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Robert P. Holley

Wayne State University, aa3805@wayne.edu

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Why Don't Library Science Students Want to Become Managers?

Robert P. Holley

Professor of Library and Information Science, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA

I've taught the library administration and management course in the School of Library and Information Science at Wayne State University on and off for almost 25 years. I've always been surprised when most students tell me that they don't want to become managers. But first, let me give some background on my teaching experience and the Wayne's management course.

Sometime around 1990, I started teaching this course as an adjunct when I was still a library administrator. I took on this responsibility because I liked teaching and had taught at the University of Utah as an adjunct. The decision was not based upon extra income because, as the Associate Dean for University Libraries, regulations forbade me from receiving any additional compensation. The director of the School was ecstatic at getting a course taught for "free." In the end, all turned out for the best since I have the suspicion that Dean Peter Spyers-Duran then asked me in 1993 to become a professor in part because my desire to teach and my experience in the classroom. I moved from the library system to the library school in fall 1993 where the library management course was one of my regular assignments.

The brief description of the management course is:

Library Administration and Management - Prereq: LIS 6010 and 6080. Library as an organization in various settings; functional diversification, staffing patterns,

program planning, budgeting, performance evaluation, communication and public relations. Core Course - 3 credits

<http://slis.wayne.edu/students/classes/descriptions.php>

A more detailed description can be found at: <http://slis.wayne.edu/profiles/7040.pdf>. The course is a fairly standard introduction to library management that doesn't require any prior management experience. Students who take this course intend to work in academic, public, and special libraries as well as other types of information organizations including archives. School librarians take a different version of the course that includes the specialized aspects required for teacher certification. The course is now a required course but wasn't when I started teaching it. The change was made based upon a recommendation of the American Library Association Committee on Accreditation's report to the School in the mid-1990s. While numbered at the more advanced 7000 level, the course has only the two basic introductory courses as prerequisites and is quite suitable for beginning students since it doesn't build heavily upon prior knowledge. As an advisor, I often recommend students to take it as one of the more basic core courses.

As a required course, I encounter a broad spectrum of students rather than a self-selected group with the career goal of managing a library. During the first class session, I ask how many students want to be managers. The usual response, and the reason for this article, is that never do more than 25% wish to be managers; and the number is often less. The last time that I taught the course only one student out of sixteen wanted to be a manager with one additional undecided person.

I then surprise most students by telling them that they won't have any choice because almost all librarians have some management responsibilities even in their first position whether they like it or not. In fact, the first position for some will be the director of a small library. In larger libraries, the current trend is to assign as many tasks as possible to library assistants, mostly to save money in these tight economic times. Duties for degreed librarians have been upgraded. The focus is now on tasks that include the broader perspective that the MLIS should provide. Another change is that the newly hired librarian may supervise library assistants who now are responsible for higher level work that used to be done by librarians a few decades ago. Perhaps the best examples are in circulation and technical services. Many small to medium sized libraries have only one librarian to manage circulation, cataloging, acquisitions, and perhaps the entire technical services unit. In some cases, the new librarian may have only the basic knowledge of the unit's functions but must supervise library assistants with many years of experience who must in effect train their new boss. Even in areas like public services where more tasks remain at the degreed librarian level with the result that fewer library assistants perform key functions, the new librarian will nonetheless most often have a few students to supervise.

The course readings, my teaching, class discussions, and the guest lecturers seldom change my students' opinion of management. In the course, I give a basic overview of management functions from the honest perspective of one who has been a manager for twenty years. I talk about the advantages including more interesting work, greater freedom to manage your time, usually more perks like attending conference to get training, and higher salaries. I don't, however, minimize the aspects that make management less appealing to some. Some of the

potentially negative aspects are dealing with emergencies, which sometimes happen just as the librarian is leaving for home; personnel issues including performance appraisals and disciplinary action; the need to make decisions, sometimes with inadequate information; and being held responsible for problems that sometimes aren't really the manager's fault. I include a small unit on managers who lost their jobs for circumstance beyond their control and even for the results of decisions made before their arrival.

I also invite guest lecturers from all types of libraries except school libraries. I tell my students that many successful management styles are possible and that my teaching presents only one viewpoint among many possibilities. In fact, I strive to invite managers with management philosophies very different from mine. The last time I taught the course I invited a manager with many years' experiences who is the director of one of the local public libraries that I sometimes use. In addition to stressing her commitment to giving good service, she also talked about her responsibility for the building. She recounted times when she was called in the middle of the night to deal with a crisis and described other more mundane unexpected occurrences such as having to catch a pigeon in the furnace room that fell down the chimney. After she left, I did what I always do and asked for questions and comments. One of the best students in the class immediately chimed in, to be seconded by several others, that she saw this as one more reason never to be the director of a library.

With so many years of teaching the management course, I've come to expect and respect this decision by many students to do all they can to avoid management responsibilities. I tell them that one of the purposes of the course is to make them aware of the rewards and responsibilities,

advantages and disadvantages, of library administration. While I would like to change their minds about this aversion to management, especially if I've seen an aptitude for leading, helping them clarify their goals is an important outcome and one that I also state during the first class session. I also stress that they will do much better in their careers if they understand how managers think. While not all managers are the same, most value employees who understand the importance of money in any decision, the value of clear writing that does not waste the manager's time in trying to figure out what the document says, and the fact that a proposal may not be implemented, not because it's bad but because others are better.

A third key concept that usually comes as a surprise is that employees have power over their bosses and that being able to manage your boss is an important skill. The librarian who is leading a key project may be more important to the director than the director is to the employee. Finally, libraries most often have unofficial leaders who don't appear on the organization chart but may have substantive organizational clout. They might, for example, excel at communicating the general viewpoints of staff or at interpreting management decision to their colleagues. One of my guest lecturers is an A+ student from one of the first times that I taught the course. She talks about leading from below and is quite happy in a non-administrative position after having been a manager for several years. I thus try to teach management in a way that will be useful to students who never have any intention of becoming administrators.

To conclude this section, I know from following our graduates that many who say that they don't want to be managers often become one. Careers often take strange turns. In some cases, they are

asked to apply. In others, they decide that they would rather be the manager than be managed by someone that they don't like.

Literature Review

Either I'm a bad searcher and couldn't find the right index terms, or not much has been published on this subject in the official literature or talked about in blogs and other Internet sources.

Information is available on related topics such as the importance of management as a core competency, notably in the ALA statement on this subject, (American Library Association) and the importance of management skills in advertisements for entry level librarian positions.

Reasons Why Students Don't Want to Become Managers

My own experience as a library science professor serves as the first source for the following section including what I've learned from teaching the management course, student advising, and my time as a library science administrator. For five years, I read all the statements from students on why they wanted to become a librarian or information professional. To supplement my own observations, I sent out a message to the student discussion list on February 1, 2015 to ask their thoughts on this issue. Since many students remain subscribed to the discussion list after graduation I included the following: "If you're an employed graduate, I'd also like to hear from you about what, if any, management responsibilities you had in your first position and whether you've been promoted to such responsibilities." I received a total of sixteen useable responses from both current students and graduates. While these responses are in no way a scientific sample, they mostly confirmed my opinion but also included additional perspectives. The factors overlap so that my attempt to group together related reasons may be less than perfect.

Personality Traits

Some students indeed choose the profession because of the stereotypical image of librarianship as a profession where the main qualification is a love of books, preferably in print, and of reading. Last semester, I had many students in the introductory course tell me that their relatives and friends were firmly convinced that the stereotypes were true and couldn't understand why anyone would study to become a librarian. As director in the 1990s, I also encountered this belief in many student applications that the prime reason why I should admit them was that they loved to read since a very early age, spent hours in the public library, and created a pretend library at home. While this may partially be an attempt to tell the admissions officer what the applicant thought he wanted to hear, I believe that some were quite sincere in their comments. In addition, I encountered a few cases where the student volunteered that a psychological counselor recommended librarianship to the applicant because of the lack of stress in the profession and the ability to avoid interacting with others. The respondents to my email request did not provide many direct comments on this issue though they talked about issue to be discussed elsewhere that depended upon basic personality traits. One current student did say that one reason might be that "the type of person attracted to the library field isn't someone who wants to manage other people."

The Nature of the Work

The student/librarian comments mirrored most of what I wanted to say in this section so that I will use their responses as a framework. The first reason for not wanting to move into management is that the person was attracted to the field because of the traditional aspect of

library work. One current librarian in the records management area states this very well. “My personal feeling is that there are many people who would rather focus in the mission and ideals of a library or information setting, rather than have to deal with the more administrative tasks that management can bring.” In a similar fashion, a current student says: “I’m concentrating on public library work because I want to do the things that public librarians do: interact with and assist patrons, select materials for the collection, plan and run programs for the public, etc. Managers don’t do a lot of those things, and therefore (possibly), students aren’t eager to skip over the things that drew them to the degree in the first place in order to be a manager.” I would add that reference work and collection development are more likely to draw upon a student’s disciplinary background in a way that management doesn’t unless they happen to be business majors, something that I have rarely encountered. Furthermore, I agree with the implicit assumption in these statements that library service requires a special skill set while management is more homogeneous no matter what field/industry the manager works in.

The second perspective students took was to look at managerial tasks as part of their decision making. On the negative side, students gave many reasons why being a manager is less desirable. A current student expressed concerns about the lack of control compared with non-managerial employees who are evaluated on what they do rather than on what others do. “I don’t have as much immediate control of my performance as an employee because it is based on the overall success of the unit, which in part rests on the performance of the people I manage.” On the other hand, a current student who has also been a branch manager since 2010 finds her managerial position “exciting” because she has “the ability to provide opportunities for staff members to realize their individual potential and passions within the profession.” A related issue is the need

to supervise others. A current student succinctly describes this factor: “Managers often have to supervise staff, and I would prefer not to do human resources work. I think there would be a lot of headaches, and I wouldn't be well-suited for it.”

Several students commented on the limited resources that libraries have in the current economic climate though I would add that library directors never believe that they have enough funding. A current public library branch manager says this best: “You will be asked to do more and more with less and less, and you'll have to figure out how to make it work.” A current student, who managed a small library before beginning her studies, puts it even more bluntly: “it can be a pain in the butt what with millages, state aid, dealing with the public, and working with fewer and fewer dollars every year.” A first year student told me that she didn't want to become a manager because of the commonly held belief that managers positions face “more administrative paperwork and more frequent meetings” and “can be more affected by intra-office politics than for the rest of the staff.”

Even with these negative factors, some students offered viewpoints in support of taking a management position. The first issue is structural. Librarians who work in small libraries have to perform management functions even if not in an official management position. As one student stated, for small public libraries, “even if you aren't management, you may find yourself in situations where you have to make management decisions. That is just how it is. Staff is limited and staff does far more than what is on a job description if they are working in a smaller library.” Another graduate commented on her experience as a student when she worked as a library assistant in a small medical library: “While there weren't any management responsibilities on

paper, I was in charge of the library in the evenings after the 9-to-5 crew had left for the day. I was the sole evening employee.” I was pleased to see these statements because they reinforced my position that most librarians, no matter what the position, have some management responsibilities. Even more telling are observations from students that accept the difficulties of management but still prefer these positions. The branch manager who talked about funding goes on to say” “You'll succeed if you're always on the lookout for new opportunities, partnerships, and ideas, but be warned, if you do this, you'll also be exhausted and stressed out. Unfortunately, exhaustion and stress often go hand in hand with creativity.” She then, however, goes on to say: “I can honestly say that my job as a branch manager is the best job that I can possibly imagine.” Finally, a current student “think(s) that without at least some management responsibilities a job can feel stagnant and even get boring.” She continues: “In group work I tend to take a leadership role, which seems to come naturally to me (and most of my fellow students aren't interested in leading). “

Prior Management Experience

Prior management experience whether in libraries or elsewhere had great influence on how the students viewed a future management career. Of the sixteen students, twelve reported some degree of management experiences. Surprisingly, only two students reported having a non-library management position. One, however, managed thirty full-time employees and 100 students so that she considers her “current management responsibilities very light in comparison” Seven had management experience in public libraries. Four were directors of branches or a small public library. As an aside beyond the main purpose of this article, the fact would indicate that

public libraries provide more opportunities for management experience with the greater number of small public libraries or small branches in larger systems. Three students gained their management experience in academic libraries by managing a small team or a few employees or students and thus have less breadth of experience than the public library branch managers. The fact that so many of the students that responded to my request for comments had this management experience affirms my suspicion that the sample is atypical. Overall, these students and graduates expect to remain in management positions. While not included in my student sample, a prior negative management experience could turn students away from a career in management.

Salary

I had expected that salary would be an important reason for wanting a management position, but only the last two students to respond brought up this issue. The first student, not currently in a management position but formerly a library assistant manager, said the following: “I also thought the responsibilities that come with management positions aren't always less stressful than non-management positions and that in the end, the income is more important.” The second student included salary considerations as part of a systematic plan for career advancement. While in school, “I was told from a number of professionals that I (especially being a male) would have the ability to quickly move up in the public library sector if I moved into management and taking a job at a smaller library was the quick step to achieving this (especially as my first professional library job).” He followed this advice and, with relatively little experience is getting interviewed for positions at larger libraries with higher salaries. Two other comments from him are worth noting. First, directing a small library gives an excellent breadth of experience. “As most

professional librarians know, many of these responsibilities listed are responsibility of one or two librarians at a larger library system, and I am quickly becoming in expert in every area due to the choice to have a larger work load and more responsibilities.” Second, he expects more job security. “My line of thinking is that as positions are cut, those in administration and management will be safer than standard professional librarians.”

Miscellaneous Comments

The following are several comments worth including but that do not fit neatly into any of the categories above. One student commented on the availability of non-librarian management positions in circulation. She is concerned that taking such a position because of her prior experience in this area might be a trap, even if posted as an MLIS-required job. Her friends outside the library field warned her that she should take a library position with more traditional librarian responsibilities such as reference and collection development in order to avoid “the ghetto of library management.”

A student who has some management responsibilities in an academic library makes the following distinction: “While the prospect of being a manager in this field (library science, education or non-profit) is interesting to me, I have no desire ever to be a manager in a corporate, for-profit institution.” She does not give an explanation for this distinction. The answer may lie in a comment from another student: “Another somewhat unrelated thought is that I've noticed a lot of young people (teen/twenties) loudly voicing their disdain for ‘office work’ Movies like Office Space and TV shows like The Drew Carey Show (two off the top of my head) portray

office work and managers in particular in a negative light. My thought is that students might have subconsciously embraced this anti-management philosophy.”

The final comment comes from a female student who somewhat hesitantly asks about gender differences: “Do you think it's because so many library students are women? Are they/we looking for part-time work (which is rarely a managerial position)? Does this field attract people who are helpers and not ladder-climbers? Is the library environment itself conducive to cooperation and assistance, neither of which necessarily point to management?” As someone who has worked in the field for 45 years and had many female supervisors, I would not extend this comment to all women; but her observations may have some legitimacy.

Concluding Thoughts

This article has turned out differently than I initially expected. The anthropological approach of asking for comments has resulted in results much more favorable to seeking a management position than I believe a reliable quantitative survey would have uncovered. The sixteen responses are certainly not in keeping with what my students have told me in the management classes that I have taught. My hypothesis is that the wording of my question may have influenced those who like management to respond.

Whether statistically valid or not, I hope that these responses combined with my own observations have sufficiently highlighted the issues that influence students to pursue or not a career in management. I wish that this article might tempt a researcher to conduct a more statistically valid study about students and management through the normal tactic of asking for

volunteers on various discussion lists might result in a similar convenience sample with less reliability.

Association, American Library. "ALA's Core Competencies of Librarianship: Final Version "
<http://www.ala.org/educationcareers/sites/ala.org.educationcareers/files/content/careers/corecomp/corecompetences/finalcorecompstat09.pdf>