

What Makes a Successful Succession Plan?

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Abstract

The current research examines the experiences of beginning and expert librarians to ascertain the factors that predict practitioner success. In the process, the study compares southern California librarians (and their academic preparation) with the experiences of librarians in other representative countries (e.g., Australia, Brazil, Canada, European Union, Hong Kong, and Turkey). Factors are identified that link to librarian preparation, with the intent of determining: 1) at what point in the academic-practice continuum identified skills, knowledge, and dispositions should be addressed; 2) what pre-service activities optimize learning. The investigator also uncovers universal and culturally determined practices. Findings inform succession planning.

Purpose

Librarian master's and post-baccalaureate credential programs have as their charge to prepare candidates to serve as successful professional librarians. While the intent is not to prepare them merely for their first job, programs try to optimize the experiences of beginning practitioners. As such, part of that preparation may include field experience. Nevertheless, the first couple of years can be difficult, particularly if the librarian's original expectations do not match the realities of day-to-day work or do not mesh with the institution's existing values and norms. Particularly since the profession predicts a surge of librarian retirements in the near future, it is imperative that those candidates who enter the profession will be successful, and will remain as librarians for the foreseeable future.

This study examined the academic preparation, predispositions, initial job experiences, and professional development opportunities of beginning and expert librarians to ascertain possible predictive factors that can foster effective librarians, specifically teacher librarians. The study informs the implementation of their library services as well as library staffing in general. It will also determine at what point in the academic-practice continuum identified skills, knowledge, and dispositions should be addressed, and what pre-service activities will optimize learning. This research compares southern California librarians (and their academic preparation) with the experiences of librarians in other representative countries (e.g., Australia, Brazil, Canada, European Union, Hong Kong, and Turkey) in order to uncover possible universal and culturally determined practices. Findings inform institutions as they plan for succession professionals.

Reviewing Relevant Literature

The literature review drew upon the standards, academic preparation, career choice, and in-service experiences of librarians. Because their functions largely overlap those of classroom teachers and educational administrators, literature from these related fields were also examined. Three theoretical strands provided valuable conceptual models for this investigation: competency theory, change theory, and contingency theory of socialization. The first focused on the individual's expertise, the second focused on decision-making and behavior, and the third focused on interpersonal relationships. Findings from the literature review were compared to standards for incoming and proficient librarians. (See further readings for more details.)

Methodology

To address these issues, the investigator used a mixed methods approach to provide a rich dataset and to triangulate responses. As an ethnographic exploratory study to determine appropriate criteria for assessment, thirty-nine beginning and expert teacher librarians (i.e., National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certified) from Southern California area were surveyed and interviewed. A follow-up set of assessment instruments gathered specific data about the subjects:

- Library media program implementation and values rubric
- Library media teacher standards self-assessment
- librarian challenges and support survey
- librarian time management instrument
- librarian satisfaction survey

IASL regional directors were then contacted to identify first- and second-year librarians and expert librarians per country (Australia, Brazil, Canada, European Union, South Africa, Hong Kong, and Singapore). A follow-up message was sent to IASL members through the association's listserv. The same set of assessment instruments were administered to gather specific data about the subjects via email and print.

Descriptive and correlation statistics were applied to the data. Open-ended questions were coded for patterns of responses, and compared with the quantitative data to triangulate results.

Findings

The findings reinforce the identified theoretical constructs of competency theory, change theory and contingency theory of socialization. Based on the data collected and analyzed, the main conclusion drawn is that librarians grow developmentally in their job:

- growing from outside control to inner control,
- growing from concerns about self-centric actions to impact on student achievement,
- moving from self-survival to school-wide improvement,
- moving from absolutist to realistic expectations,
- focusing from daily operations to long-term influence,
- focusing from skills development to deep understanding of information literacy and the role of information, moving from self-control to institution-wide leadership.

Reflecting competency theory, significant differences existed between first- and second-year librarians, and between second- and third-year librarians and more experienced librarians. Additionally, significant differences existed between veteran librarians and National Board certified teacher librarians. In general, first-year librarians focused on their own practice and their transition to their new role. Second-year librarians tended to focus on fitting into the school culture as they impact student achievement; they also put more attention on the resources they had in contributing to the school's purpose. By the time that librarians reached their third year, they focused on their working relationship with other school personnel as well as other librarians. National Board certified and other expert librarians were self-motivated, and found ways to improve library programs by optimizing school factors and finding ways to advance one's own knowledge and application for influencing school improvement.

The international aspect advances study on determining the universal and culture-specific experiences of librarians in their academic preparation, induction period, and eventual long-term success. Amazingly, most content knowledge and practices are universal. Culturally-defined

aspects tend to focus on hiring practices, job functions, and decision-making. Additionally, gender- and age-linked factors were not identified as significant.

Conclusions

Findings from this research provide a richer picture of the experiences and needs of first- and second- year librarians. Of particular interest is the potential differentiation among beginning, competent and expert librarians. Thus, the study's findings can inform librarian-preparation graduate programs and site induction programs. Furthermore, longitudinal data can determine if the librarian program modifications impact the success rate of these librarians. Findings also inform succession planning.

What kind of candidates should librarian preparation program coordinators and library administrators look for? Extroverted or service-oriented individuals who are self-confident risk-takers or at least open-minded, life-long learners, and flexible. Candidates are more likely to be successful if they are good communicators and collaborators. In terms of "good fit" with the function of a librarian, those who value intellectual challenge and autonomy, and those who like reading and research processes, are more likely to feel comfortable. While having these pre-existing dispositions can facilitate beginning librarian experiences, some of the behaviors (e.g., independent learning skills, communication, collaboration) can be taught in pre-service programs.

In terms of its impact on academic librarian preparation programs, the assessment instruments can be used in the field experience to ascertain to what extent those candidates are prepared for their first professional position. Data collected from the use of the instruments can also be examined to modify programs in order to optimize librarian candidates' professional success. Candidates need to understand underlying theories of librarianship as well as apply those principles and best practices in real-life situations, with an intention of educational management and leadership. They also need to be able to explore current library technologies in order to develop valued expertise at the future work sides. Furthermore, explicit attention to professional dispositions should constitute part of academic recruitment and socialization.

Reflecting expert librarians' high regard for continuing education, librarian preparation programs should give serious consideration to offering advanced and refresher courses for librarian practitioners. Potentially, such programs could provide mentoring opportunities, combining pre- and in-service librarians. Another promising practice is to provide two-tiered librarian licensure: 1) a preliminary credential to enable individuals to begin work within a school setting, perhaps as a part-time intern; and 2) a "clear" credential, which would require additional academic preparation. This latter tier could involve an induction partnership between the school system and the university.

In terms of dispositions and career motivation, whatever the motivation (e.g., activist vs. idealist), the match between personal and school expectations should be optimized. Field experience can be an effective "filter" or reality check to make sure that the anticipated expectation reflects real job functions. Additionally, pre-service faculty should explain change theory and issues of job transitioning in order to help candidates deal with possible stressful situations. Academic advisors should alert potential librarians that the job will not be less stressful or demanding, but rather the pacing and interaction with the institutional community will be different from their prior jobs. They should also be alerted that they will likely not be able to read on the job.

The contingency theory of socialization provided a framework to explain the relative success of beginning librarians, and reinforced the impact that administrators have on the success of librarians. Indeed, academic faculty should remind their students that the hiring process is as much about interviewing and sizing up the school and its administration as much as the school interviewing the potential librarian.

Several recommendations for administrators emerged from the data analysis. For example, administrators need to clarify job expectations, including budget issues. They should also be sensitive to first-year workload, and provide professional development opportunities for new functions such as technology expert. To ensure librarian retention and success, administrators should provide targeted professional development opportunities throughout librarians' career paths. Greater attention needs to be made to earlier professional development, particularly to close transfer of learning. Administrators should make sure that beginning librarians have subject-expert mentors and opportunities to see librarian best practice. While general/site orientations are useful, more social connections should be the focus in the second year. To that end, administrators need to demonstrate explicit encouragement for collaboration and information literacy incorporation. Additionally, they need to explicitly encourage reading, information literacy, and technology competencies through curriculum development and allocation for time and recognition for collaborative planning and implementation. Fostering a learning community could optimize such efforts. Administrations also need to make sure to acknowledge and publicly recognize librarian's efforts beyond their identified job descriptions; their public support will gain them acceptance when they ask librarians to do more with no additional remuneration. Administrators also need to make sure that all librarians, regardless of their tenure, have opportunities to network, to voice their needs, and to contribute to the school's mission based on their abilities.

Administrators and library service supervisors would do well to check the process of librarians from one year to the next to determine if satisfactory progress is being made. They should also encourage and facilitate tenured librarians to advance from a competent *status quo* to expert status.

In terms of planning for successors, library administrators should:

1. Think 5-10 years ahead.
2. Identify possible staff changes
3. Determine desired functions and associated skills sets.
4. Identify potential in-house staff as successors.
5. Plan career-long professional development .
6. Examine and improve organizational culture.
7. Recruit applicable/matching staff.
8. Mentor/socialize new staff.

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