The Perceptions of Librarians in Regional Universities in Texas Regarding Leadership Development Experiences

Yumi Shin & Kaye Shelton

Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological narrative study was to examine Texas regional university librarians' perceptions of leadership development experiences in order to provide better library services to patrons from all backgrounds. The selected ten academic librarians were interviewed either face-to-face or virtually with in-depth questions about leadership development. The interviews were analyzed to understand the essence of the participants' experiences and divided into different themes to find patterns. The findings revealed the participants' perceptions regarding the need for leadership development, their participation in leadership opportunities, and the obstacles to attaining leadership development. Implications included the need for more administrative support and for changes to library school curricula.

Introduction and Research Questions

Today, academic libraries face rapid and unpredictable changes, which have affected library services tremendously. These include budget cuts, new information technology, more online learning opportunities, and globalization.[1] Because of these rapid changes, leadership development is critical to ensure the continued success and growth of libraries.[2] In fact, leadership in academic libraries has gained much attention to meet the new roles of librarians and needs of institutions. As Gwyer discussed, a different style of leadership is required to manage organizations successfully amid chaos and complexity.[3] Simultaneously, academic libraries are developing new information resources to provide digital products for their patrons. Hernon and Rossiter described the librarian's role in the future library would focus on delivering the appropriate resources that meet patrons' needs by utilizing current technology effectively.[4] Furthermore, it was expected libraries would still exist, with different functions as learning behaviors and patron preferences would change in a new digital era. Consequently, academic librarians would play more of a teaching and facilitating role due to increased remote access to library collections and the changes in classroom teaching and learning behaviors.[5] Therefore, effective library leadership is critical to the onset of positive outcomes to manage these ongoing changes successfully.[6]

Numerous researchers emphasized the need for leadership development and training for all library employees at every level.[7] However, according to Kendrick, Leaver, and Tritt, library staff have limited opportunities to learn leadership skills and voluntarily choose the options available.[8] Therefore, most of the leadership skills can only be obtained when they assume formal positions of leadership.[9] While various studies described leadership and professional development, little was revealed regarding the perceptions of academic librarians of their own leadership development experiences, as well as the impacts of their participation.[10]

Hence, it is essential to understand what leadership development programs are available and to whom these programs are directed.[11]

The purpose of this phenomenological narrative study was to examine Texas regional university librarians' perceptions of leadership development experiences to provide better library services to patrons from all backgrounds. The following research questions guided this study:

- How do librarians in regional universities in Texas describe their library leadership development experiences?
- What do librarians in Texas's regional universities believe regarding the need for leadership development in order to manage different issues professionally?

Literature Review

In this literature review, library leadership, library leadership development programs, and barriers to gain library leadership are examined. The library profession has been keen to leadership development for librarians,[12] with voluminous research published that stresses the need for leadership for all levels of employees to successfully manage ongoing changes.[13] While numerous studies explained library leadership development, little was revealed in terms of the relationship between leadership development and employees.[14] Furthermore, there are few guidelines for different levels of employees to gain library leadership.

The first formal library leadership program was the Senior Fellow Program (Senior Fellows) designed by the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1982.[15] The various library leadership development programs available currently were introduced at that time with detailed information.[16] Library leadership development programs were generally divided into formal and informal programs.[17] While formal programs were generally courses offered by professional organizations or institutions, informal programs consisted of conferences or various types of discussions.[18]

Some libraries established their own leadership development programs.[19] The Crawley-Low Library of the University of Saskatchewan, Canada, introduced the Library's Leadership Development Program (LLDP),[20] which consisted of six modules for two days that focused on behavior assessment.[21] Somerville et al. described a Research Information Services and Education program conducted at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly – SLO).[22] Sheehy also introduced a new program, Synergy: The Illinois Library Leadership Initiative, established by Jean Wilkins, Director of the Illinois State Library.[23] Unlike other programs, Synergy was a year-long program.[24]

Numerous researchers studied not only the benefits of library leadership, but also barriers that prevent proper leadership. Auster and Chan investigated obstacles to learning library leadership that they divided into two sections: work-related, and non-work-related.[25] According to Auster and Chan, work-related constraints were considered to be "situational constraints," which included too much information, equipment, materials, financial support, and

time allocation in the workplace, while non-work-related barriers included personal issues and the lack of information, resources, time convenience, and quality.

Kendrick, Leaver, and Tritt focused on obstacles for librarians working at small and rural academic libraries. The barriers presented in the paper were funding, travel distance, time, staffing, and budget cuts, among other barriers.[26]

- Funding: Funding was the primary barrier to seeking professional development for librarians working at small libraries. Funding was available for mainly local and state conferences.
- Travel distance: Travel distance was the second highest barrier for small academic librarians. Since many conferences were held in metropolitan areas, small academic librarians in rural areas found it difficult to participate in the major conferences.
- Time: There was always insufficient time for academic librarians working with smaller organizations to attend conferences due to daily tasks required due to a greater quantity of responsibilities.
- Staff: Staff limitation prevented rural academic librarians from gaining professional development since many small libraries were operated by a solo librarian.
- Budget cuts: Budget cuts were an extremely problematic barrier for librarians working in rural areas, especially in terms of gaining access to professional development programs.
- Other barriers: Other barriers included no interest by or no requirements for librarians at small academic libraries.

Methodology and Research Design

For this study, the phenomenological narrative research was performed to study the library leadership development from the interviews of librarians in Texas's regional universities to provide better services. Creswell explained qualitative research started with assumptions and used theoretical frameworks to address a social or human problem that would affect individuals or groups. According to Creswell, a phenomenological study explores the views of individuals about a particular phenomenon.[27] Van Manen described the main purpose of phenomenology is to reach phenomenal understandings and insights through phenomenological reflection, such as the epoché and the reduction.[28] Van Manen also stressed the study of the epoché-reduction is the primary method of phenomenological research,[29] and is a method of reflection on the exclusive meaning of the phenomenon to gain an essential understanding of the phenomenological meaning of human experience.[30] The phenomenon in this study was the library leadership guided by research questions to provide the perspectives of the lived experiences of the participants. This qualitative research design focused on the leadership development of librarians in Texas's regional universities.

The data was collected through in-depth interviews via face-to-face or virtual interviews. Creswell explained data in phenomenological research would be collected from the individuals who experienced the phenomenon.[31] Further, data collection in phenomenological studies often

was done through in-depth and multiple interviews with respondents.[32] Moustakas stipulated two main questions would be asked in the phenomenological research: What have you experienced about the phenomenon?[33] What situations have affected your experiences of the phenomenon? Although other open-ended questions were used in the research, these questions focused on gathering data describing the participants' experiences.[34]

Selecting participants for this study was essential to obtain valuable answers from research questions. A purposeful sampling of ten Texas regional university librarians was selected for this study. Creswell indicated researchers used purposeful sampling to decide specific individuals and sites to use in the study.[35] For this study, 10 librarians in different regional universities in Texas were interviewed regarding their experiences of leadership development. Interview participants were selected after thorough review of their answers to the email questionnaire. In order to develop a more complete picture, the researcher purposefully selected various types and positions of librarians working at Texas regional universities who had any library leadership development experience. Therefore, the librarians with no leadership experiences were excluded from the potential list of interviewees. A guided interview protocol included questions pertaining to demographics and library leadership experiences. Letters of invitation and consent forms were sent to prospective librarians explaining the purpose of the research. The selected participants were interviewed via face-to-face or virtually with in-depth questions about leadership development.

Academic libraries in Texas regional universities provided the setting for the study. As Creswell described, qualitative researchers often collect data at the site where participants experience the phenomenon.[36] Further, researchers have face-to-face interactions in the natural setting. Therefore, the researcher conducted the interviews in on-site settings, such as the libraries, if geographically accessible. Additional interviews were conducted via internet protocol depending on the respondents' preferences. Interviews were recorded to enable delayed transcription and interpret data to find shared experiences of the participants. All the interviews were followed by the guided interview protocol, and notetaking was done during the interview process.

The treatment of the data in the study included the procedures that Creswell suggested for qualitative research analysis. The guidelines to analyze data were also followed by the recommendations of Creswell. According to Creswell, data analysis in qualitative research includes the following three steps: preparing and organizing data, interpreting data into themes through a process of coding, and finally representing the data. First, the researcher asked participants open-ended questions to collect interviewees' personal opinions as much as possible. Then, the researcher developed protocols for recording the information, transcribed the data, and analyzed the data. All the collected data were stored and secured before moving to the next step, transcribing the data.[37]

After the coding stage of all the transcripts, the data were divided into different themes to examine the perceptions of librarians in Texas's regional universities regarding leadership development. Categorizing themes was critical in the study to find patterns and shared experiences of the participants. The researcher examined the transcribed interviews of the

participants' responses and looked for patterns and trends from their answers. Then, the information was gathered in data sets by themes to provide significant readable information. Finally, the researcher generalized towards the perceptions of librarians in Texas's regional universities regarding library leadership development.

Results and Discussion

The phenomenological narrative approach was used to collect data from individuals who experienced the phenomenon. The interview protocol is found in Appendix A. All interviews were conducted via face-to-face or virtual meetings. Furthermore, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into text. Then, the transcribed data were synthesized into themes to find patterns and shared experiences of the participants. Lastly, the themes were aligned with the research questions for the study. This section presents the collective analysis of the phenomenological narratives.[38]

The first research question focused on the participants' perceptions regarding library leadership development experiences. All the participants experienced leadership development prior to this research. The following themes were identified: leadership development through institutions or formal programs, communication or management skills for popular topics, and communication skills as the most gained skill.

All the librarians in this study participated in either formal or informal programs of leadership development. Formal programs were considered as the courses offered by professional organizations or institutions, while informal programs were those at conferences or various types of discussions.[39] Specific libraries developed special programs applicable to their institutions.[40] Six participants indicated the trainings from their own institutions were beneficial due to the easy access and direct relation with them. The TALL Texans Leadership Development Institute (TALL Texans) program provided by the Texas Library Association (TLA) was the most significant formal program that many participants attended. Lastly, all 10 participants mentioned they participated in various informal programs, such as conferences, workshops, webinars, and trainings.

A variety of topics on library leadership development were available.[41] Similarly, topics of library leadership that all participants learned from their experiences varied. Since all librarians used their own terms to express the topics of library leadership, the popular topics were categorized to communication and interpersonal skills, management skills, and strategic thinking skills. In addition to these popular topics, other topics were mentioned, such as technology and budgeting.

Communication and interpersonal skills were the most popular topics in library leadership development. Six participants emphasized they learned communication and interpersonal skills from their leadership experiences. Management skills was the second topic covered for leadership development. Management skills include hiring, training, evaluating people, and making decisions.[42] All the participants indicated that numerous leadership programs dealt with management skills. Two participants admitted their lack of management

skills, but also a desire to develop those skills. Strategic thinking skills were also presented for leadership development. All the participants perceived they learned various leadership competencies from their experiences. The most prominent competency acquired was communication and interpersonal skills. Six participants discovered they gained communication and interpersonal skills.

Research question two explored the need for library leadership development. Numerous literature stressed the need for library leadership for all levels of employees to manage constant changes effectively.[43] The predominant themes that emerged were: absolute need for leadership development, opportunities through library associations or institutions, and money and time as the main barriers.

All the participants for this study agreed that library leadership development is absolutely needed for their career growth. Many of the participants realized the need at the early stage of their careers, while some of them acknowledged it when they entered positions that required leadership roles. These participants admitted they struggled to handle many issues. Therefore, they strongly recommended everybody in the library field should develop leadership skills to avoid these hardships. As indicated above, all the participants agreed that library leadership development was critical to deal with the rapid changes in library science today. Therefore, they sought out opportunities applicable to their situations and interests. With regard to resources, four different places were identified: library associations, own institutions, search engines, and emails. Three participants indicated they searched opportunities through various library associations, such as the Texas Library Association (TLA), the American Library Association (ALA), and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). On the other hand, all the participants also agreed that they sought out various types of opportunities for their leadership, such as conferences, trainings, webinars, and workshops.

Librarians encountered the above obstacles to barriers of gaining library leadership today.[44] All the participants expressed they had barriers to achieve library leadership based on their situations. Among various obstacles, three noticeable barriers were presented: money and time, the challenges of finding a good mentor, and overcoming the introverted tendency. Four participants specified that time, specifically money and time, are always challenging to gain library leadership.

Conclusions

The findings of this study revealed the participants' perceptions regarding library leadership development experiences. Participants in this study realized the absolute need for leadership development and participated in various types and topics of leadership development.[45] Although participants encountered the obstacles attaining leadership development, they expressed that they gained positive impacts on their personal and professional lives.[46]

The first research question focused on the participants' perceptions regarding library leadership development experiences. The findings from this study supported the conclusion that

various library leadership development programs were available currently, and some libraries established their own leadership development programs.[47] All the participants took part in either formal or informal programs of leadership development. Auster and Chan explained formal programs were considered as the courses organized by professional organizations or institutions, whereas conferences or various types of discussion were considered informal programs.[48] Many librarians indicated they participated in various trainings at their own institutions. As Guo indicated, specific programs applicable to certain libraries were created to help librarians at those institutions develop professional skills.[49] As Chapelle presented, all the librarians experienced a wide range of options available for leadership development, such as conferences, workshops, webinars, and trainings.[50] The findings of this study further corroborated previous studies on a variety of topics on library leadership.[51] Although communication and interpersonal skills were the most popular topics in this study, all the participants indicated they learned various topics on library leadership development, such as management skills, strategic thinking skills, and technical skills.

Research question two explored the need for library leadership development. The findings from this study supported the conclusion that numerous researchers stressed the need for library leadership for all levels of library employees to manage constant changes effectively.[52] All the participants agreed library leadership should be developed as early as possible. The findings of this study also supported the conclusion that librarians encountered the barriers of developing proper professional leadership.[53] Davis and Lundstrom explained time and money were the main barriers for all institutions to support professional development, including leadership.[54] Kendrick also presented various barriers to attain library leadership, such as funding, travel distance, time, and staffing.[55] Among various obstacles, three noticeable barriers were presented in this study: money and time, finding a good mentor, and overcoming the introverted tendency. Although all the participants expressed a variety of barriers based on their situations, money and time were the main barriers in this study.

The contributions of this study can be examined as follows. The participants had the opportunity to think about their own leadership development experiences and evaluate their leadership development's current status in order to provide better library services. This study may offer value by discovering desirable support for the leadership and professional developments in different groups from the library. From this thorough investigation, library organizations can identify appropriate leadership guidelines for various employee groups.

Implications and Further Study

The conclusions of this study suggest several approaches to provide librarians with more opportunities to ensure their leadership development. Based on the findings and conclusions of this qualitative phenomenological narrative study, the researcher offers the following suggestions and implications to administrators in libraries and higher education.

- All institutions should acknowledge the need for leadership development and educate administrators to increase their support for leadership development.[56]

Administrative support is key to the professional development process,[57] which could help librarians increase their opportunities and cooperate with administrators without any conflict.

- Library schools and professional organizations should emphasize the importance of leadership development and ensure the librarians' preparation to satisfy today's needs.[58] Creating leadership classes in the library curriculum could provide a valuable tool for students to explore leadership development at the early stage of their careers. This could help students acknowledge the need for leadership development and to develop their leadership early.

The library profession has been keen to library leadership development for librarians to ensure the success of libraries.[59] In other words, numerous literature has stressed the need for leadership for all levels of library employees to manage ongoing changes successfully.[60]

This phenomenological narrative study focused on the perceptions of librarians in Texas's regional universities regarding their experiences in leadership development. The study was limited to 10 librarians who experienced leadership development. Although the researcher gained insight for possible implications for this particular group, the qualitative data gathered cannot be generalized to any larger population. Therefore, additional research is recommended to learn more about the scope of this phenomenon.

This study focused on librarians in Texas's regional universities who had leadership development experience. Further study might focus on specific groups of librarians to examine their perceptions regarding leadership development, such as mid, high, and top-level librarians. Additional studies might be conducted in specific libraries to explore the differences among libraries, such as private and public libraries, and 1st tier and 2nd tier universities. Finally, the setting might be expanded to other states in America or even to other countries to compare the differences among librarians from different backgrounds.

Purpose Statement:

The purpose of this phenomenological narrative study was to examine Texas regional university librarians' perceptions of leadership development experiences to provide better library services to all types of patrons.

Background Questions:

1. Tell me about yourself. What is your current position at your library? What is your role as your title? How long have you been working at your place?

2. What did you do before you stepped into your current position? Have you worked at different positions in the same organization? If so, what, where, and how long?

3. Where did you work before this organization? Have you worked at another library? If yes, where, what, and how long?

Research Questions:

1. How do librarians in regional universities in Texas describe their library leadership development experiences?

   a. What kinds of library leadership development experiences have you had to help you understand your current roles?
   b. What contents of library leadership have you learned so far, and what other contents do you still need to learn?
   c. What competencies of library leadership did you gain the most from your experiences and the least?
   d. What was the most meaningful experiences regarding library leadership and why?

2. What do librarians in regional universities in Texas believe regarding the need for leadership development in order to manage different issues professionally?

   a. Do you think you need library leadership skills? If so, when did you realize the need and what specific competency was needed the most?
   b. Why do you think you need to develop library leadership? If you are not a leader yet, why do you think you need it even before becoming a leader?
   c. What library leadership opportunities do you seek out when you think you need to develop library leadership?
   d. What are the challenges to attain library leadership?

Yumi Shin (shiny@lamarpa.edu) is Coordinator in the Gates Memorial Library at Lamar State College Port Arthur

Kaye Shelton (kaye.shelton@lamar.edu) is Professor of Educational Leadership at Lamar University

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