely that this would skew that data since the library managers themselves, rather than the institutions, were the unit of analysis. The email addresses of the managers were collected from their institutions' web sites. The managers were then emailed an invitation to take the electronic survey. A total of 313 managers were sent personalized emails asking them to take the survey. Of these 313 surveys, 119 were returned, for a response rate of 38%.

Results

The survey instrument may be seen in Appendix B. The phrase “question [number],” hereafter, will refer to the questions in Appendix B. Several of the questions were skipped by many respondents and, thus, did not generate useable results. For example, only ten respondents chose to name the library school they attended (question 9). Also, very few noted whether they took a management class in library school (question 15) or how important a second master’s degree is to being an effective library manager (question 13). Nearly all of the 119 total respondents answered the rest of the questions.

Most of the respondents in this study were directors and department heads. All of the respondents reported having the master’s degree in library and information studies (MLS). The average year the respondents started their first management job was 1993, with a range from 1963 to 2011, and a median of 1994. The average year for starting their current job was 2002, with a range from 1977 to 2011, and a median of 2004. This means that the average respondent has been in their current job for nine years.

The gender distribution in the sample was 74 women (62%) and 45 men (38%). For the non-demographic questions in the survey, chi squared tests showed that there were no significant differences in the choices made by each gender. In other words, on the opinion questions, the male and female respondents generally answered the same way.

When asked “what attribute is the most important to a library manager?” strong interpersonal skills was the most common answer, with 25% of the responses (See Figure 1). Remember that these were not free-response answers. The participants selected from the list of attributes listed in Appendix A. The second and third most common answers were integrity and vision. The top two attribute results, interpersonal skills and integrity, are the same as Herson, Powell, and Young’s (2003, p. 70) except in reverse order. This strongly suggests that these are, indeed, the two most important attributes for a manager to possess.

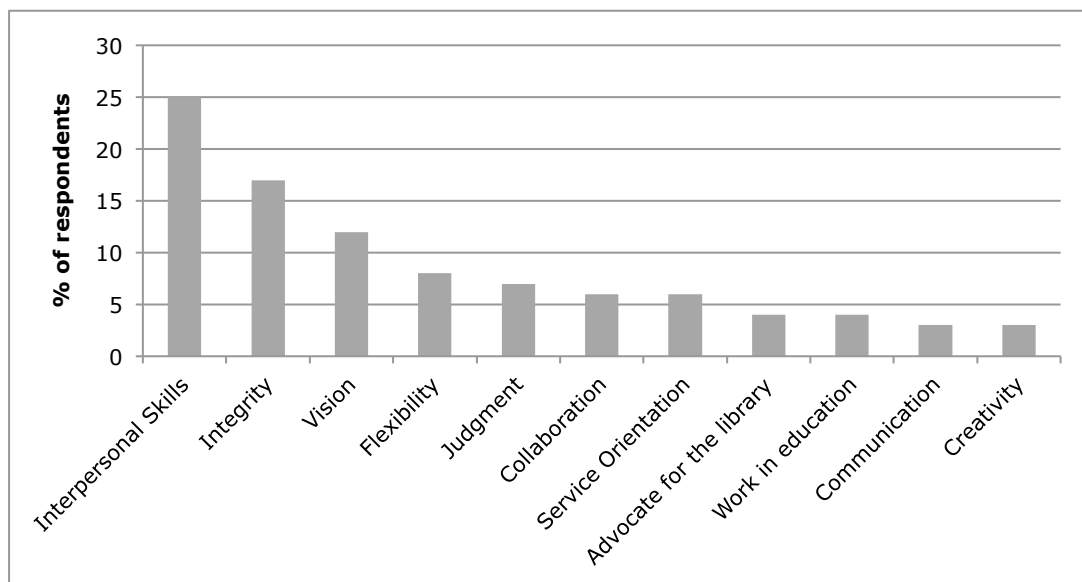


Figure 1
Most Important Manager Attributes

Far and away, respondents stated that human resources and personnel issues were the most difficult part of academic library management (64%). Tied for second with 6% each were evaluation and assessment of services, and communication. The other categories were strategic planning, budgeting, development/fundraising, collections, outreach, facilities, marketing, legal issues, and other. These categories are listed in rank order.

To answer the question “What management skills should students learn in their MLS programs?” respondents answered along a broad range of categories (see Figure 2), with evaluation/assessment and strategic planning the leading choices. Interestingly, human resources came in fourth, despite the fact that the respondents rated it as the most difficult part of the job (as noted above).

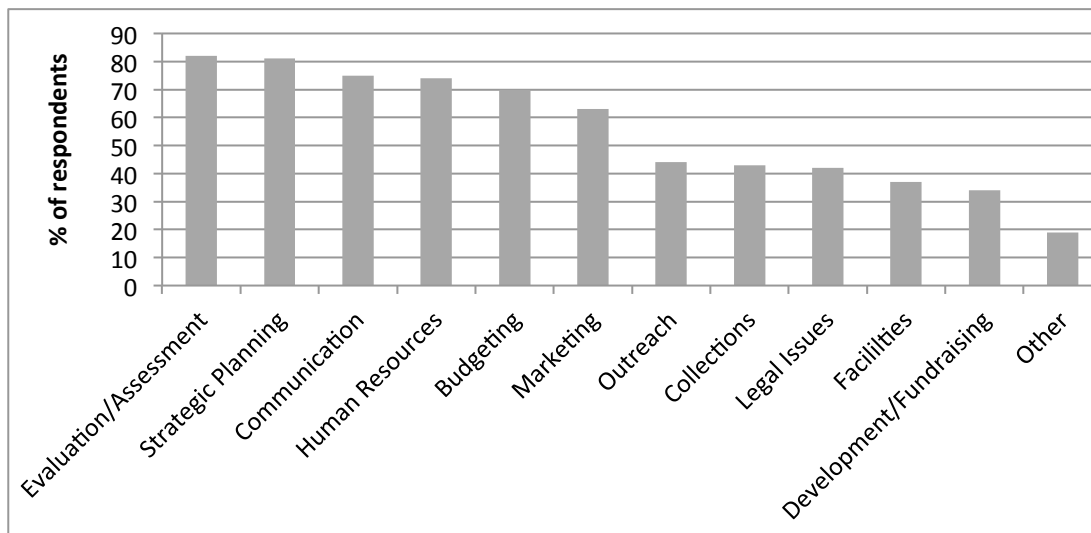


Figure 2
Management Skills for MLS Students

Despite these strong feelings about what students should learn in library school, opinions were mixed about the usefulness of management classes in library school (question 16). Typical responses received regarding the importance of a management class in library school include

“For the first time, I was exposed to management theory and many of the principals of goal-setting, evaluation, communication, and institutional functioning.”

“The importance of planning strategically and envisioning the future/leadership versus management.”

“Better understanding of campus politics and its impact to the library, legal issues such as copyright and licensing, challenges to budgeting.”

Typical responses pertaining to management class in library school as not being useful include

“Not really; the amount of time between the class and when I started managing was too great.”

“Everything I learned about management was on the job training, reading and conferences, networking, and through trial and error.”

“Management is learned on the job.”

Overwhelmingly, the respondents rated management education in MLS programs (question 17) as very important (33%) or important (50%). Reasons for this include

“I think an overview of library management issues is important, just as other aspects of librarianship are treated.”

“I believe that librarians need to see the “big picture” in higher education and that management training helps with that.”

“One usually ends up supervising someone in the library.”

Even though “management is unimportant” was a minority opinion among respondents, it is always useful to look at the contrarian responses:

“Because people don’t become managers, or good managers, by being taught it. They have to learn it through experience and development of skills and personal qualities.”

“It’s (*sic*) relevance doesn’t come until years later in most cases, and even with that, it doesn’t prepare you for the personnel issues one typically faces.”

Again, respondents overwhelmingly felt that it was very important (21%) or important (64%) for new graduates to possess management skills. Reasons include

“It is helpful for librarians, even newly minted ones, to have clarity of the big picture and to think of where they fit in the larger system.”

“I think project management skills are very important for new graduates because much of the work they will be doing will either be leading or being part of team projects.”

“Everyone manages the library during his or her time of duty.”

The minority who felt that it is not important for new graduates to have management skills is best represented by the following comments:

“I need them to be skilled in many ways, but management is far down on the list of priorities.”

“They need to learn how to think like a librarian, learn librarianship skills, etc. before they can begin to think about how to manage within the library framework.”

“Either they have it or they don’t.”

When asked if they had taken formal management coursework beyond the MLS, 55% answered yes. This figure is probably low because the term “formal” was not, but should have been, defined. Eighty-six percent rated these as very important or important mainly because of practical experience, networking, and a “safe environment” to discuss management issues. Of those that answered yes, the items most often listed were master of business administration (MBA) programs, EDUCAUSE Leadership Programs, Harvard Leadership Institute, the Higher Education Resource Services (HERS) Institute, consortial and institutional programs, as well as ALA & ARL programs.

When asked whether a manager’s personal traits or learned skills were more important, respondents overwhelmingly selected personal traits by a margin of 76% to 24%. The question was tempered with the caveat that emphasized the first part of the survey question: “realizing that both learned skills and personal traits are important.”

Discussion

Clearly, it takes a blend of personal traits and learned skills to make a good academic library manager. One simply is not born with the ability to assemble a great budget. However, based on the results of the survey, it appears that the respondents believe that certain personality types make for better managers. This finding seems to mirror the “conventional wisdom” that Bass felt was incorrect (1990, p. 27). It appears that the survey respondents tend to believe that good managers are born rather than bred.

In extrapolating from the results, MLS programs seem to be a natural place to acquire learned skills, but it appears that they are best for setting a general foundation, rather than focusing on specific skills. There does seem to be an acknowledgment that the gap from taking management classes in library school to managing in practice is a bit of a problem (as also noted in Rooney [2010, p. 390]). However, respondents believe that library school students should be versed in management for many reasons (as shown in the comments above), but primarily so they have a view of the big picture of the library and can understand the context in which their managers and administration are working.

For specific management training, respondents who had taken formal management classes outside of their MLS were extremely positive about their experiences. These training sessions or programs, such as the Harvard Institute or EDUCAUSE sessions, allowed managers to focus on a specific issue while giving them practical experience. They also felt these were “safe environments” to discuss potentially touchy management issues. These programs are also seen as valuable networking opportunities. This matches with Rooney’s (2010, p. 392) conclusions that management training outside of library school and the home institution are very valuable in developing managers.

Respondents were pointed in their criticism of the question that asked “what attribute is the most important to a library manager?” Many wished they could have picked the top three attributes or rank-ordered the entire list that was given. However, the point of the question was to determine the most important attribute so that

managers/trainers can work on developing programs to enhance that attribute. Interpersonal skills were easily the top vote-getter, and this seems like an attribute that can be enhanced through further training.

Further Research

From this survey, several opportunities for further research on this subject are evident. The first would be to expand the scope of the study beyond Pennsylvania. It is possible that Pennsylvania library managers are unlike library managers from the rest of the country. This could be for any number of reasons: perhaps they are older or younger than other library managers; perhaps they all tended to go to the same library schools; or perhaps they are different for other reasons altogether. Expanding the sample could help determine the validity of the current study.

Another area of possible further research is to expand the study to public library managers. Though there are many similarities between public and academic library managers, there are likely differences in the skills and traits that make a quality manager. The comparisons and contrasts would certainly make for interesting reading and add to the research in this area. Another variable that was not examined in this study was the size of the library or institution where the respondent works. It is possible that the size of the library and position of the manager in the organization chart could have an effect on how they view management skills and traits.

After the survey was conducted, it was noted that mentorship was not included as a choice or category. Had mentorship been included in the survey, it certainly could have been a top choice for how managers and new librarians learn how to be managers.

Finally, one might ask non-managerial librarians what skills and abilities constitute a good manager. These librarians may not have the same perception of what it takes to be an effective manager as someone who is a manager. The bottom-up approach might yield substantially different results.

Final Thoughts

As the Boomer generation continues to retire from the librarian profession, it is imperative to develop library managers and leaders to replace them. This gap might not be at the higher levels of administration, but at the middle manager level. As Rooney (2010, p. 390) notes, "it will be harder to recruit middle managers from other libraries. . . [so] it will be necessary in the future for more academic libraries to develop their own middle managers from within." Administrators must encourage their librarians to seek management training in order to ensure a robust succession plan.

Survey respondents strongly agree that professional development opportunities such as workshops, seminars, and institutes are among the very best ways to develop quality library managers. Even in these restrictive budgetary times, administrations will do well to make funding available to those who aspire to be library managers or those who want to become better library managers. There are myriad opportunities available to better those traits that are innate, as well as those skills that we have developed along the way.

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Appendix A

List of Skills

- Evaluation/Assessment of Services
- Personnel/Human Resources
- Budgeting
- Collections
- Facilities
- Communication
- Marketing
- Strategic Planning
- Outreach
- Legal Issues
- Development/Fundraising
- Other

List of Attributes

- Integrity
- Strong Interpersonal Skills
- Ability to serve as an advocate for the library
- Excellent oral and written communication skills
- Ability to work collaboratively with campus colleagues
- Ability to articulate vision for the library within the institution
- Flexibility
- Demonstrated ability to exercise mature judgment
- Good listening skills
- Commitment to professional development of library personnel
- Respect for scholarship and learning
- Strong service orientation
- Enthusiasm for work in an educational environment
- Sense of humor
- Documented record of problem solving
- Creativity
- High energy level
- Dynamic

Appendix B: Survey Instrument

Question 1: What is your job title?

Question 2: Are you male or female?

Question 3: What year did you start your first management job?

Question 4: What year did you start your current job?

Question 5: What is the most difficult aspect of library management?

- Evaluation / Assessment of services
- Personnel / Human Resources
- Budgeting
- Collections
- Facilities
- Communication
- Marketing
- Strategic Planning
- Outreach
- Legal issues
- Development / Fundraising
- Other, please specify

Question 6: Do you have a Master of Library Science degree or equivalent academic credentials?

Question 7: If you don't have an MLS or equivalent, what is your highest degree obtained?

- Bachelor
- Masters
- MBA
- JD
- M.D.
- PhD.
- Other

Question 8: What year did you obtain your highest degree?

Question 9: What college/university granted your MLS?

Question 10: What year did you graduate with your MLS?

Question 11: Do you have a PhD. in Library Science?

Question 12: Do you have a second master's degree?

Question 13: How important is having a second master's degree to being a successful academic library manager? (1 = very low importance, 5 = very high importance)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Question 14: Why?

Question 15: Did you take a management class in your MLS program?

- Yes
- No
- Don't remember

Question 16: If you did take a management class, was that class useful to your future work? How or in what ways?

Question 17: How valuable is formal management education in MLS programs for academic library managers?

- Very Important
- Important
- Unimportant
- Not Important at all

Question 18: Why?

Question 19: How important are management skills for new MLS graduates that you supervise(d)?

- Very Important
- Important
- Unimportant
- Not Important at all

Question 20: Why?

Question 21: Have you taken formal coursework on management topics (other than in an MLS program)?

- Yes
- No

Question 22: If yes, please describe the formal classes you have taken.

Question 23: How valuable were these formal programs to you in your role as an academic library manager?

- Very Important
- Important
- Unimportant
- Not Important at all

Question 24: Why?

Question 25: What management skills should students learn in their MLS program? Choose as many answers as applicable.

- Evaluation / Assessment of services
- Personnel / Human Resources
- Budgeting
- Collections
- Facilities
- Communication
- Marketing
- Strategic Planning
- Outreach
- Legal issues
- Development / Fundraising
- Other, please specify

Question 26: Of the following personal attributes, which one is the most important to an academic library manager?

- Integrity
- Strong Interpersonal skills
- Ability to serve as an advocate for the library
- Excellent oral and written communication skills
- Ability to work collaboratively with campus colleagues
- Ability to articulate vision for the library within the institution
- Flexibility
- Demonstrated ability to exercise mature judgment
- Good listening skills
- Commitment to the professional development of library personnel
- Respect for scholarship and learning
- Strong service orientation
- Enthusiasm for work in an educational environment
- Sense of humor
- Documented record of problem solving
- Creativity
- High energy level
- Dynamic

Question 27: Realizing that both learned skills and personal traits are important, which is more important to being a successful academic library manager?

- Learned skills
- Personal traits

Question 28: Please feel free to enter any comments on the survey here.