



## Degrees of Leadership in the Academic Library

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the evolving landscape of academic library leadership, questioning the sufficiency and necessity of the Master of Library Science (MLS/MLIS) degree for leadership roles. The authors, currently pursuing EdDs, examine three key questions: (1) Does the MLIS adequately prepare librarians for leadership? (2) Are there benefits to having academic library leaders without an MLIS? (3) What challenges arise when library leaders lack an MLIS? Through a dialogic discourse, the authors reflect on their experiences and other relevant literature. They discuss the limitations of MLIS programs in preparing leaders, the potential benefits of diverse educational backgrounds in leadership, and the complexities of balancing traditional librarian knowledge with broader leadership skills. The paper highlights the ongoing debate within the profession regarding educational requirements and competencies for library leaders, suggesting that additional credentials or alternative pathways may become increasingly relevant for academic library leadership positions.

### KEYWORDS

academic libraries, library leadership, library degree, librarian training

### SUGGESTED CITATION

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## Degrees of Leadership in the Academic Library

A recent editorial in *College & Research Libraries News (C&RL News)* from Christina J. Steffy and Meg Massey (2024) revisited the debate over the necessity of the Master's of Library Science (MLS—also commonly referred to as a Master's of Library and Information Science, MLIS) and the current state of Library and Information Science (LIS) education in the United States. According to Steffy and Massey, the field's insistence upon requiring an MLIS, despite the degree's inability to prepare professionals for the field, has led to cognitive dissonance. The publication of the *C&RL News* editorial came at just the right time, as the three authors of this reflection have been pondering a tangential topic: is the MLIS sufficient (or, dare we say, even necessary) for academic library leadership?

At our own academic libraries, we have observed an increasing trend of hiring academic library deans, directors, or associate vice provosts without an MLIS, which has long been considered both the base qualification and the highest credential for academic librarianship, including leadership positions. Because we noticed an increase in job postings for academic library administrators that require or strongly prefer a PhD or EdD alongside the MLIS, we each decided to pursue a Doctorate in Education (EdD) to meet this evolving expectation. There seems to be an emerging implicit requirement for academic library leaders to hold a credential beyond the MLIS, suggesting an unspoken rule shaping the profession's future. All three of us are enrolled in the EdD program in Higher Education Leadership and Practice at the University of North Georgia (UNG), driven by aspirations for future leadership roles and a commitment to lifelong learning. Interestingly, UNG's EdD program has drawn a notable number of academic librarians since its inception (Shore et al., 2024). Encountering several librarians in our EdD program—and realizing that many more in our professional networks are also pursuing EdDs or PhDs—has led us to consider which qualifications are now seen as essential, or even preferred, for leadership roles in academic libraries.

Observing the shift in educational requirements and assumed leadership skills for academic library leaders—and considering our own pursuit of degrees beyond the MLIS—led us to three key questions: (1) Does the MLIS adequately prepare librarians for future leadership roles? (2) Are there benefits to having an academic library leader without an MLIS? and (3) What challenges arise when an academic library leader does not hold an MLIS? We also began to wonder if our pursuit of an EdD in leadership reflects a broader trend, suggesting that a degree beyond the MLIS (or even replacing it) may soon become the norm for library administrators. Through a dialogic discourse, we will explore each of these questions, reflect on related literature, and share our perspectives and experiences with non-MLIS academic library leaders.

## Does the MLIS Prepare Librarians for Future Leadership Roles?

### **Nancy:**

The human aspect of a workplace is much more complex than any college course on management could cover, so it is not surprising that the American Library Association (ALA) does not prescribe specific management training requirements for the accreditation of Library and Information Science education programs (American Library Association, 2006). However, this has led to significant inconsistencies in the management skills and competencies taught and required across library science master's and doctoral programs. These inconsistencies have led to a debate within the profession about what minimum skills and core competencies are or should be required for librarianship (Colson et al., 2023). In my MLIS program, I was able to take two management courses, but I cannot say that either of them adequately prepared me to be a manager. Given that experience, making the MLIS a requirement for library leaders raises concerns about potentially excluding otherwise qualified candidates who lack this specific credential. The requirement of the MLIS underscores the challenge of balancing theoretical knowledge gained through advanced degrees with practical expertise acquired through experience (Sare & Bales, 2014). A further complication is that institutional hiring entities are determining educational requirements as each library role is being filled, leading to some new library leadership who hold advanced degrees other than the library degree. Oliver and Prosser (2018) discussed that as long as there is disagreement and division within the profession of librarianship itself, hiring managers will be equally unclear about educational requirements for librarians in general and leadership specifically. There needs to be a review and revision of standards and requirements to enter the profession, and agreement about what roles within the library require a library degree (Oliver & Prosser, 2018). Costs associated with graduate education, both in time and money, can be a deterrent to librarians seeking professional development and career advancement into leadership roles. Current leadership development programs for academic librarians who seek career advancement may not fully prepare individuals for the multifaceted demands of library leadership roles. The gaps in leadership development can leave MLIS graduates underprepared for the human aspects of library leadership roles. As a result, I feel there is a common perception that library managers and directors whose terminal degree is the MLIS may not be adequately trained or prepared to effectively manage staff and teams, leading institutions to look outside the library for leaders.

### **Kristina:**

As Nancy mentions, the current perception (and reality) of inadequate training and preparation for library leaders and administrators is the result of a decades-long discussion in the world of librarianship about the preparation and training of library leadership, specifically when it comes to managing people rather than systems. Mackenzie and Smith (2009) examined management education in LIS graduate programs and discovered “no clear direction is offered

for the preparation of future library managers for the management of people” (p. 140). Harris (2016) reaffirms Mackenzie and Smith’s findings seven years later, noting there is still little research to indicate why certain management skills are more difficult for library directors to acquire than others. Martin (2018, 2019, 2022) has noted several times the difficulties of even defining leadership in the field of librarianship.

Though opinions vary widely on leadership training, preparation for administrative roles, and even the definition of leadership within our profession, one fragile thread seems to tie many of these conversations together: the longstanding requirement that anyone with the title of “librarian” must hold an ALA-accredited MLIS degree or its foreign equivalent. I consider this a fragile thread because the conversation is shifting, with more voices in the field—including my own, to an extent—beginning to question the necessity, utility, and value of the MLIS degree as it currently stands. Most of my degree courses were taught by professors rather than practicing librarians, which I felt widened the gap between theory and practice. I recall in my own library degree program that the single library management and leadership course was not offered because the professor who taught it had taken a position elsewhere, and they were unable to find someone to cover the course during my two years in the program. Therefore, I never got to take the management course. The MLIS degree may still serve as a crucial entry point that establishes the foundational knowledge required for general librarianship, but I cannot say with confidence that I learned much in my degree program that has directly prepared me for my current middle-management position. Instead, I found myself seeking out tangential experiences and opportunities while I was getting my degree and early in my career that have been far more applicable in preparing me for leadership. I still believe that the MLIS has value as an entry point to the profession of librarianship, and that academic librarians and leaders should have formal education beyond a bachelor’s degree. However, I am no longer certain that the MLIS should be the singular—and terminal—credential for the field.

**Erin:**

The field of librarianship is diverse and complex, making it challenging for library schools to provide all the necessary training and coursework that a librarian may need in their career. While MLIS programs often provide foundational training for various specialties within the field, its coursework tends to focus more on theory than on the practical, day-to-day skills essential to the profession (Colón-Aguirre & Bright, 2024; Sare et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2024). This disconnect is especially pronounced in academic librarianship, where recent graduates frequently feel unprepared in critical areas like leadership and management, skills typically gained through on-the-job experience (Harris, 2016; Sare et al., 2012). Additionally, many library science students, myself included, begin their MLIS program without certainty of which track or focus they want to pursue. I chose a wide variety of courses in hopes of receiving a comprehensive library education. Unfortunately, the only management course that was available to me was a required course for the entire iSchool that was very generic and did not

include specific library management skills, such as change management, library operations, and budget management. Therefore, when I became a manager in an academic library many years later, I had to learn management skills while on the job, through various leadership workshops provided by my institution, as well as by attending numerous webinars and library conferences. Additionally, when choosing a doctoral program, I wanted a program that focused less on instruction, and more on practical skills. I am not sure if I would have gained sufficient practical management skills from a PhD LIS program. I would be interested to see research findings about management education in doctoral library and information science programs, similar to the study that Mackenzie and Smith (2009) conducted on master's programs.

### **Are There Benefits to Having an Academic Library Leader Without the MLIS?**

#### **Nancy:**

Due to the confusion around what it means to be a librarian and what credentials are necessary, some professionals seeking library employment may seek positions or roles that do not require a library degree (Ferguson, 2016). Ferguson also notes that when the education requirements for library positions are inconsistent, a degree in librarianship may be viewed as unnecessary. If the MLIS is not required for librarians in general, then it is hard to argue the necessity for library leaders to hold an MLIS (Harris, 2016). Through conversations with other academic librarians, it is our perception that leaders without the MLIS bring a wealth of experience in navigating academic culture across campus that librarians may not. In examining literature about library leadership, it was discovered that library leaders increasingly need skills beyond traditional library science, in areas like fundraising, compliance, and strategic planning (Harris, 2016). There is a growing need for professional development opportunities in these areas, yet most MLIS programs are likely unable to add these areas to their existing curriculum. Research shows that in the library science field, practical experience and other advanced degrees are often valued more highly than doctorates for leadership positions, especially in smaller academic libraries (Gilman & Lindquist, 2010; Lindquist & Gilman, 2008; Mayer & Terrill, 2005). In my discussion with others researching this topic, I have heard a common suggestion of adding micro credentials or certificate programs to add depth to existing MLIS education to capture topics that are relevant to some, but not all career paths within librarianship. For example, the hot topic of the moment is the use of artificial intelligence (AI), and while there is general agreement about the importance of understanding AI's role in higher education, a full semester course may not offer the flexibility that an on-demand micro credential could (Lo, 2024). Adding the ability to gain skills from other disciplines would allow leaders to broaden their knowledge base while supporting their library.

**Kristina:**

The idea of bringing in an academic library leader without an MLIS used to make me quite anxious. Academic librarians are known for “closing ranks” and often assume that outsiders cannot fully grasp the intricacies of how and why an academic library functions. This reaction, in myself and others, does not surprise me. I have seen several academic libraries led by appointed teaching faculty or non-library administrators who often deeply appreciate the library as a research hub but lack a clear understanding of its broader roles. Sometimes this setup works well, but more often, neither the library staff nor the appointed person seemed to ask the questions needed to foster a cohesive organization. I even once witnessed a library led by a corporate consultant brought in by the university president—a situation that, unsurprisingly, did not end well. Nancy mentions an excellent point about skills from adjacent degrees and roles in higher education administration bringing a richer and more nuanced skill set to academic library leadership.

However, to truly benefit from a library leader without an MLIS, certain qualities are essential: curiosity, open-mindedness, and a strong capacity for managing change. While many MLIS-trained librarians possess these qualities, I am beginning to see the advantages of considering leaders without the MLIS—especially when they bring complementary skills that the MLIS may not typically provide. The instances where I have seen a non-MLIS academic library leader be more successful is when the leader is internal to the institution, has capital built across campus that they willingly use to raise the profile of the academic library, are willing to learn about how academic libraries function and use that knowledge to advocate for the library, and has had academic library-adjacent experience that is not just research-related.

**Erin:**

Kristina, that anxiety is real, especially if it has never been done before in your institution! Change is hard for librarians (or anyone) when there is a shift in the organizational culture; we hold tight to our MLIS and expertise because of outsiders’ doubts about the validity of our jobs and education. Constantly having to prove ourselves is exhausting, and so welcoming a leader without a library degree may be met with some reluctance. However, as you both have mentioned, a broader perspective of higher education and the institution itself will help the academic library remain more relevant on campus. Higher education is infamously known for siloing, and so having an intermediary between departments across campus may aid in chipping away at these dreaded silos. I think another benefit of having a leader without an MLIS is the concept of transferable skills. If leaders without a library-specific degree possess problem-solving, communication, and interpersonal skills gained through other work experiences and post-graduate degrees, these transferable skills can effectively support success in academic library leadership.

## What are the Challenges of Having an Academic Library Leader Without the MLIS?

### **Kristina:**

In recent years, I have seen more and more job postings for academic library leadership positions asking for degrees beyond the MLIS, such as a PhD or an EdD—and often a second masters. Right now, I have mostly seen them in the preferred qualifications, but they are beginning to creep into the required qualifications for some leadership positions, especially top leadership positions, such as Dean, Director, or Assistant/Associate Vice Provost (AVP). A few months ago, a colleague of mine at another institution in the University System of Georgia remarked that their institution had failed a search for a Dean of Libraries twice because a PhD or an EdD was a required qualification. As soon as the library convinced academic affairs to move the extra degree to the preferred qualifications, they completed a successful search and have since been quite happy with the successful candidate.

I think there are several reasons we may be seeing this growing trend. First, administrative roles in higher education are becoming increasingly complex, and there is a push for academic librarians to match the scholarly credentials and output of their teaching faculty peers. Therefore, it is no surprise that top administrative leadership in the library, which may be part of a provost's cabinet or leadership team, is also beginning to ask for equivalent credentials to other deans, directors, and AVPs. A second master's in addition to the MLIS has been common for many years, especially for subject librarians, but I believe that university administrators often view advanced degrees beyond the MLIS, like EdDs and PhDs, as signifying a leader's ability to think critically, lead change, and operate at a high-level within university administration. But it is important to note, signaling is one thing—it is another thing to have the experience leading. So, while advanced degrees can be beneficial, they should not be the sole pathway to leadership—with or without the MLIS.

### **Nancy:**

Kristina, you make a great point about the many pathways to leadership on campus and in the library. I would expect that library leaders without the MLIS may face a steep learning curve in their onboarding, especially if they are not aware of the library's mission and role in student and faculty success. It is one thing to use a library's services, and quite another to oversee its operations. And academic libraries have the added challenge of navigating higher education requirements and culture while providing information access and research support. I had the opportunity to visit with a former academic library dean who has experience with regional accreditation standards, and I asked them about library leadership in the absence of the MLIS. They were concerned that a library leader who did not possess the MLIS might not be as committed to library success or may not be prepared to support library staff if they do not understand the nuances of library operations. Additionally, if institutions are unable to prove

that alternatively degreed library directors meet the requirements for accreditation, it may cause issues or delays in accreditation, leading to complications for the institution as a whole. It could also be difficult for an alternatively degreed library leader to receive acceptance within the library, particularly from veteran librarians and staff who are concerned about devaluing the MLIS.

**Erin:**

I agree, Nancy. Acceptance amongst library employees is critical to success for academic library leaders without the MLIS. Without professional experience working in an academic library, assumptions could be made about a library's values, service, and role in higher education. These leaders will have to participate in active listening to gain an understanding of the organizational culture. While leaders may hold an advanced degree or expertise in their own subject area, they must be willing to learn about library culture, be receptive to followers' feedback, and be willing to invest in professional development in academic libraries and library leadership. These unique library leaders will need to "do more with colleagues and followers than set up simple exchanges or agreements"—a symptom of transactional leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 5). Instead, a transformational leadership style will help leaders to build relationships and trust within the organization, while inspiring their followers to make needed changes.

### **Conclusion**

The evolving expectations for academic library leadership raise many questions for us about the adequacy of the MLIS as the defining qualification for leadership. As the field grapples with diverse demands, including change management, collaboration, and advocacy, academic library leaders without an MLIS may bring valuable, complementary skills that contribute to effective library management. We feel as though these questions, and our anticipated future research into academic library leadership without the MLIS as a requirement, have the potential to contribute to the overarching conversation about the general value of the MLIS and the state of LIS education. We have observed a growing trend in job postings requiring or preferring advanced degrees beyond, or instead of, the MLIS. Our own pursuit of EdDs to meet these evolving expectations, along with our experiences with academic library leaders without MLIS degrees, has raised more questions than answers. In the meantime, we look forward to continuing the conversation about degrees of leadership and invite others to do the same.

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