Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

AAU Library Directors Prefer Collaborative Decision Making with Senior Administrative Team Members

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

AAU Library Directors Prefer Collaborative Decision Making with Senior Administrative Team Members

A Review of:
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Abstract

Objective – To understand academic library leaders' decision making methods, priorities, and support of succession planning, as well as to understand the nature, extent, and drivers of organizational change.

Design – Survey and interview.

Setting – Academic libraries with membership in the Association of American Universities (AAU) in the United States of America and Canada.

Subjects – 62 top administrators of AAU academic libraries.

Methods – Content analysis performed to identify most frequent responses. An initial survey written to align with the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) 2014-2015 salary survey was distributed prior to or during structured in-person interviews to gather information about gender, race/ethnicity, age, time since terminal degree, time in position, temporary or permanent status, and current job title. 7-question interview guides asked about decision processes, strategic goals, perceived impacts of strategic plan and vision, planned changes within the next 3-5 years, use of mentors for organizational change, and succession planning activities. Transcripts were analyzed to identify themes, beginning with a preliminary set of codes that were expanded during analysis to provide clarification.

Main results – 44 top academic library administrators of the 62 contacted (71% response rate) responded to the survey and interview. Compared to the 2010 ARL Survey, respondents were slightly more likely to be female (55%; ARL: 58%) and non-white (5%; ARL: 11%). Approximately 66% of both were aged 60 and older, while slightly fewer were 50-59 (27% compared to 31% for ARL), and almost none were aged 40-49 compared to 7% for the ARL survey. Years of experience averaged 33, slightly less than the reported ARL average of 35. Requested on the survey, but not reported, were time since terminal degree and in position, temporary or permanent status, and current job title.

Hypothesis 1, that most library leaders base decisions on budget concerns rather than upon library and external administration strategic planning, was refuted. Hypothesis 2, that changes to the academic structure are incremental rather than global (e.g., alterations to job titles and responsibilities), was supported by responses. Major organizational changes in the next three to five years were predicted, led by role changes, addition of new positions, and unit consolidation. Most participants agreed that while there are sufficient personnel to replace top level library administrators, there will be a crisis for mid-level positions as retirements occur. A priority focus emerging from interview responses was preparing for next-generation administrators. There was disagreement among respondents about whether a crisis exists in the availability of new leaders to replace those who are retiring.

Conclusion – Decisions are primarily made in collaboration with senior leadership teams, and based on strategic planning and goals as well as university strategic plans in order to effect incremental change as opposed to wholesale structural change.

Commentary

With growing involvement in research support and other trends, little is known about the drivers of decision-making of academic library leaders, the focus of this inquiry. Two critical evaluation checklists were used in the preparation of this evidence summary (Glynn, 2006; Perryman & Rathbun-Grubb, 2014).

A good background for the study is provided, although slight confusion arises due to terminology, with references to library directors, senior administrators, and top administrators without a differentiating definition.

Demographic results were comparable to prior ARL data, although slightly higher age and experience averages for directors were shown. Seven of nine interview questions were included in the publication, enhancing replicability, while the other questions emerged during interviews. Question 1 conflates two issues ("How do you make decisions about your organization's future, both regarding library direction as a whole and your organizational structure?"), which is problematic, because respondents may not have responded to each the same way. Of additional concern, neither "major" nor "incremental" change was defined, and the reader cannot discern whether definitions were provided to interviewees. Content analysis specifics were not provided in response to open-ended questions.

Thematic content analysis was performed by the author alone, and did not include an independent coder. While the author mentions this as a limitation, the rationale that this decision supports participant anonymity is not sufficiently convincing: transcripts could have been anonymized prior to independent coding. In the absence of this step, readers would benefit from category definitions and examples. Responses to each question are shown in detailed tables, but were frequently counted in more than one category. It is reasonable to expect that decisions use more than one form of input, but in some instances, knowing (in question 1, for example), that a library director employed collaborative decision making *as well as* strategic plans and goals would enhance understanding. Sole reliance upon frequencies does not provide information about priorities or unique contexts for decision-making. As well, the author found

it surprising that only three respondents reported using data to support decision making. However, further questioning on this point might have revealed that "strategic planning and goals" (or other categories) were themselves supported by data. Findings from the study could be expanded by looking at each participant as an individual case, in order to consider elements affecting decisions for library leaders.

The snapshot of university library directors' decision-making processes and priorities provided by interview transcripts updates prior studies, and identifies changes from budget- to mission-driven strategic management planning. Additionally, new information on the use of the ARL Leadership Fellows Program, mentoring, and other professional development opportunities used to prepare future academic librarians and future deans is provided.

References

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