The Career Choices We Make:

Balancing Ambition, Personal Fulfillment, and Life as an Academic Librarian

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Introduction

This chapter is for those among us who reach the midpoint of our careers and contemplate taking a higher-level position or doing the opposite and moving to positions that involve less leadership responsibility. We suspect that the ideas we express will apply to many in the profession. However, we acknowledge that gender, race, and identity play a strong role in career paths and opportunities. Yet, who among us has not felt that we could make significant improvements, if only we were in charge? And who among those who are in charge has not once yearned for a release from feeling responsible for the performance of others? Our advice will not apply to everyone; however, we feel that our combined experience is likely to ensure that it is relevant to the majority of professionals in librarianship.

We begin by describing our career paths, both of which are quite nonlinear. Our exposition includes reflection on our motivations for the twists and turns we have navigated. We then describe the nature of the work as well as the ways this work has impacted us in the many positions we have had, which collectively span the gamut from library liaison to unit head to department head to dean. Given our diverse experience, we expect that

these narratives will resonate with many of you and thereby serve to provide insights relevant to your own situation. Additionally, the contrasting approaches we offer may create opportunities for those who are undecided.

After sharing our experiences in academic libraries, we provide practical advice based on the lessons we have learned from our journeys and conversations with many colleagues. Here we present guidance for deciding whether to pursue a position with more or less leadership responsibility. This takes the form of actionable strategies and motivational mindsets. We end with tips for successfully transitioning into a new position and taking full advantage of the opportunities it can provide for growth and fulfillment. Through our explorations and conversations, we conclude that career trajectories depend on highly personal and situational factors for everyone.

Our Career Autobiographies

Lis

As a white cisgender female, I represent a minority in the field of university and library leadership in terms of gender, but I also am part of the majority in terms of race. It has been interesting to be part of the dominant culture and, in many ways, outside it. As a woman, I have found that my ambition has not always been supported by colleagues. In fact, I have often felt great resistance in my push to further my education and expand my career.

I started my career in librarianship as an instruction librarian at Louisiana State University (LSU) in 2005. The move to teaching within an academic library was a natural transition for me as I had spent the three previous years teaching English at both the high school and community college levels. My intent during my MLS degree was to be a humanities librarian, so when an opportunity to pursue that area of librarianship opened up at Kansas State University (K-State), I grabbed it. At this point, my daughter was in fifth grade, so I committed to stay at K-State until she graduated high school. As a single mother, it was very important to me to provide this stability. Thus, I focused on achieving tenure (2013) and earning my PhD in geography (2015) while at K-State. Shortly after defending my dissertation on the work and life of Frida Kahlo and their deep connection to place, I had the opportunity to take a department head job at Stony Brook University, NY, in 2015. With my daughter settled in college, it felt like a good time to explore management as a potential career path. While the position at Stony Brook included many wonderful colleagues and a stimulating environment, I left after fifteen months to take a similar department head position at the University of Utah in 2016. I was drawn to Utah for a number of reasons, including family considerations, geographic location, and the opportunity to manage a departmental budget. After four years at Utah, I was offered a position at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville as dean of library and information services in 2020. I was excited about the position for several reasons, including the opportunity to develop skills in university leadership as well as (once again) a geographic location that put me close to family. As I continue to look forward to career opportunities, I know that family, geographic location, and opportunities to grow professionally will be the biggest deciding factors for me.

Jason

Prior to working in libraries, I studied social psychology and started a PhD program in that field. My ambition was to uncover the cognitive bases of discrimination and use those insights to eliminate racism. During my first and only year in the PhD program, I learned that my conceptualization of racism as a manifestation of cognitive bias was, itself, racist. This is because it denied the influence of power dynamics that seek to perpetuate themselves. Confronted with the reality that my views were borne of invisible, easily denied influences—what McIntosh[1] described as white privilege—I decided to abandon my studies and pursue a career grounded less in theory and more in action.

As I reflect on my career in libraries, I recognize that white privilege and male privilege have shaped the opportunities available to me as well as the expectations I have placed on myself. Many of my opportunities, including the fact that I was hired by my library in the first place, were made more likely by my socialization into the predominant culture of whiteness. Hout and Morgan found that expectations for achievement are shaped by the encouragement one receives from those in positions of authority.[2] And given the racism in our society, it is likely that this encouragement is differentially available based on race. The positive evaluations that steadily raised my career ambitions were not due entirely to performance. The fact that my success would help perpetuate the power structure operating in my library almost certainly biased my evaluators.

While Lis's career has taken her to several different universities, I have spent mine at one institution: Kansas State University. I was hired as a part-time reference generalist in 1998, despite not having an MLS. I remained in that part-time position until 2008. After finishing my MLS in 2007, I waited for a full-time position to become available at K-State Libraries. It never occurred to me that I would not be successful in obtaining a full-time job. This is because I knew I was performing in ways that were perceived positively. I was using metrics and framing my work in ways that I knew would appeal to my supervisors who were also white and were using evaluation systems designed by white people.

The idea of looking elsewhere for a full-time position held no appeal to me because I enjoyed being near family and lifelong friends and I was loath to lose the reputation, social capital, and many strong relationships I had built within the library. In early 2008, I began my first full-time job as an evening service coordinator. Two years later, the libraries adopted a new organizational structure which led to many new job openings, including several tenure-track positions in public services. I applied to become an undergraduate services librarian because I was eager to eventually have the job security that tenure affords and because I wanted to have a deeper impact on student success. When the head of the Undergraduate and Community Services Department took a sabbatical in the spring 2013 semester, I served as the interim head. I was tenured and promoted to associate professor in 2015. Then, following another restructuring, I became a social sciences liaison librarian in the newly formed Academic Services Department. When the head of the Library User Services Department left the university in 2016, I was encouraged to apply for that leadership position. Again, this encouragement came from a white male and was, I believe, given with the expectation that I would not implement radical change. I was not at all sure that I wanted to remove myself from my focus on instruction and consultations, but I was

also intrigued by the opportunity to help transform our frontline services and influence the overall direction of the libraries. Ultimately, I opted to apply for the position. I was selected and have been in that role ever since.

Reflecting on Leadership

Jason

I entered my new position as a department head with the view that leadership meant charting a strategic direction and convincing others to be motivated by the pursuit of concrete goals. I saw it as my mission to eradicate laziness and instill a strong work ethic in which work was intentional, countable, and action-oriented. Looking back now, I am struck by how thoroughly my views were informed by my whiteness and specifically by the assumption that my status was indicative of merit.

I quickly realized that my approach was doing little but causing me and my colleagues stress. However, it was not until I attended the Harvard Leadership Institute that I began to understand why this was happening or how I could modify my leadership philosophy. The core text we used during the institute, *Reframing Academic Leadership* by Lee Bolman and Joan Gallos, presented four frames through which a leader could interpret situations: structural, political, human resource, and symbolic.[3] At the beginning of the institute, I took an assessment to learn which frames I relied on most heavily and which I neglected. I was actually proud to find that I relied almost exclusively on the structural frame and very little on the human resource or political frame. However, as the institute proceeded, I came to appreciate that not every situation could be effectively addressed through structural activities such as documentation or the creation of new policies or procedures. In the months following the institute, I radically reformed my approach to leadership. Rather than seeing leadership as the act of guiding through rule setting, I chose to see it as the act of listening, encouraging, and advocating. Rather than valuing the quantity of outputs, such as the number of reference consultations and the number of instructional sessions given by the department, I elected to value the creation of relationships and new services. I put my energy into advocating for opportunities for those I supervised.

Prior to making any moves upward or downward, I thought the quality of my work-life balance would decline when I moved up and improve when I moved down. Surprisingly, neither has happened. This is likely because I have few non-work-related responsibilities. I have no children and do not have elderly parents who need my care. When I have lacked direct access to decision-making, I have felt the need to work more in order to persuade others to listen to me. This belief that productivity would lead to power is indicative of the subtle influence of white privilege.[4] When I entered my first leadership position, I was inclined to work more so that I could maintain expertise in each facet of the department's operations. After a few employees expressed frustration at the example I was setting and annoyance at the lack of trust I was showing in their ability to manage their own work, I chose to return to my previous level of work activity.

My primary motivation for moving into positions with more formal leadership had been my desire to directly influence my library's strategic direction. In the early stages

of my career, I was certain I knew what we should be doing more of and what we should stop doing altogether. This confidence was, I now know, borne of the fact that I knew what was valued and did not question whether those outcomes were worth pursuing. I thought that as a unit head or department head, I would be able to convince others to see the wisdom of my ideas. What I didn't anticipate was how effectively my fellow department heads were able to convince me of the wisdom of their visions, which were often very different from mine. I now focus on advocating for each department to think carefully about the way users experience the systems, spaces, and services they each offer. I have observed that with greater formal leadership, I have the opportunity to reshape organizational practices and policies that have perpetuated traditional power structures. I am determined to use my position and privilege to foster inclusion and enhance diversity, both for patrons and staff.

Lis

I didn't step into a leadership role until my daughter had graduated from high school, so in many respects, I had the luxury of devoting increased time and energy to my work. Particularly as dean, I feel it would be a very tough work-life balance if I had young children in the home. I think this might be one reason that we see far more males in administrative roles in librarianship, even though the profession is overwhelmingly female. Even in our progressive society, the weight of parenting and domestic chores still fall largely to women.[5] Since all my dean experience has been during the pandemic, I know that I'm not even getting the full experience of what it is like to manage that type of professional schedule that includes travel and in-person events.

As I've reflected on my first year and a half as a dean, I've realized that the work-life balance in this role would have been much more difficult if I had a child still at home. Given that my daughter is an adult and on her own, I have a lot more leeway to spend extra time on work tasks than I would have five or six years ago. This is not to suggest that parents make bad leaders, but that the issue of time and home life might be more complex for those with at-home care responsibilities.

Given that I had many life experiences prior to taking on a leadership role, my philosophy of leadership embraces the idea of work-life balance. Something I feel has been demonstrated during the pandemic is a greater need for emphasis on health (mental, physical, etc.) in the workplace. In my role, I've worked to enforce ideas of self-care and family-friendly policies in the workplace. I'm a firm believer in having work be an integral and fulfilling part of one's life but certainly not the entirety of it. One strategy that I think helps promote work-life balance is having social gatherings in the workplace where people can find out about each other's interests and lives.

I think it is a fallacy to think that a dean has complete control of the vision and mission of the library. Particularly when the librarians are faculty, it is absolutely essential to have a consensus on major issues or changes. Additionally, the mission and vision of the library must align with the mission and vision of the university as well as the expectations of the provost and other university leaders. Within the library, I rely heavily on my administrative team to help me present and solicit ideas from across the organization and at

all levels, including staff. Similarly, I think evaluations can be particularly tricky. While people absolutely need constructive feedback, there are many considerations to take into account when evaluating faculty and staff. For example, sometimes the hard skills can be much less important than the soft skills.

From my vantage point as dean, I think there is a crisis in mid-management leadership in libraries. I spent five years in two different mid-management roles and found both roles to be unsatisfying. Based on my experiences, as well as those of others that I've talked to, it seems that libraries often don't know what they want from their middle managers and, consequently, do not provide them with the leadership experiences they need to move forward. I think that this accounts for many mid-managers deciding to step down from their roles. They often have little authority but are responsible for guiding operations in a complex environment. As a new dean, this is something I'm trying to not emulate. I try to give my mid-managers autonomy and decision-making power within their areas. This does not mean being completely hands off but rather providing support when needed and, likewise, space when needed.

Encountering the Reality of Leadership

Jason

Early in my career, I moved from a position as a unit supervisor to one that had no supervisory authority. After making this switch, I tightly embraced the opportunity to become a radically independent solo actor, responsible for my own actions, and in control of how I chose to spend my time. I highly recommend that anyone who has a similar change in position try this at least for a while. The reason is that this radical move away from the perceived strictures of leadership enables one to rediscover and reimagine one's purpose and goals. I suspect that many who follow a similar path will notice, as I did, that there is a remarkable similarity between these newly imagined motivations and those one held before. Whether or not this is the case, once you rediscover what drives you, end your period of self-focus and find others whose vision overlaps with yours. Collaborations with those individuals can enable you to achieve the breadth of impacts you strove to achieve in your former role.

When I first became a department head, I had a burning desire to rapidly implement new projects and create a culture of innovation. I revealed my agenda early on and was frustrated by the resistance I encountered from my department. Now, almost five years later, I realize that any agenda I would have imposed would have been received poorly. What I should have done is hold conversations in which each employee described what they enjoy about their work and what impact they wanted to have on our patrons and community. Then we would have been able to form a vision and mission to which we all contributed. So, while there are many tips I could give to anyone seeking to take on a greater leadership role, I choose to give just two: go slowly and build collaboratively. Although one might feel tempted to move quickly to establish a reputation for decisive action, experienced leaders recommend taking the time to understand what needs to be done before starting to act.[6] And though it might seem easier to focus on what you and

your team can accomplish independently, you will likely achieve more success by acknowledging the interdependence of the separate functional units within your organization and collaborating with those units.[7]

Now that I have been a department head for five years, I have begun to reframe my perception of my role in the organization. Much of this involves challenging the assumptions I have about what a leader should and should not do. I felt that a leader should understand all the details of the work of those they supervise so that their work can be adequately evaluated. As well, I thought it important to always endeavor to exceed the quality of work of anyone else in my unit. And I did not feel that it was appropriate for me to ask for help from those I supervise. In reflecting on these assumptions, it has been clear that they have led to a good deal of stress and have diverted my attention from helping my employees grow. They have also prevented me from taking advantage of opportunities to engage fully in new initiatives being pursued by my library. In recognizing these assumptions, I am feeling their power over me recede, and I am allowing myself to enjoy my work more fully. I have already seen the benefits in my employees, several of whom have begun to exercise informal leadership in the absence of my constant involvement. I wish I had been willing to explore my assumptions much earlier. I strongly recommend doing so regularly and even taking the bold step to discuss these with your employees. It can help foster transparency and can free you from imagined norms that hamper growth.

Lis

When moving into a new level of leadership, it is crucial to gain a sense of clarity about the motivations, strengths, and weaknesses of those whom you are working with closely. It can be tempting to ride the wave of excitement and enthusiasm that comes with your new leadership position (particularly if you are coming in from the outside), but it is easy to create many problems for yourself early on if you do not step back and critically evaluate those in your organization. At the minimum, I think it takes a year of working closely with others to understand their talents and weaknesses. It is vital to see people in action, over a period of time, not only in their job functions but also in how they treat others. For me, observation is the best tool for evaluating existing employee potential. I also think it is important to put work into creating strategic partnerships—on-campus and in the community—early on. Not only can these individuals help to advance your mission but also offer a network of support. Although it will be tempting to focus all your energy internally (especially if the organization is suffering in some way), these external relationships are crucial for long-term success.

One of the most difficult tasks I've had as a new dean is managing expectations. With new leadership often comes new opportunities. However, not everyone will get an opportunity to advance in a new organizational structure or advance at the same pace. Although it is important to keep lines of communication open regarding new opportunities for advancement within the organization, it is also important not to seem to promise anything. This is important not only because it will take time to evaluate existing employees but also because university administration often has a great deal of control over how the library is structured—particularly in unionized environments. Thus, the dean

or director may not be able to carry out their vision exactly as planned. Consequently, it is crucial to understand the constraints of your particular institution and system prior to making any sort of reorganization plans.

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Jason

I frequently find myself contemplating whether I want to stay in my current position, strive to become an associate dean, or move back into a library liaison role. As a person who has an anxiety disorder, I deliberate the merits of each alternative over and over, hoping that I can eventually find a path that feels right. This indecision is caused by an anxiety-based mental bias to interpret uncertain outcomes negatively.[8] Although I haven't come up with a fail-proof approach to circumventing my career-path indecision, I have arrived at some strategies that I know will help me. And I suspect that they may help any mid-career librarian.

The first is to talk to others who have made the type of move you are contemplating. Ask them what they enjoyed and disliked about the role they moved into and what they missed and did not miss about the role they departed. Also, inquire about any surprises they experienced. When you find yourself empathizing, you should take note. Those moments can help you cut through all the clutter in your contemplation and uncover fundamental truths about your own situation. Closely related to this first strategy is asking friends and colleagues why they think you should make the kind of move you are contemplating. If the reasons they provide don't inspire you, this is a good sign that they don't think it would be a good move for you. If you choose to directly ask them if they think you should make the move, it is important to recognize that people who know you well may give you different perspectives than those who do not. Where there is direct conflict in the advice you receive from the two groups, I recommend giving preference to the advice from those who know you well.

A similar approach is to talk to people who are currently in the type of position you are thinking about moving into. Ask them about what tasks occupy most of their time, which aspects of their job excite them, which cause them stress, which give them satisfaction, and how their position has changed them. When listening to their answers, avoid the strong temptation to think that your experiences would be completely different from theirs. Social psychologists have found that external circumstances often play a much more significant role in our behavior than our internal traits.[9] Therefore, our reactions to the stories we hear from individuals in the positions to which we aspire are perhaps the best guides we can have.

Although I place the most trust in my emotional reactions to externally generated information, I also find it useful to carefully reflect on the match between my desired position and my values, personality traits, and interests. When making mental or physical lists of what is important to us, I recommend thinking back on situations at work where you felt energized and using those to make inferences about ourselves.

Whenever I invoke these strategies, I conclude that I enjoy getting down into the weeds to solve problems for patrons, discovering new research tools, and creating informational resources. However, I also have strengths in macro-level thinking and strategy. Thus, my decision is tough.

Lis

I tend to subscribe to the philosophy, "You don't know until you know." One strategy I employ as a dean is to allow people to try out leadership roles on an interim basis so that there is a better sense of knowing if leadership is a good fit. For some, they find that leadership is something that hinders their scholarship and, potentially, their relationships with colleagues. For others, they realize that leadership is, in fact, what they want to focus on professionally rather than a focus on being a faculty member and scholar.

There have been so many surprises for me as I've moved through leadership positions that I don't think any amount of investigating or analysis could have prepared me for them. Additionally, how one reacts to a circumstance shapes the circumstance itself. What might be a challenge for one leader could be viewed as a minor issue for another. There are so many factors that come into play. For example, serving as a dean at a mid-size regional, doctoral/professional university, my job is very different from the dean roles I observed at large R1 ARL institutions. Likewise, my leadership style at my current institution is radically different from the leadership styles of all deans that came before me. Consequently, I'm experiencing a situation where some problems are being solved and other new problems are emerging simply based on people's reactions to me.

I also think making mistakes is the only way that we can truly learn. In academic libraries where the librarians have tenure, taking on a leadership position without fully knowing all the implications is a somewhat safer bet because the tenured faculty role is always something to fall back on. That is actually quite common in other academic departments on campuses—they typically don't see deans and/or chairs remaining in those roles in perpetuity.

I think it's also hard to know your strengths until you have the opportunity to exercise them. For example, I've found that I have a talent for institutional reorganization. That's something that I never had the opportunity to do prior to my current position. For example, I was able to put a framework on an organization that had none (no organizational chart, no functioning middle managers, etc.) within six months of arriving at my position.

Talking to people who are in roles that you are considering can be effective, but I find that rather than them simply saying what they think you want to hear, there is often a great deal of professional jealousy among colleagues that might cause them to discourage you because of their own insecurities. It is much more important, in my opinion, to try out roles and see how they feel and then make decisions based more on internal factors rather than external factors.

The only way to know if you like or are good at leadership is to do it. This isn't to suggest that careful consideration shouldn't go into the decision. Rather, I believe that making the decision and actually doing the job is the only way to fully know if it's right for you. Ideally, a healthy organization provides opportunities for people to try on leadership

roles with the assumption that they may lead to something else—but not necessarily. In fact, some people may prefer operating in leadership roles outside of their library—for example, in relevant professional organizations or at an expanded campus level.

Conclusion

Our chapter has sought to give our very different perspectives on how mid-career librarians can develop pathways to leadership or, conversely, develop in other areas of their work life. We use our own experiences to help those who are at crucial crossroads in their careers. We hope what we've communicated is that there's not a one-size-fits-all to finding success and fulfillment as your professional journey continues. As well, we've been able to give some very practical advice regarding decisions such as relocation, leadership, organizational politics, and university cultures. It is clear that experience is, in fact, the greatest teacher and that one should carefully weigh the benefits and consequences of career decisions.

Notes

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