

Leaders in the Making: Succession Planning Starts in Library School

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Abstract

Many of today's library leaders are likely to retire in a decade or two at most. In order to prepare for the next generation of leaders, many libraries devise succession plans. Unfortunately, far too many do not consider their succession plan until the last minute. This article proposes that starting leadership and management training in library school is a preemptive measure that will result in already-prepared leaders, easing the burden of succession planning. It also briefly discusses the growing trend of librarian residencies as a form of extended library education, another potential way to produce successors.

Keywords: *succession planning, leadership, LIS, library school, LIS education, residency*



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The Baby Boomer generation of librarians is nearing retirement in an age of increasingly complex technology and shifting priorities. Even though far too many aging information professionals must continue working beyond the standard retirement age, we can still expect a number of retirements and shifts in leadership roles in the next decade or so. This has prompted discussion of succession planning in the library workforce, particularly academic libraries. Succession planning identifies individuals who exhibit leadership qualities and prepares them for future administrative roles through training and mentorship (author's definition). Its ultimate goal is to have the next generation of leaders in place prior to the exit of retiring leaders.

Librarian residencies are one way to address the need for successors. This growing trend models that of medical residencies, putting newly minted librarians and information professionals in short-term learning roles (generally two to three years at most). These roles encourage a diverse workforce (particularly from underrepresented groups, such as people of color), give early career librarians customized on-the-job experience, and start them on the path to continuous career development and growth. While each participating library has a slightly different vision for their resident(s), they share some common goals:

- To diversify the upcoming cadre of librarians through emphasis on ethnically diverse candidates and gender minorities
- To rotate each resident through a variety of library departments and roles, exposing them to sub-fields and potential areas of expertise
- And to devote their final year to a capstone project meant to demonstrate their training and assess the efficacy of the programs

This is an important trend because it is frequently difficult for new library school graduates to find employment within six months of gaining their diploma, based on the author's observation of fellow library school graduates. They act as extended librarian education, just as medical residencies extend the practical learning of physicians.

Residencies are a valuable tool to identify potential successors early in their careers, but succession preparation should begin even earlier. Webster and Young (2009) discuss the fact that succession dialogue frequently appears only when prompted by institutional change, unplanned vacancies, and the like. Leaders are selected based on functional expertise, without preparation for the unique realm of senior leadership. Library schools can start the succession prep before the need arises, through things like management tracks and required courses. Of course, there is debate in the literature about whether or not library schools should teach leadership skills; some feel it is the duty of the graduate's new workplace. There is also disagreement on which particular skills should be taught (Phillips, 2014). This is not altogether surprising, given the diversity of opinions in any career field.

Regardless, many LIS schools engage in leadership preparation, even minimally. The School of Library and Information Science at the University of Oklahoma offers a required course in information organization management and an elective in leadership of information organizations (University of Oklahoma, 2018). The University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business (2018) offers a Master of Management in Library and Information Science designed to prepare leaders in the field with practical skills. The Harvard Institutes for Higher Education have a Library Leadership track, including tracks for leadership in the digital age and academic library leadership (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2018).

Libraries of all types are taking steps to identify future leaders, using leadership programs. However, it is the author's observation that many librarians continue to leave library schools ill-prepared to even meet early career competencies, let alone step into leadership positions. Since the tide seems to be turning in a positive direction, there is hope. More of these leadership and residency programs begin to emerge, encouraged mostly in the context of diversity at this point, but leaving open the prospect of utilizing this same idea for a general focus on library leaders of the future and their roles in library succession plans. Targeted library leadership residencies could recruit and train information professionals possessing inborn leadership traits or a strong interest in a leadership track.

It is worth noting that even librarians with experience in supervisory and middle management roles balk at the idea of senior leadership. For many, the rewards, if any, are not worth the increased stress, personal sacrifice, and weightier responsibilities (Webster & Young, 2009). It is this author's view, as well, based on personal observation. However, library schools could alleviate some of this anxiety through training, requiring internships, and practical application of theoretical skills, especially as they relate to leadership and succession preparation.

Ultimately, an effective succession plan will require early preparation, before the degree is even in hand. Superior leadership preparation and mentoring before graduation can produce more confident information professionals with marketable skills, address the hesitations of frontline and mid-level managers, and give libraries a head start in planning for the future of the workforce. This will ultimately provide a strong foundation for succession planning and ease the minds of the outgoing generation of librarians and the concerns of the incoming wave.

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