

Developing leaders and transforming libraries

Dan Gjelten and Teresa Fishel

What do focus, passion, courage, wisdom and faith have to do with our day to day work? If you are a leader in today's academic library, those qualities are essential for success in guiding this generation of library workers through the current reinvention of the academic library. As Karen Wittenborg has pointed out in her essay, "Rocking the Boat", the leaders she most admires are those who are "visionaries, risk takers, good collaborators and communicators, mentors, and people with uncommon passion and persistence."¹ It is these kinds of leaders that will be able to turn this transition into a meaningful "transformation," and the development of these leaders is a key challenge for the profession today.

Library administrators acquire their leadership skills from a number of different sources – their library education, from independent study and reading, mentors, and, notably, from on the job experience, both positive and negative. Yet, for library professionals in mid-career, there is still often a need for reflection and consideration of one's understanding of leadership, especially as it is distinguished from management and administration. In addition, as we know from various reports, we should be preparing for a fairly significant loss in library leadership due a "major wave of librarian retirements"² sometime within the next decade.

This year, two library leaders have identified a particular focus – one on library education (Michael Gorman) and the other on advocacy for academic libraries (Camila Alire)³. With this renewed emphasis on educating future librarians, as

¹ "Rocking the Boat". Karen Wittenborg, in REFLECTING ON LEADERSHIP. (Council on Library and Information Services, 2003). p. 1.

² "Secure Our Professional Future." Rachel Singer Gordon. LIBRARY JOURNAL, February 15, 2006, p.50.

³ "Advocating to advance academic libraries; the 2005-06 ACRL President's focus". Camila A. Alire. C&RL NEWS, September 2005, p.590

well as the need to develop advocates and leaders throughout the library organization, and given the need in the library profession for leaders with vision and courage, our article is intended as commentary and consumer's guide to the two excellent programs which provide opportunities for leadership training for academic librarians: the one week ACRL/Harvard Leadership Institute (Cambridge, MA) and the two week Frye Leadership Institute (Atlanta, GA.) Both, in somewhat different ways, provide current and future library leaders with opportunities for growth and transformation as professionals. While there are differences between the two programs, they have several characteristics in common.

In both cases, the programs will be most useful for academic library professionals who are maturing leaders in mid-career. They assume a certain level of experience with leading an organization or a department within an organization in the higher education environment, including responsibility for strategic planning and the management of people and budgets. They also assume a commitment to something greater than an individual career. The experience is most powerful when the participants share a devotion to the "bigger idea" – the value of the library in the larger academic organization. Both institutes are for librarians who believe, as William Plater noted in a 1995 essay, that "the library is the means by which American universities will transform themselves into something entirely new."⁴ Both are for library professionals who wish to not only sustain, but advance their organizations.

Since leadership is, to some extent, based on self-knowledge, there is the need in both programs for a level of openness to personal growth. As in all kinds of educational experiences, the fundamental ability to be able to listen non-defensively is important. These leadership programs ask participants to assess themselves honestly and to be willing to change and transform themselves based

⁴ "The Labyrinth of the Wide World." William M. Plater. *Educom Review* 30:2 (1995): 39.

on a new understanding of individual roles and responsibilities within a larger organization.

Both programs will help develop credibility in participants who take the experiences seriously. Both can help to develop leaders who are continually open to new ideas, who have a compelling “story” to tell, and, importantly, who have the ability to step back from the level of the subjective (that is, being *subject* to stresses and frustrations) and be able to *objectify* those frustrations, to hold them up and study and analyze them.

Both require pre-readings and homework. Both involve classroom lectures and discussions. (The readings vary according to the year of attendance, and according to instructors and guest lecturers.) Instructors provide recommended readings that have included Mirage of Continuity (Brian Hawkins and Pat Battin), Reframing Organizations (Lee Bolman), and How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work (Robert Kegan.) The Frye Institute schedules speakers from a variety of academic perspectives – in previous years, they have included James Hilton, David Shulenburg, Stanley Katz and Diane Oblinger, among many others. Each speaker brings a special perspective that leads to extensive discussions in class, and conversations which often continue outside of class.

In both cases, the participants come from a diverse group of institutions – adding to the rich mix and exchange of experience. In academic libraries, the variety and range of institutional size, institutional cultures, as well as economic factors present opportunities to increase our understanding of how external forces can impact all of us in similar ways. Whether one is from a small college or a large university, the exchange of ideas leads to thoughtful exploration of solutions that can be implemented in any institution. Finally, it is the *personal* transformation that takes place during each of the institutes that is perhaps the most valuable experience.

That is a lot that the two experiences have in common. But there are also differences in the programs, not in quality, but in depth and width.

The ACRL/Harvard Leadership Institute uses the case study method to examine particular issues related to the nature of leadership itself. It poses the questions:

- how effective is my leadership?
- how is my library positioned to meet the challenges of the present and future?

The most compelling portions of the curriculum are personal and meaningful conversations about what it means to be a leader in a rapidly evolving profession. These conversations take place in formal classroom settings as well as small group sessions. The structure of the week is a university schedule in microcosm – a series of daily sessions with professors each of whom had an area of expertise that they explored with the class, including leadership, financial management, and adult development. These are provocative sessions that give participants time to ponder questions that are essential to understanding themselves as evolving leaders. Comments from past participants frequently refer to being reinvigorated, revitalized, rejuvenated and renewed. The quality of the faculty at Harvard is unanimously recognized by past participants – in our experience, it was the highest quality educational experience of a lifetime.

The ACRL/Harvard participants are entirely academic librarians, giving the program a very specific focus - academic library leadership. It also provides participants with a cohort group that one seeks out at conferences and meetings, and from which one can find ongoing support as new challenges develop at our respective institutions. The Frye Institute, on the other hand, includes participants from a variety of backgrounds in libraries, information technology, the faculty and administration in higher education throughout the world. In both cases, participants leave the programs with new relationships and colleagues. But because the Frye Institute is a longer immersion, one is likely to develop closer connections with fellow participants. While one can renew acquaintances at

annual gatherings for alums of both programs, we have found that the listservs for the Frye Institutes continue to serve as connections with colleagues on an ongoing basis.

Both programs are “immersion experiences” and provide the opportunity to reflect on these issues away from the daily operational grind of the office, but there is a notable difference in the time commitment between the two. As noted, the ACRL/Harvard program is one week, and the Frye Institute is two weeks, including the weekend between. Participants at the Frye Institute, therefore, have a concentrated and extended time to study, and dig both deeper and wider into the material that is presented. The Frye faculty consists of University presidents and other administrators, faculty, researchers, librarians and technologists, each with a unique perspective but a real interest in the work of those who are attending the Institute.

The daily schedule at Frye typically includes two to three sessions that share a common theme - for example: issues in higher education, institutional mission, student success, perspectives from different university positions (President, VP Finance, faculty), and leadership styles. In all sessions, the recurring theme is participation in management and leadership “at the big table” (as Brian Hawkins says) that is, understanding the positions and concerns of the institution beyond the walls of the library. The Frye Institute places its emphasis on the importance of a campus wide perspective on the work of libraries, as well as focusing on the collaborative nature of library and IT interactions. Many sessions at Frye relate to the larger educational mission of the institution, and provide participants with a new understanding of the role they play (as individuals and in organizations) in the academic enterprise.

Before going to Atlanta, each Frye fellow is required to prepare a proposal for a project that he or she will begin to explore during the Institute and be expected to complete within a year of completing the Institute. As an additional preparation

for the experience, participants are required to interview key academic officials to get a sense of what issues are considered critical on their respective campuses. Participants leave Frye sensitized to the issues facing colleges and universities and with a better understanding of the role the library plays in the mission of the institution. Fellows are asked to consider the library's contribution to teaching and learning at their institutions, and the most effective ways to collaborate with colleagues across the campus to achieve institutional goals.

While clearly there are good reasons to attend both Institutes, there are also reasons to sequence the two experiences. In our opinion, it makes sense to attend the ACRL/Harvard Leadership Institute first, and the Frye Institute two or three years later. The Harvard experience will remind the participant of what is involved in leadership. The Frye Institute helps those leaders become more effective, particularly in interactions with administrators and colleagues outside the library. At two weeks, the Frye experience requires a significant time commitment on the part of the participants. It also assumes that participants recognize the value of collegial and collaborative professional work towards the achievement of institutional goals.

In assessing the personal transformations that took place for each of us, we both agree that we have become more visible and more vocal on our respective campuses. Although we both feel that previously we were advocates for our respective libraries, we also feel we are now more aware of and engaged with trends in higher education that are relevant to the services we provide and we are better able to articulate our roles and how the library can contribute to the educational mission in addressing these changes. While both institutes allowed us time for reflection, they also taught us to think in different ways to address the complexities of constant change while working within organizations that are often resistant to change. We have redefined ourselves, in a growing sense of our role: from "I'm a reference librarian" to "I'm a librarian" to "I'm a responsible person in support of the academic enterprise." This movement away from

specialization has brought us closer to the larger vision of the world in which we work. Further, we have each taken steps to become more involved in national organizations, either as presenters at conferences, or participants in conference planning. For both of us, this transformation can be attributed to broadening our scope during the Frye Institute and the ACRL/Harvard Leadership Institute.

During this year of emphasis on library education and advocacy, we feel the need to focus attention on leadership institutes is vital for our continued success in transforming academic libraries in the digital age. Preparing leaders who are “visionaries, risk takers, good collaborators and communicators, mentors, and people with uncommon passion and persistence” is essential for the healthy future of academic libraries. Both of these institutes are excellent opportunities for individuals to explore ways to develop their own vision, to articulate it with passion and to inspire and influence the direction of their organizations. We hope that others will take the time to comment on their experiences at some of the other excellent leadership training opportunities that are becoming available.