Levelling Up or Levelling Out?

In Search of a New Vision for Library Leadership

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An Acknowledgement.
It seems some introductions are in order…

▪ Who are we?
▪ Why are we here?
▪ How dare we?
▪ Disclaimers / statements of bias / RTs do not necessarily equal endorsements
“I’ll have the usual, please”: The (stereo)typical leadership trajectory

▪ “It all began in library school…”
  ▪ Scholarships
  ▪ Student committees
  ▪ Work experience
▪ Early projects receive support & recognition
▪ Bespoke training opportunities (more on this later…)
▪ Alternately, the Peter Principle & its corollaries.
  ▪ Mere survival in the face of precarity and economic attrition may unwittingly privilege a person for later management. If you had to quit to make rent, you’re hard to promote.
  ▪ Inobtrusiveness and/or talent for organisational politics can generate significant benefits.
Decoupling leadership from management

▪ What is leadership?
▪ What is management?
▪ Are they the same thing? Do we act like they are?
  ▪ Key distinctions and areas of overlap
▪ According to whom, anyway?
Existing opportunities

- **Academic**
  - Leadership Institute for Academic Librarians (Harvard)
  - ARL Leadership Fellows Program (ARL)
  - Senior Fellows Program (UCLA)
  - Leading Change Institute (CLIR/Educause)

- **Public**
  - Public Library Leaders Fellowship Program (CULC)
  - Advanced Public Library Leadership (SOLS)

- **Archives**
  - Archives Leadership Institute (NHPRC)

- **Law**
  - AALL Leadership Academy (AALL)

- **Non-sector specific**
  - Northern Exposure to Leadership Institute (NELI) (Private)
  - Aurora Institute for Emerging Leaders (Aurora Institute)
  - Emerging Leaders (ALA)
  - MPLA Leadership Institute (MPLA)
Characteristics of leadership programs

- Residency, resort-like location (if you’re lucky)
- Expensive fees (tuition + travel / accommodation)
- Highly selective
- Application process, often driven by external nomination
- Demonstrated, “exceptional” leadership
- Minimal information available online
  - Creation of small, exclusive communities
- Little or no assessment of impact or usefulness
Barriers to participation

- Economic
  - Who pays? How?

- Cultural
  - Ritual language / social capital
  - Performativity of values not necessarily tied to leadership aptitude

- Logistical
  - Jurisdictional: Urban/Rural, Travel restrictions (explicit & implicit)
  - Professional: Coverage for responsibilities / freedom to take time
  - Personal: Family responsibilities, childcare, &c.
Repercussions

▪ Replication and amplification of societal inequality
  ▪ Prior access —> continued access
  ▪ Many opportunities privilege librarians over other staff
    ▪ Is “leadership” somehow less important for other staff?
    ▪ Doesn’t everyone want and deserve opportunities to be the best at what they do?
▪ The perils of individualism
  ▪ How can we meaningfully effect change in complex systems?
  ▪ Is “effecting change” our purpose? Or maintaining current norms?
  ▪ What do we genuinely bring home, besides lines on a CV?
Participant Reflections¹ — Themes

- Management heavy
- Hyper-individual
- Echo chamber
- Useful, for a given value of “useful” — some workplace integration
- Focused introspection is useful
- Mentorship, building relationships was valuable

¹ names have been withheld to protect the guilty
Alternative models?

- Localised leadership institutes (USask)
- Grassroots initiatives (E-Learning Symposium, NLS)
- Dickinson College model (a more nuclear option)
- Mentorship, especially in-workplace and/or free-to-play
- Thinking differently about hierarchy and organisational structure
  - All-librarian meetings (HPL)
  - Parallel assessment
  - Meaningful fora for dialogue
  - Explicit commitments to diversity (MIT)
Alternative models — individual efforts

*NB! These represent our own observations & interpretations!*

- Gillian Byrne: using evil for good (mentorship, connecting people)
- Barb McDonald: making time for all, leadership audit
- Monique Woroniak: groundwork for change, centering political and labour issues
- John Dupuis: chronicling war on science (using individual expertise)
- Jim Suderman: respecting people’s time
- Deb Thomas: working on-desk, personally participating in new staff hires
Unlike a leadership institute, we don’t secret knowledge.
What are your thoughts?