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Dan Tam Do

Alana Nuth

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Dan Tam Do<sup>a</sup> and Alana Nuth<sup>b</sup>

*<sup>a</sup>Collection Management Services, David W. Howe Memorial Library, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT, United States; <sup>b</sup>Milne Library, SUNY Geneseo, Geneseo, NY, United States*

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# **Academic Library Middle Managers as Leaders: In their Own Words**

The experience of academic library middle managers is largely unexamined in the LIS literature, even though middle managers oftentimes function as change agents, succession planners, and project initiators and therefore make significant contributions to organizational success. This qualitative, interview-based study examines how middle managers in collection management or technical services departments experience “leading from the middle” and how they perceive their growth, development, and current roles as leaders. Over the course of ten interviews, significant themes emerged, including: initiating or implementing change; professional relationships with colleagues at all hierarchical levels; organizational culture; and professional development and institutional support for learning.

Keywords: leadership; leading from the middle; academic libraries; technical services; collection management; organizational culture; change management; middle management; professional development

## **Introduction**

Middle managers play an important role in the organizational structure and success of academic libraries, as they are often among the first personnel to recognize and respond to changes in technology, staffing, and user behavior. They participate, if not in the development of institutional goals, then in the implementation of those goals. Besides engaging in activities that are typically expected of managers, such as overseeing workflows and supervising staff, middle managers often find it necessary to adopt leadership behaviors, including influencing, developing, and motivating staff, collaborating with colleagues across the organization, establishing or developing a workplace culture, and communicating with various stakeholders in complex and challenging ways.

The abundance of writing on academic library leadership found in the LIS literature is evidence that the topic is of particular concern and interest. Much of the

current literature consists of theoretical analysis, suggested best practices, or quantitative analysis of survey data and job advertisements. Existing research topics include the implications of library managers' leadership skills and related professional development; hiring trends in director and administrative roles; desirable experience, skills, and traits of library directors and administrators; library leadership in the face of change; and various leadership models. What is largely absent from the literature are intimate tellings of the personal experiences of academic librarian middle managers who also demonstrate leadership behavior.

As a response to this gap, this qualitative, interview-based study aims to articulate the experience of middle managers who “lead from the middle” of their organizations as part of technical services and collection management departments or units. It seeks to discover not what middle managers can or should do to lead, but rather how they came to begin doing so and what being a leader is like for them. The following research questions were used to guide the study:

- How do middle managers working as part of technical services and/or collection management units in academic libraries perceive and describe their experience(s) “leading from the middle?”
- How do academic librarian middle managers perceive their own growth and development as leaders, and what are some of the factors that influenced their development?
- How do academic librarian middle managers understand their roles as leaders in their respective organizations, colleagues' perceptions of that role, and the reception of their leadership behaviors and initiatives?

The scope of the study was limited to middle managers in technical services and collection management departments or units. Managers in these roles face technological change and demographic shifts in personnel and are often compelled to apply entrepreneurial approaches to problem solving. Both authors are themselves middle managers in collection management departments; this shared background enabled the authors to develop relevant interview and follow-up questions and to understand the work and perspectives of the interviewees.

## **Review of selected literature**

### ***Library leadership***

Among recent studies and analyses of library leadership are those that address preparedness or effectiveness of academic library directors (Fought & Misawa, 2018; Harris-Keith, 2015, 2016). Although they focus on directors, these studies have important implications for middle managers, their leadership skill development (particularly if they aspire to become directors), and their work under directors who are learning various aspects of leadership on the job or are assessing their own effectiveness as leaders. A study by Kwan and Shen (2015) similarly focuses on those occupying leadership positions in libraries or ethnic caucuses, exploring those leaders' perspectives on essential skills and attributes for successful library leadership.

Other literature addresses general leadership preparation and training, whether as a component of LIS education (Phillips, 2014), succession planning (Jantti & Greenhalgh, 2012), or faculty and staff development following organizational transition (Feldmann, Level, & Liu, 2013). The literature review conducted by Wong (2017) also includes an examination of the current state of research into academic library leadership development.

Central to some of the writing on library leadership is a concern with adapting to technological and social change (Aslam, 2018; Düren, 2013; Fales, 1999), exploring the leadership implications of innovation (Goulding & Walton, 2014; Walton & Webb, 2016), or understanding perspectives on leadership held by Millennials (Graybill, 2014), who have become the youngest generation in the academic library workforce.

Various aspects of different leadership models have also been analyzed, including shared leadership (Baker, 2009; Franklin, 1999; Raubenheimer & Müller, 2006), distributed leadership (Goulding & Walton, 2014), and service leadership (Maciel, Kaspar, & vanDuinkerken, 2018).

### ***Library middle management***

Wong (2017) suggests that there is a gap in research on leadership development at the middle management level of libraries:

Overall speaking, librarians conceive leadership as a process of influence that can happen in all levels of the organization; nevertheless, ‘leadership as headship’ dominates the discourse in library literature. When development of middle managers or new librarians is discussed, the context usually surrounds succession planning, or individuals’ career progression to senior positions (p. 162).

The authors of the current study concur that there is potential for further research on this and many other aspects of middle management in libraries, although the following stand out as examples of writing in this area.

Sullivan (1992) predicts that developments in information technology and changes to organizational structures will lead not to the disappearance of middle managers in research libraries but rather to the transformation of their roles. The author discusses characteristics of and models for the new roles and identifies necessary skills and abilities, including a 17-point blueprint for development.

Mosley's two books (2004; 2008) provide insight and guidance on various aspects of work as a library middle manager. The earlier title, targeted at prospective or less experienced managers, treats topics such as communication, budgeting, legal issues, change, and performance, while the subsequent title explores issues of interest to more seasoned managers.

Rooney (2010) uses surveys to find out what preparation, training, and development current middle managers received before and since becoming middle managers, how academic library administrations supported such development activities, and what attitudes library managers and middle managers have towards such activities. The author compared the results of this study to those of a similar study conducted in 1992 by Wittenbach, Bordeianu, and Wycisk and concludes that "on average, the profession has made progress in this area over the past 17 years" and that "for the gaps that do remain, fairly straightforward and easily implemented solutions are available" (p. 392).

Chang and Bright (2012), focusing on public services, discuss changes to middle management roles driven by user needs and by technology such as online social networks. They identify new opportunities for middle managers in communication, management, collaboration and partnerships, and understanding responsibilities rather than being limited by job descriptions. Keys to middle manager success include ensuring Total Quality Management at all times, preparing staff for changes, and creative thinking. Examples from the authors' experiences support their analysis.

The handbook on library middle management edited by R. Farrell and Schlesinger (2013) includes guidance, recommended literature, and personal reflections on topics such as communication, performance management, career development, and leadership. Chapter 6, "Expertise, influence, and magical thinking: interviews with

middle managers”, takes a similar approach to this study, summarizing themes raised during interviews with seven librarians in middle management in higher education. Prominent themes include expertise, communication, influence and authority, managing expectations, and middle management as a destination rather than a stop on the way to a higher position. Positive aspects include effecting change, working with others to achieve goals, and mentoring and empowering reports, while negative aspects include implementing decisions made or supported by others, time spent “putting out fires and resolving conflicts” (p. 23), and learning on the job rather than having received training. Interviewees advised other middle managers to be knowledgeable about the work of department members, embrace leadership, have positive relationships with colleagues, seek help when needed, and learn continuously and maintain curiosity.

### ***Leading from the middle of a library***

Davis and Macauley (2011) and Mosley (2014) explore leadership that is independent from formal title or position. Davis and Macauley examine leadership trends that have emerged as an industrial era mind-set (“working for”) continues to give way to a knowledge era (“working with”) mind-set (p. 41). In a context of change and complexity, the authors assert, “no matter if we are leaders or followers, we are all responsible for library leadership” as well as “for leading ourselves and for taking an active interest in how our organisations are governed” (p. 43). Mosley advocates for expanding understanding and recognition of “leadership at the grass roots level or among the front line librarians and staff” (p. 5), which shares with titled leadership the need for well-developed communication and interpersonal skills but which is nevertheless distinct from titled leadership.

Creelman (2016) discusses strategies managers can use to develop leadership skills in others, arguing that it is their responsibility to do so (para. 18). They are “in the



optimal position of immediate, frequent contact with direct reports and colleagues across departments and levels within an organization ... This frontline knowledge and accountability position [them] to identify colleagues with leadership aptitude and to assist in their development” (para. 4).

Some of the literature on leading from the middle of a library or without position authority draws significantly from writing in other disciplines, particularly business and the behavioral sciences.

A survey by Cawthorne (2010) of 77 middle managers in Pacific Northwest academic libraries studies the degree to which academic libraries practice shared leadership, how much middle managers participate in it, and how closely the managers agree with Sandra Jackson’s framework for shared leadership, which originally appeared in the medicine management literature and consists of four components, accountability, equity, partnership, and ownership.

R. Farrell (2013) “provide[s] library managers with a theoretical framework for thinking about how change is effected by those in middle management positions” (p. 4). Effecting change is increasingly expected of middle managers due to the trend in libraries towards shared leadership, evolving circumstances in politics, economics, and technology, and, finally, “increasingly unstable budgets, pressures to increase efficiency, and the changing landscape of digital information access and consumption” (p. 4). Drawing on literature from fields such as social anthropology and economics, Farrell discusses two guiding principles:

First, library middle managers must understand how their libraries and the larger institutions in which their libraries exist (universities, cities and towns, corporations) ‘think’ ... Second, following economist John Kay (2010), it will be argued that effective change leaders rarely attempt to effect change through head-on, top-down, direct methods. This challenge is particularly important for middle managers to recognize since they generally lack the power and authority to bring

about change by fiat. Rather, effective change leaders adopt indirect approaches to change, methods that adapt to the complexities of working with people of varying personalities in complex, changing situations and strategies that rely upon influence (p. 5).

Two case-like scenarios are also presented, followed by discussions of potential solutions.

M. Farrell (2014) sees all leaders as occupying a middle position, because they are “accountable to another level of decision making or power” (p. 691). It is essential for a leader to balance the “dual nature of knowing operations and broader organizational objectives” (p. 692) and to communicate well with multiple organizational levels (p. 693). Farrell uses words such as “frustrating,” “exhausting,” and “unappreciative” to describe how a middle manager might feel but maintains that the middle is a position of power because of the perspective it affords and the opportunities available to the manager to lead, bridge, and collaborate across the organization (p. 698).

M. Farrell makes reference to two papers from outside the library literature that nevertheless provide valuable perspective for the library practitioner. Sethi (1999) describes evolving pressures on middle managers, who are increasingly expected to behave as leaders, and identifies new roles and competencies for them. In particular, middle managers will be vital to innovation within organizations. Gabel (2002) uses a case illustration to demonstrate how leaders and managers are “caught” between the interests and perspectives of those below and above them in the organization and possibly also entities from outside the organization. The author provides a schematized process for resolving such situations and offers guidelines and approaches for leaders and managers to consider. In describing the psychology of leading from the middle, Gabel writes:

The feelings accompanying the perception of being caught in the middle, on a psychological level include hopelessness, anger, frustration, helplessness, and depression. Common responses to these feelings are a sense of failure, and a tendency to yield or give up. For many who feel conflicting pressures ..., there seems no way to win, no way to advance either the agenda of the organization or the program, or to succeed personally. The sense of personal failure is potentially always present in these situations. Certainly, for those individuals who tend to take their evaluations by others as a yardstick of their own successes, a sense of personal failure may seem inevitable. They will fail either one side of the opposing issue, fail the other side, fail themselves, or fail all of these. Demoralization, and a sense of futility, seem likely (pp. 366–367).

Boatright (2015), positioning academic libraries as having “embraced the model of learning organizations” and thus requiring shared leadership (p. 343), draws from business and psychology literature to share practices that can be helpful to a potential library leader, even one without positional authority, in the areas of casting vision, strategic planning, project management, rejecting passivity, team building, and implementing accountability.

### ***Professional identity***

The notion of professional identity is helpful to the understanding of middle managers’ experience, as leadership behavior may be influenced by managers’ perceptions of themselves and their role in the institution. Gee (2000) defines four perspectives on professional identity. For the purpose of this paper, Gee’s description of institutional identity and discourse-identity are the most relevant. Institutional identity is “authorized by” the institution and tied directly to one’s position in the institution. Discourse-identity, on the other hand, is more widely defined as a recognition of traits and characteristics by the people around the individual. Discourse-identities are formed by dialogue; individuals are not born with traits, nor are the traits granted to them by a

higher power; instead, characteristics are developed through social interactions and discourse (pp. 102–103). In this way, one’s institutional identity may not match one’s discourse identity and vice versa. In the academic library environment, a middle manager may perceive his or herself to be leader and be perceived by others to be a leader, yet not have the authority of a high-level management position.

By many researchers, professional identity is considered to be fluid and influenced by interpretation, experience, and context (Beijaard, 1995; Cooper and Olson, 1996; Dillabough, 1999; Goodson & Cole, 1994; Reynolds, 1996; Sugrue, 1997). Professional identity is described as ever-changing and the result of interactions with peers and self-growth. Gee’s statement further reinforces these ideas: “Identity development occurs in an intersubjective field and can be best characterized as an ongoing process, a process of interpreting oneself as a certain kind of person and being recognized as such in a given context” (Gee, 2000, p. 99).

Much of the current research focuses on teachers’ professional identity and role in the classroom. This research has relevance to librarianship as both fields are facing dramatic changes: “Research on teachers’ professional identity formation also contributes to our understanding and acknowledgement of what it feels like to be a teacher in today’s schools, where many things are changing rapidly, and how teachers cope with these changes” (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004, p. 109). The middle managers interviewed as part of this research have experienced changes in the profession, their organizations, and their own personal and professional development.

### ***Conclusion of literature review***

The leadership literature that was reviewed addresses change in the LIS field, discusses particular leadership models, is prescriptive in nature, synthesizes previous writing on leadership and management, or quantitatively analyzes data survey or job

advertisements. While some authors describe their own activities and initiatives to support or supplement their arguments, and respondents to surveys often had opportunities to answer open-ended questions, few examples from the literature fully characterize the lived experience of leading from the middle of a library. This study addresses that gap by asking academic library middle managers to characterize their experiences of leadership, in particular how they behave and identify as leaders and how they believe colleagues perceive and interpret the middle manager's role as a leader.

### **Method and research process**

This study aimed to gather first-hand accounts of middle managers' experience as leaders. Thus, the researchers employed a qualitative research method, interviewing middle managers in academic library collection development or technical services departments and units. The researchers targeted middle managers in these two functional areas because they respond proactively as well as reactively to changes in technology and the marketplace, user expectations, and budgets and personnel by modifying workflows, adopting new tools and systems, and supporting staff through transitions. Additionally, the researchers both work in these functional areas; their own knowledge and experience allowed them to respond with thoughtful follow-up questions during the research interviews and better understand the context surrounding responses from research subjects.

Many studies on leadership and management in academic libraries employ quantitative research methods, including statistical analysis of survey results. The approach used in this study sets it apart from much of the previous research in that it allowed the research subjects to describe their experiences in their own words.

Further, a qualitative, interview-based method best supports investigation of the study's research questions. The research subjects were asked about their experiences and perceptions, as well as their professional identities. They had the opportunity to respond to questions with as much depth and contextual information as they felt comfortable sharing, and the researchers could pose relevant follow-up questions as needed. Such responses provided the researchers with the means to answer the study's three research questions, which are all of the "how" variety.

After participating in human subject research training and receiving approval for exempt research from the Institutional Review Boards at their respective institutions, the researchers began soliciting participants. The authors distributed an email message to each of the following library-related listservs targeting information professionals interested in technical services and collection management issues: ALCTScentral, ERIL, SERIALST, ULS, and AUTOCAT. The email described the goals and purpose of the study, potential risks of participation, and the authors' steps to ensure anonymity and security of data. The message invited participation from individuals who met all of the following criteria:

- Employed in academic libraries
- Employed in a middle management position within a technical services or collection management department or unit
- Self-identify as a leader or as demonstrating leadership behavior

The researchers identified a total of 10 respondents who met the criteria and agreed to be interviewed. These respondents were sent follow-up messages with definitions for the following concepts and terms:

*Professional identity* can be informed by multiple factors, including identity as a librarian, status as a faculty member, functional responsibilities, or personality traits as they pertain to one's work. While it can take into account job titles and associated roles, professional identity does not necessarily need to align directly with – or be limited by – a job title. One could, for example, simultaneously hold all of the following professional identities: library associate professor, electronic resources librarian, supervisor, collaborator, problem-solver, and educator.

*Leadership* is described and defined in a multitude of ways throughout LIS literature. For the purpose of this study, the authors consider leadership to be the act of influencing people to contribute to the organization's success, follow a vision, or develop professionally. The authors note that leadership and management are not the same. Managers focus on completing a job or task according to a policy or procedure, whereas leaders aim to fulfill a goal or mission.

A *middle manager*, in a hierarchical organizational structure, reports to one or more members of the library administration while supervising staff or units. The middle manager is responsible for carrying out the goals and plans of an organization as determined by the administration. Middle managers work in the middle tier of management, with responsibilities to communicate and collaborate with both the upper or top tier of management and subordinates.

Middle managers have the opportunity to lead up, down, and from the side. *Leading from the middle* in this study describes the efforts and leadership behaviors demonstrated by middle managers to move an organization forward in meeting institutional goals, responding to change, or developing a positive and productive organization culture. Middle managers who “lead from the middle” often do not have

the institutional authority or associated title of an administrator, yet wield their influence and leadership capabilities to make progress.

The researchers also shared the interview questions below and scheduled an interview with each respondent at a mutually agreed upon date and time.

The following demographic information questions were posed to the interviewees:

- How many years have you worked in academic libraries? What is your current role and how long have you been in it?
- What are your age and gender?

The following open-ended questions were posed to the interviewees:

- What would you describe as your primary professional identities?
- When and how did you first see yourself as a leader?
- What do you do that demonstrates leadership?
- What factors drove you to adopt leadership behaviors?
- How does your department or library support your leadership goals, traits, or development?
- Do you think your colleagues see you as a leader? Why or why not? If yes, in what way?
- How have your leadership initiatives been accepted by colleagues?
- What do you do now that would have surprised you five or ten years ago?
- Overall, what have your experiences been like “leading from the middle?”

The researchers used GoToMeeting software to conduct virtual interviews and requested participants’ permission to record the interviews. Interview transcripts were



downloaded from GoToMeeting and transcribed using TranscribeMe, a transcription service. The researchers then coded the interview transcripts using the qualitative research software, NVivo, organizing the interviewees' responses into "nodes" or categories which reflected significant themes and patterns and which served to elucidate interesting and sometimes unexpected threads from the responses.

## **Results**

### *Demographic information*

Interviewees consisted of nine individuals who identified as female and one who identified as male. They ranged in age from 31 to 69 years, with three individuals in their thirties, three in their forties, two in their fifties, and two in their sixties.

### *Academic library experience and current role*

The amount of time interviewees had spent employed in academic libraries ranged from 7 to 37 years. In this group, 37 years represented uncommon longevity: the other nine individuals had spent between 7 and 17 years working in academic libraries. One individual spent four of their eleven years of experience working pre-professionally, while part of another individual's early career was spent volunteering.

Interviewees' current roles included:

- Head of electronic resources and access services
- Technical services librarian (functionally, electronic resources librarian)
- Coordinator of library electronic resources
- Supervisor of library services
- Electronic resources librarian and interim department head
- Head of technical services and assistant director of library (similar to chair role)

- Cataloging and metadata coordinator
- Head of electronic services
- Head of technical services department (originally head of acquisitions, which subsequently merged with cataloging)
- Director of collection development

The researchers note that quotations from research subjects have been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

***Research question: How do middle managers working as part of technical services and/or collection management units in academic libraries perceive and describe their experience(s) “leading from the middle?”***

The first research question reflects one principal goal of the research study: to understand both the leadership experience of middle managers in academic libraries and middle managers’ perception of that experience. For the researchers, responses to the following interview questions contributed the most towards gaining that understanding:

- What do you do that demonstrates leadership?
- What do you do now that would have surprised you five or ten years ago?
- Overall, what have your experiences been like “leading from the middle?”

#### *Demonstrating leadership*

The question about demonstrating leadership was critical, given that this study focuses on middle managers who, in addition to managing and supervising their staff and departments, also act as leaders as part of their role regardless of whether leadership is explicitly identified as a responsibility in their job description. In their responses, interviewees described ways in which they make or initiate changes or improvements,

establish or maintain relationships with others, hold a big-picture view of goals and direction, facilitate communication, or take responsibility and confront challenging situations.

For some interviewees, making changes or improvements was an important component of leadership.

If I see that something is not working correctly, I will take the initiative to try to fix it or reorganize it, or in some way improve it, whether it's a process or something that's been status quo for a long time and maybe no longer applies.

I think just being open to new ideas and liking new ideas and liking change and expecting change to be a part of the landscape.

I led the staff council to be more engaged in the university, and I sort of empowered the group to make changes. Before, it was just sort of like an hour meeting once a month, and nobody really thought that they had any way to make an influential change in the university.

What I'm doing is trying to figure out how our tech services unit ought to change and adapt in order to fit the 21st century. I inherited a very, very traditional structure and traditional job descriptions ... And my role as a leader is to figure out where we ought to be going and then to get the folks to go there.

A number of interviewees discussed the way they conduct their professional relationships with both supervisees and higher administration. Some saw themselves serving as advocates.

I am an advocate for my department. I attend various meetings ... as a representative of the technical services functions ... [Advocacy means explaining] our purpose, our value, and why we need to fill vacancies when they occur, what our duties still are, and how we have adapted. We used to have 30 people, we're down to eleven; we don't do less, we're just much more efficient.

I think everyone here has a good feeling that I will stand up for our department when needed. ... They know I'm going to make a fuss for being taken advantage of. If something goes kind of awry for us in electronic services, I won't let it happen again ... I like them to know that I have their back.

Definitely behind the scenes, I do a lot of advocating for my people and my team to library administration because I see that as a huge role of any manager, is to make sure that you're making your team visible to your supervisors.

Other interviewees described how they strive to show care for others and emphasize service.

I really do feel like leadership, at least what I've seen of positive leadership, is really about taking on the discernment and listening roles.

I would say just really making an effort to meet staff members where they are and figure out where they want to grow, if they want to grow, or if they just want to come to work and do their job and then recognizing, okay, there are still those times when I need to share a bigger idea and help people move towards that bigger idea. And then just providing staff members with the training, with the knowledge, for whatever is necessary to make sure that we all adopt that same vision of where we can go.

If someone needs help or the department needs help, then I might be annoyingly too willing to help ... One of the most important things I do is to kind of model how we should treat one another.

A number of interviewees mentioned some way in which they see the “bigger picture,” by possessing vision and perspective, being goal-oriented, or maintaining general awareness of the overall work environment.

I try to look forward, rather than back, and try to keep abreast of what's coming up and what potentially may have benefit to us here in the library. Not every new gimmick or idea is going to fit here because we are small and private, but I try to figure out what will be important to us in the coming years.

I have a pretty clear idea about not wasting people's time and trying to accomplish clear goals. So goal setting would certainly be another thing that I think would fit here and being thoughtful about measuring progress ... I really like doing strategic planning.

I think what's really been entrusted to me is understanding the bigger picture and understanding how the work of whatever unit I am supervising fits into that bigger picture. And then helping all the individuals in those units understand that picture as well ... I have the privilege of being in meetings that other people do not in my unit, in my department. And so a lot of that responsibility is me paying attention and understanding what's going on in both above me, below me, with our neighboring departments that we interact with a lot.

I'm lucky that I have experience at everything that I'm over except for the IT part, so I don't want to lose that sort of, that I kind of have a good handle on what's going on and understanding what everyone's working on.

One interviewee described facilitating communication.

I do a lot of helping smooth the way for work that needs to get done and sort of opening channels of communication between myself and other unit directors or other functional areas of the library. For example, we work very closely with our acquisitions department that's not in the collection development unit, it's in technical services. So we've had to build bridges and connections that weren't there previous to my being in this position.

Finally, some interviewees have demonstrated leadership by confronting challenges or shouldering responsibility. For some, doing so required making use of their communication skills.

I don't hesitate to give my opinion ... I don't enjoy conflict and confrontation, but I don't shy away from it, either. And I think leaders need to do that. They need to be able to have those tough discussions with other employees or even with patrons.

Part of that involves just the willingness to take responsibility for the full lifetime of projects, the envisioning piece, the planning, the carrying through, and a really nice wrap-up ... Not being afraid to contribute what could potentially be unpopular ideas. Putting up with difficult personalities within meeting situations.

[My staff] do come to me with some of the more technical issues and just those things that, frankly, are above their pay grade, and I just jump in and figure those things out and work through those issues for them.

### *Unexpected directions*

In order to gain a sense of how the research subjects would characterize their experiences of middle management given some hindsight or a longer perspective, the authors asked them what they did now that would surprise their selves of five or 10 years ago. In their answers, the interviewees mentioned specific work responsibilities or functions as well as aspects of leading, managing, delegating, and relating to colleagues.

Some interviewees expressed surprise about the type of work in which they continue to be, or are no longer, engaged. Common themes emerged among the responses that reflect trends in the profession, including: the increasing and changing role of technology, the amount of time and energy focused on managing and interacting with staff and colleagues, the expectation to do more work with fewer staff, and technical services as a form of public service.

I'm surprised that I still do so much technology work, even though I work with a lot of people and manage a lot of people ... Taking management of people and programs and really applying that to implementing the new website or re-implementing your ILS or those types of things ... I feel like I keep managing to move to roles that are more technology-based, even though I keep trying to move to roles that are more people- and management-based, more liaison roles, and then you're like, oh, wow, okay, more technology.

That I would be so involved with electronic resources and kind of the back of the house end of things, because that's not where I started.

I catalog. Five or 10 years ago that never would have happened. Because of the loss of staff, I've had to learn how to do that ... We have just accepted that in order to get through the day, we all have to do everything ... And that is absolutely different than it was 10 years ago where everybody had a specific job and you never did anything else.

I wanted to be a cataloger when I went to library school, and really, that's all I wanted to do. And so now I don't do any cataloging. I never would have thought I would be managing five people. I never thought that I would be involved in copyright or that I would be participating at the top level of the university, I just had no idea that I would be working on governance, university governance and initiatives at that level. And I never would have thought I would be the assistant director or even the head of the department, because I really thought that I would be happy sitting in my cubicle cataloging books all day. And I definitely would have been shocked if someone told me that I would be the systems librarian, because I don't even know how to download my iTunes at home.

I was always a sort of technician, in the sense that I always did the work, I was hands-on in the work and was an expert at the work and one of the lessons I've had to learn is to stop trying to do the work, because my staff are supposed to do it, and they are way better at it than I am. I cannot be an expert in the work anymore ... And frankly, I wouldn't be very good at many parts of it, which I find terrifying.

I have way more interaction with my library administration in my current position than I did before, by virtue of my position in this middle management role. Five or 10 years ago, I would not have seen myself being entrusted so much with the ins and outs of library organization management. Being asked for supervisory advice from my supervisors, you know, that mentoring informal conversation behind closed doors about their having a conflict with something, how I would handle it.

A couple of interviewees found that the way they understood their workplace culture or related to others had changed.

Probably not five years ago, but 10 years ago, I would have definitely been surprised to learn that I am as committed to working within the established norms and structure of an organization that I am ... But you do get a lot more done when you figure out how to work with people and then just figure out, "Okay, this is an area that is really worth my time and energy to flesh out and get more people to adopt my point of view," than if you're just contentious and abrasive. But I wouldn't have recognized that as being abrasive 10 years ago. ... But now I'm recognizing, there was a reason why it's done this way, and it's probably a cultural reason, and if it's a cultural reason, then there are people invested in the way it's being done now, and along with people being invested in a certain way, there's emotions and just a lot more going on than just that's the way it's been done.

I've had to become far more social and outgoing and people-oriented than five or 10 years ago ... I would like to sit quietly all day long and do my work, and I never get to do that now, and I'm fine with it, every day a minimum of two meetings with somebody or other to talk about something.

### *Overall experience*

When asked to describe their overall experience of "leading from the middle" as a middle manager, most interviewees characterized their experiences as generally positive, although a few took note of the negative aspects.

I'm finding that I really like middle management.

When you are caught in the middle, it can be difficult at times. Another piece of it is getting torn in two different directions as well, where you have to balance the needs of those you supervise with the needs of those who supervise you.

I'd say my experiences have been rewarding to me.

I'd say simultaneously a bit frustrating, but also very encouraging. I think the encouraging is outweighing the frustrating. When you're leading in the middle, you also feel caught in the middle sometimes, and that's hard to deal with.



I actually love my position, and I don't have any desire to move into the director role. I don't want to leave the middle because I really feel like my role is sort of support. It's really been good for me and valuable to the library.

I would say overall that it's been pretty challenging because I am very project-oriented and I like the technical side of this profession ... and then when I get pulled back into the managerial side, it takes a few minutes for me to, "Oh, that's right, that's one of my responsibilities, that's something that I need to do." There are definitely days that I'm not leading from the middle, that I'm not leading at all, that I ... need to remind myself that part of leading is being dependable by attending to the managerial type of stuff and that being dependable is a key factor in being responsible, which is a key factor in building trust, which is critical for leadership. But then there are some days when things do fall in place and I'm forward-thinking and I'm communicating well and enthusiastic about what I'm doing and why I'm doing it.

If everything isn't aligned, it can be completely miserable, because you're getting pressure from below and pressure from above, right? And if none of that is meshing, you're just completely miserable ... At the job I was in at that point, I felt like I knew where I was as far as the department went, but from the pressure from above, no, I was always guessing. I was always trying to figure it out ... and so that made me pretty stressed out all the time ... I think my supervisor now does respect me and my leadership abilities, but I also have the strength to say, this isn't working for us, or this is a departmental problem we need to handle, and to also turn around back to the department and say, we might need to do things differently, or let's try this first, please, and see how it goes, and then we can go back to the old way.

Some interviewees mentioned managerial or organizational factors as important contributors to the quality of their overall experience. In particular, positive relationships with or high regard for more senior managers was connected to greater job satisfaction for the middle managers.

The director of the library is wonderful, and is a very good manager, and for the most part, he accepts that people will do their job as expected, and so he doesn't do a lot of intervention and sticking his nose in where he doesn't need to.

I have a really fantastic library dean ... who really makes my work a lot of fun, and I feel supported in my work, and we have a strong leadership team here where everybody's voice is valued. So I think that's made the work of all of the middle managers here a lot more rewarding.

I see real results even in the way that I interact with my boss. ... I just can see that maybe I've had a calming effect on her, I have a broader perspective, and I'm happy to let her deal directly with the budget and that sort of thing. ... If my director wasn't open to suggestions, I would be miserable, because if I was shut down, I wouldn't want to stay. ... The first boss, head of tech services, she's a brilliant person, but she ... had just these definite ideas about how things were going to get done and what needed to be done and what the end result was. And so I would come to her with these new ideas and she'd say, "No, we're going to do it this way." And there was just no conversation, no discussion.

I have encountered some frustrations when I've had ideas that haven't been accepted, ... where there's a number of things that I want to get on with ... and I'm moving a little too fast for my boss, or, in fact, several bosses ... where what I see as a small project they see as being connected to a bigger thing, and they want to do the bigger thing, and I'm like, no, come on, little wins, quick wins, let's just get in and do this piece. I have had some frustration about seeing ... a lack of decisions, seeing very slow processes and endless rounds of consultation, which in my view is not necessary, but then, the people above me are smarter than me, ... so if they think more consultation is necessary, it could be that they see something that I don't see.

Some interviewees referred to relationships with staff or with other colleagues as being a significant component of their overall experience. The responses did not present a great deal of consistency, as some interviewees described positive relationships, while others described their relationships in more neutral terms.

I think the other thing that is so important for middle management is to really communicate the goals and values and connecting them. So the nitty gritty of what you're doing and why, why it matters that you have great customer service and then connecting those to the greater school goals and mission. So really, making people relevant, it's like, you are important, you are directly connected to this mission and this value and you are a value add.

It's been interesting knowing things that I can't yet tell my staff. And sometimes that's hard. But I understand confidentiality and how things have to work through a process before they can be shared with everybody. And I also am in a position where I know how my staff feels about things that I have to try to explain, it's not me, my staff brought this question forward and so I need to find the answer and then take it back. And when to just say, okay, we all need to get together and talk instead of being the intermediary.

It's also just frustrating when you are told something by administration and you have to pass it down and people aren't happy about it. And then I want to make sure that administration understands that this is the feeling because I want them to actually know what's going on with the staff. ... I think it's also encouraging to be the person in the middle, because I get the chance to really know what the staff are doing and understand what they're doing, and see the triumphs and the wins and celebrate with them, and that's something that administration does miss. ... People are frustrating, but people are also great, and my staff have just been really helpful, they've offered lots of information and insight as I've been thrust into extra meetings in my interim department head role, and they've helped me to understand more of what goes on, how decisions might impact them. And then that helps me better represent them when I go to other meetings.

I think that this experience of leading from the middle has been so fulfilling to me because I realized that I love working with people. I love supervising people. I love inspiring people both who work for me, but also the people that I work for. And I can see how much of an impact I make on both directions. ... When anybody in the library approaches me with an idea, even if my first gut reaction is to say, "No, that's stupid. Like, what are you thinking? You obviously haven't thought that through," I don't say anything and I try not to reveal that idea in my body language, because I know that's stifling. ... As a result of that attitude, people come to me with all of their questions ... When I want something done, I say, "This is what I

want to get done. Do you want to get there on your own, or do you want me to tell you how I think is the best way to get there?" And I have half of my staff say, "Just let me get there, and if I make a wrong turn, you can correct me," and then I have half my staff who say, "I want every single step outlined for me, get me there." And so I have to be flexible in the way I lead, by what they want, too.

A good portion of my job, when I'm trying to advocate for my people, or I'm trying to communicate across what our department needs are, or advocating for my peers, is that sort of leading up situation to my supervisors, to our dean, and making sure that that gets voiced, that there is a voice for people who feel like they're not in a position to advocate for themselves.

Opportunities for learning and development, as well as support from upper administration for taking advantage of them, were named by some interviewees as factors contributing positively to their overall experience.

Continuing to learn has been such a valuable piece to me of being in this middle kind of role, sort of learning from watching our library dean, some of her strategies for being successful on campus, continuing to just build my skills that have made me a better middle manager. Also, ... [there is] a strong professional development program right here on campus with a lot of lunchtime workshops with lunch provided, so I have felt very supported in my continuing professional development.

I don't think anybody knows how to be a department head or a unit head or the middle manager. It's something that you learn how to be. If you have a good department head that helps you or a good administration that helps you learn how to navigate those processes, then it's better than if they just expect you to figure it out. We also have a good human resources department on campus, and they do supervisor training ... So I really think it depends on who's on top and who's on the bottom, especially when you start. And if everybody's supportive and helpful, then you kind of figure it out.

We actually have one of those professional development initiatives ... a course that we offer ... called leading from the middle ... It's a lot of reading and discussion and the fabulous thing about it is that it doesn't matter if you are a unit director or if you are, you know, first year, just got your first library job and you're working the

circulation desk. You're all going to get into a room, and you're going to talk about leadership traits, and you're going to talk about managing, and you're going to talk about how you don't need to have a supervisor's title to be a leader.

While a number of research subjects mentioned change – whether initiating it or helping to implement it – in their responses to other interview questions, it was also named by some as a significant component of their overall experience.

My library director came in after some, what I'll call stagnation. ... She came in and implemented a lot of what I will call new work culture standards. So cultural standards of professionalism, what's expected, what's not allowed, what we do here, what we don't do here, what's reasonable, what's not reasonable. ... In this specific case, accountability is really hard. So really being very open about what you are tracking and why, and having quarterly goal meetings and updates, what's going well, what's not going well ... Resetting those expectations is really hard, but it's also really important, because if you don't do that, there's no growth.

I've been able to implement ideas that were important to me. I feel like as an individual, I have made changes in this library and this campus, which is incredibly rewarding to me ... I've been able to do a lot of, be involved in a lot of strategic planning, and then seeing that through.

I've been able to make some changes. I've been able to do some of the things that I want to do, see problems and then fix them and if that means persuading colleagues or people above me to be supportive, I feel in general I've been pretty successful at it ... I actually enjoy the kind of mid-level role because I am within a sort of fairly focused space, I'm able to see problems and persuade people to go and fix them.

***Research question: How do academic librarian middle managers perceive their own growth and development as leaders and what are some of the factors that influenced their development?***

This research question focused on middle managers' perceptions of their own growth as leaders as well as possible influences on the development of their leadership skills.

While the findings from the previous research question provided some insights into the

middle managers' views on learning and experience as opportunities for growth, the following interview questions explicitly sought to elicit responses concerning this topic:

- When and how did you first see yourself as a leader?
- What factors drove you to adopt leadership behaviors?
- How does your department or library support your leadership goals, traits, or development?

### *Leadership self-image*

Although the interviewed middle managers arrived in their current roles through a variety of different avenues, some commonality did exist among the responses. When asked when they first saw themselves as leaders, most interviewees indicated that some experience predating their current job or career, in some cases dating back to childhood or youth, was instrumental in helping to form their self-image as leaders.

I was actually a student worker myself. I had become proficient and [had] the skills needed to do the job and they liked my customer service. So I was promoted to a team captain in my junior year of college.

From a really early age, I just started being elected to leadership positions, like as early as aged 10 and 12 and things like that, and I think I've just always been comfortable with that.

Probably when I worked with [organization]. I had been the director of an arts and crafts program after spending years as a counselor and it was that experience going from a counselor who [was] definitely responsible for a degree of leadership and mentoring and kind of being a buddy to campers to that role of director where the decisions that I was making had ramifications beyond the few people that I was immediately influencing. That was when I first really internalized that difference between the different roles and types of leaders in organizations.

Others came to see themselves as leaders once their job responsibilities demanded that they develop their leadership skills. In some cases, they were the only person in their environment with the expertise or responsibility to perform a certain type of work.

My job descriptions have always had some sort of phrase that talked about, I need to provide leadership in whatever area it is that I was working in. My very first academic library job, I was actually a cataloger and I had to provide leadership for cataloging rules. And then I morphed into an electronic resources librarian and I had to provide leadership on electronic resources. And at all three institutions I've been at so far I've been the sole person in that librarian role at that library.

I was a coordinator in a small department within cataloging for years, but I never thought of myself as a leader until I was kind of thrust into a situation, a different university where I became the interim director. And then I thought of myself as a leader.

Prior to this role, I worked in a consortium office so I was a consortium librarian for about eight years. And I would say that was where I began to see that I could take on leadership roles or sort of formal leadership roles. In fact, during that time I did a 10-month secondment where I was department head for an interlibrary loan unit.

As the older people in the libraries have retired, I'm the only one left that has any length of time working with recurring publications. So I am a leader in the libraries with that, with working with the jobbers, with how you deal with the various vendors and the publishers and paying the bills and getting what you paid for.

### *Motivating factors*

Interviewees were asked what motivated them to adopt leadership behaviors. Some of their responses, such as those that addressed making changes, getting results, moving forward, or responding to workplace necessities, bore close thematic similarities to what they told the researchers about how they demonstrated leadership. In addition, some

interviewees discussed the influence of their personalities or backgrounds or experiences they had had with previous managers and leaders.

Some interviewees were motivated by the prospect of being able to make changes, get results, or move forward.

I just really like getting things done. I'm not real patient with projects that don't have a clear goal and don't really visibly move forward, I'm like a moving forward kind of person. So if I'll be in charge, then I can make it move forward like I want it to move forward, right? I think some of that desire just for end product sort of drives me sometimes to say, okay, I'll be willing to lead this project and sort of take it from there.

When I have sort of adopted leadership behaviors, it's in response to a feeling of frustration that things aren't happening and feeling like I could make things happen. So I also realized that the way to make things happen is by empowering other people and connecting with people. And by doing that, we can influence policy and behavior, and that's sort of what I wanted to do, so I get really frustrated with people just sort of accepting things the way they are, if they're not as good as they could be, and I realized that I need to be in a leadership position in order to make those changes that I want.

I can see things that I think ought to be changed. ... The deepest thing is to look around and go, I see this mismatch between the activities that are going on and what I believe to be, and what my university librarian says, is the kind of directions we ought to be going.

Others were motivated by the need to respond to professional demands, whether those demands were perceived by the individual or made by a supervisor.

I came into this job immediately into a leadership position as a coordinator. Certainly from the beginning I've been leading a department, supervising people, so I was sort of just popped into a leadership position as well. But I think the dean at the time felt like I could handle that.



It became very apparent that my career path in [city] was going to be at the University of [state]. And if I wanted to be a librarian I was going to have to apply for the vacancies that came available throughout the library structure that I was qualified for. And so I did, knowing that I would have to become a leader.

My job description pretty much said, I need to do these things. And so I worked on being a leader in functional areas of librarianship. And then also I think the second [factor] was really being the only person in that library to handle specific tasks and, I mean, if someone had to answer a question it was me.

Just recognizing both if I'm not going to do it, no one is going to do it, or somebody else is going to have to do this and I already see that individual is just overloaded with work. So part of it [is] just having empathy for the other people that you work with, other leaders, other supervisors, other colleagues, and then just recognizing where you are within that entire agency and being willing to say, "Hey, I can help with this" [or] "Oh, okay. That's kind of stepping on your toes."

My previous supervisors and certainly my current supervisor recognized that need to get things done and to get things started, and they have then increasingly given me responsibilities, particularly for certain functional areas or, more recently, over teams ... Other things are sort of self-initiated where I say, this really needs to get done and I feel I can do something about it, so I'll jump in and help out or try to get a group of people riled up and get it done.

For some, personality or personal background factors played an important role in motivating leadership behaviors.

Part of it is just part of my personality that if I see something doesn't work, I want to fix it. I don't turn away from that kind of challenge. I generally walk towards it.

Possibly a bit of even family structure in growing up. I grew up with a lot of kids and we all really had to take responsibility from an early age. I think I just have some personality factors that make me comfortable with that.

I think that was probably largely personality driven. If I see that something needs doing, I don't really wait for someone else to do it ... I'm going to either take

initiative on something, or I'm going to talk to the people who can best help me get that done. And oftentimes, at that, it turns into some sort of collaborative effort because they saw that at the end, something was lacking as well.

Others were motivated by experiences with past managers or by their own previous experiences of leadership. Findings from the previous research question also provided insights in this area.

I've been exposed to different leadership styles, and I've really understood what I like as leadership and what I don't like as leadership. ... I don't prefer leadership in terms of, if I go to my leader or boss and I ask for help or a technical question or something, and they can't help me at all. That is a style that really just does not work for me. I've worked for bosses who don't know anything about my area of libraries, and they didn't want to learn about it. ... So one of the things that I really think is important in leadership behaviors are that you are honestly available as a resource to the people that you are managing and leading. And that you can identify or help identify things that people who are reporting to you want to do, and help them achieve those things. So helping them how to create goals or project plans, and then helping them see that through. Those are the styles of management that I have loved. So that is what I try to do myself.

I have had other positions where the environment was not a good one, and I was kind of forced into leadership positions that didn't really fit with what I was doing because others didn't want to take on that responsibility. But that's a very frustrating position to be in.

#### *Departmental or organizational support*

Interviewees were asked how their departments or libraries supported their leadership goals, traits, or development. Most responses reflected positive attitudes held by interviewees towards the level of support from their respective institutions (financial, cultural, or otherwise), their supervisory experience, and opportunities to contribute to library leadership, take on responsibilities, develop skills, or implement initiatives. Findings from the previous research question also provided insights in this area.

The number one thing that I really appreciate is that there is no micromanagement at my library. I'm really seen as a professional who is expected to contribute at a professional level. I feel like I have a seat at the table ... And my boss has been incredibly supportive in terms of participating in professional organizations and has been very flexible about that. We have less money here to go to conferences, so it's been really nice to have support in terms of applying for grants or funding opportunities.

I would say just by regular meetings with our leadership team, I've been able to have real input into the decision making for our library. I do also have, I think, a pretty generous professional development budget, which allows me to evaluate areas where I feel like I need to build skills and go do that. I'm expected to serve in professional organizations, and I like doing that. My memberships are paid by the library ... If I just have original ideas about things that feel important to me, I work within pretty much of a yes kind of culture where I'm able to follow through with my ideas.

I have the benefit of having a professional development fund that I can use ... So I use that usually to attend conferences, sometimes webinars, or sometimes our human resource development courses on campus might be relevant ... We also have a formal mentoring program for tenure-track faculty all throughout campus, but in the library, they match you up with another library faculty member. And currently I work with my mentor a lot on, this situation came up, this is how I handled it, I feel kind of icky about it, or I'm just not sure I handled it correctly, or I don't understand how it fits into the library's bigger picture.

I've received two promotions in the four years I've been here, so they've sort of put me in positions of leadership, so that's a way of supporting that. And then as assistant director I was given the role of a mentor, and I'm sort of in charge of helping other people in their professional development, and I think those two roles were very specific to me. I don't know that every assistant director who gets appointed will be in charge of those two things and I think that was sort of given to me as support of that trait that I have in me.

My current supervisor is the dean, and she's very open to continuing education not only for me, but the rest of the staff in the library and librarians as we can afford it. She asks my opinion a lot and she values my opinion. That doesn't mean she

always takes it and uses it, right? ... She suggests me for different committees on campus. She has me go to meetings for her at times, depending on what the subject is. If it's something that I'm more familiar with I will go in her stead or I'll be her permanent replacement for something. So for me that's a big deal, to have that kind of support.

***Research question: How do academic librarian middle managers understand their roles as leaders in their respective organizations, colleagues' perceptions of that role, and the reception of their leadership behaviors and initiatives?***

The researchers sought to learn how middle managers saw their own roles in their respective organizations as well as how they believed their colleagues perceived the managers' leadership activities. Responses to the following interview questions provided the most insight into this area:

- What would you describe as your primary professional identities?
- Do you think your colleagues see you as a leader? Why or why not? If yes, in what way?
- How have your leadership initiatives been accepted by colleagues?

#### *Professional identity*

The researchers asked interviewees to identify their primary professional identities. The lists below highlight terms and phrases used by interviewees to describe their professional identities, which reflect not only job titles, ranks, or formal functions but also other roles they play or skills they felt they brought to their positions.

Professional identities related to job skills, rank, and/or formal job function:

- Electronic resources and liaison librarian
- Faculty member (cited by three interviewees)
- Academic librarian

- Librarian (cited by two interviewees)
- Technical services librarian (cited by two interviewees)
- Tenure-track assistant professor
- Library assistant professor
- Systems librarian
- Head of technical services
- Acquisitions librarian
- Assistant director
- Collection development librarian
- Metadata developer
- Cataloger
- In procurement
- University copyright specialist
- [Someone who] serve[s] on faculty senate

Of interest, one research subject who cited “faculty member” as a professional identity also noted, “I ... would never refer to myself as a professor.” Another subject cited “librarian” as a professional identity but made a point of mentioning that “librarian” was used only “outside of the libraries”; “inside the libraries,” this person identifies as “classified staff”. Of the subjects who cited “technical services librarian” as a professional identity, one added, “within that, specifically electronic resources,” while the other emphasized that “the tech services part is extremely important to me.” Finally, the participant who described part of their professional identity as being “in procurement” clarified with the following: “when I am talking to non-librarians trying to explain what I do.”

Professional identities related to skills, knowledge, or abilities:

- Customer services or quality assurance manager
- Mentor (cited by two interviewees)
- [Someone who] work[s] with many people outside of the library
- [Someone who has the] ability to multitask
- [Someone who] use[s] several different ways to communicate, both written and verbally
- Coordinator (cited by two interviewees)
- Supervisor or manager (cited by four interviewees)
- “A really great convener” (in contrast to “I’m going to chair this group”)
- Teacher
- Problem solver (cited by three interviewees)
- Member of editorial board of an ALA Guide
- Troubleshooter
- “Someone who’s here to help [rather] than here to tell you what to do”
- Diplomatic ambassador
- Project manager
- “Someone who gets things started, like an initiator”

The participant who cited “teacher” as a professional identity clarified by saying, “I consider training teaching, and I teach all the time.” One of the participants who identified as a “problem solver” also described this role as being “almost like a fixer.”

### *Colleagues' perceptions of research subjects as leaders*

Most of the research subjects responded in the affirmative when asked whether they thought their colleagues (broadly defined) saw them as leaders. When asked in what ways they were seen as leaders, research subjects mentioned that they were authorities or experts in particular areas, that they filled certain roles, whether formal or informal, or that they had the personal qualities or outlook they believe a leader should have. Evidence that they were seen by others as leaders includes the feedback they received, being consulted on particular topics, or being nominated for a committee or award. Some interviewees gave responses that were not entirely positive: the qualifications were in one case explained by the nature of serving in an interim position, in another by the prevailing organizational outlook on leadership.

I know that they do because I'm seen as a subject matter expert in some ways in some of the things that I do. So I know that people have confidence in the skills that I bring. People ask to collaborate with us a lot. In the last two years, we have seen a huge difference on campus in terms of the programming that we're offering and the ways that we've been able to extend our services and really kind of infiltrate the campus. So it is nice and people say nice things, they say in emails, I hope people know how appreciative we are that you're here ... But also, the HR director has said things to me in just the last semester about how strong my leadership and specifically my management skills are, and she specifically asked if I was intending to continue to be in management and have maybe an eye for advancing at some point.

I do think my colleagues see me as a leader within the library and my colleagues on campus as well ... My active work on Faculty Senate has allowed me to work with a lot of teaching faculty who have valued my work there. Some of the other people who serve in coordinator roles within my library have told me and emailed me after meetings and really thanked me for my leadership in those meetings. So I think we all have a lot of respect for each other in that shared leadership that we have. The people whom I supervise I think see me as a leader because that's so clearly my role within our department.

I think they do. The last couple years, I've made a conscious effort to step back a little bit from things and let some of the younger people that are going to be here longer take those roles ... And so I'm more like a mentor; that's my role now, but a couple of years ago, my staff did nominate me for a campus-wide supervisor award that I won, which was kind of a surprise.

I have kind of two answers to that. Yes, I think in the functional area of electronic resources, I think specifically because I'm the only one at this institution, the only librarian [in] those tasks, I am seen as a leader in that area and folks know I supervise staff members ... I think the fact that they keep coming back to me with things kind of confirms that they do understand and acknowledge and believe that. In my interim department head role, I do feel like I'm working a little bit harder to be seen as a leader, but I think that's because I have that interim title in front of me, and I know that that doesn't mean that I have the ability to make huge decisions, huge changes ... So I want to make sure that folks outside the department, especially, know that they can come to me with any concerns they might have or if they want us to embark on a project with them, it still needs to come through me, and I think for the most part, that is understood. I'm just learning to be a little bit more assertive with, I don't think the staff have time to do that right now. Those sorts of things are a little harder to say out loud to your colleagues.

I think they do. Why? I am a very inclusive person and I think that people are drawn to that. And I am able to spot the strengths in people and sort of help nurture those. And so people recognize that and they also sort of strive to rise to my level of expectation, which is pretty high. So they see that I am effective and competent and that I make things better. I can effect change by building those relationships with the administration, and so they just sort of work with me to achieve that ... They feel empowered to make changes that maybe they didn't even consider before.

I would say probably to a degree, but that's because I've just pushed myself or put myself out there and we have had a couple opportunities to work on cross-functional teams in the past year ... One committee, I was able to chair it, and then another one, I stepped up and tried to be active on it. But I think that a lot of people here have that same, "Well, we're not really expecting anything until she hits the three-year mark." ... The people that I can think of that are respected within the



organization, they have over a decade of experience. That longevity factor is what drives leadership at this organization.

In this position, they definitely do. I get things done and people like that. That's one of my big MOs in life and in work, is that you ask me or you ask the department to do something, and we do it ... I haven't had any problems with putting forth ideas and people giving me a hard time about it or trying to suppress them or anything like that. They either like them or they don't, and I move on, you know? I've had some of my colleagues nominate me for different committees and things without my knowledge ... like a university strategic planning committee. So to me, that shows me that that particular person thinks I have leadership qualities.

I hope they do. You know, wrong-headed sometimes, leading the charge the wrong way sometimes, but I hope that they do. And the main sign of being a leader is simply that you are making changes to things. Sometimes the change is as simple as, we are not going to do X and Y anymore ... But other times the change is starting something new. I've done a reorganization of our structure here. People's jobs and duties and roles have changed, workflows have been streamlined, and those to me are all signs of seeing a future and making change to try to get to that future. I hope the staff within the unit see me the same way, too. It's a little bit different because then I'm just the boss and in fact they probably expect management more than they expect leadership ... You can be a good manager and a bad leader, or maybe a bad manager and a good leader, and I hope my peers would see me as being an effective leader.

I know that my upper administration sees me as a leader, because they told me that. I think that my peers see me as a leader because I have actually very good working relationships with the other directors in the library, where they do come to me a lot, and I am able to come to them on consultations and in particular advice about any supervisory issues that come up or management ... In terms of my direct reports, I try to be very accessible to them, inasmuch as anyone feels like they can be accessible, but I make my time here at work their time. I have an open door policy in my office at work where if my door is open, and it's most of the time open, they can come in ... So I feel like in that capacity, to the best of my ability as a leader, I'm showing that I'm here to facilitate the work that they do. And to as best as I can prevent obstacles from limiting the work that they do. In terms of people that are outside of my direct report or my peers or my supervisors, I think that's a little bit

harder for me to say because of course, less day-to-day interaction. But I think, because I constantly sit in front of meetings presenting or doing trainings for people outside of my department, that I am a visible leader, even if we're not collaborating on a work basis.

### *Reception of initiatives*

Interviewees were asked how their leadership initiatives were accepted by colleagues. In response, most were able to describe either specific initiatives that had some measure of success or a general impression of positive reception, while acknowledging that not all of their ideas or suggestions have been equally well-received. Notably, a number of interviewees described work environments in which colleagues were supportive and open to change.

I would say in general, on this campus they love it. They're open to listening to new ideas. I think one of the things that I'm really conscious of when we start new programming or I lead a new initiative, is that it has to be sustainable. Right, so what is the library capable of doing and maintaining and what's reasonable for collaborators and colleagues on campus? So how can we step forward and create really high impact learning objects or projects for our students and our faculty?

I would say positively ... Although there are times, too, when I might throw something out there and everybody looks at me like I'm crazy. That happens too.

I guess I can think of a couple of ways that I had ideas, and I usually will get a group, usually it's actually my technical services team, we'll sort of start on something. For example, morale in this library wasn't great. ... So we started instituting monthly potlucks, library-wide ... That's been very accepted, but it didn't totally fix the problem ... But at least we're all thinking, and we are talking, and we're trying to communicate what the problem is ... I decided we would go to a different interlibrary loan platform ... I actually built a team across floors, so I do a lot of cross-training. And so I had tech services people and circulation people, and the person who's hired to do ILL, we all work together, and people seem really open to that ... So I think people seem pretty enthusiastic about working together, and that excites me because I think maybe I can start to make a difference in the

climate here, if I maybe keep concentrating on these little teams and giving people a chance to work together.

At my last position, I was spending so much time educating and advocating for digital preservation. ... I was really able to see that effort that I made kind of take shape and people were using this vocabulary and using these ideas that we had discussed ... That whole general idea was well received then and people independently recognized, "Okay, I need to fill this knowledge gap, I need this type of training." And then it grew more organically rather than coming from one person, and I think that that's evidence of a successful leadership initiative, that it wasn't just me driving the bus ... I've definitely had failures too ... One of the initiatives that I was trying to encourage was just building the culture of doing a literature review at the start of forming committees, which had been part of my experience in public libraries. When we needed to tackle a new endeavor, we would need to do a literature review and then come back and share some of the ideas we chatted about, but because we were a merged organization with information technology, a lot of the IT people were like, "Yeah, no, we're not going to do that."

They seem fine with it. Some things we've moved forward with together, and other things maybe weren't the best ideas in the world and maybe they didn't go anywhere ... There doesn't seem to be an environment here where you're going to knock down someone's idea just for the heck of it, or for some other weird political reason of your own.

When I propose ideas for changes, in general, people are very accommodating to those changes. I've been able to create a couple of initiatives that were not just things internal to my own division, but they required cooperation and support from other divisions. And in general I feel that people have been very open to that. It comes down to the personality of the division head in question and some of my colleagues, they can see, oh, yeah, change is necessary here and [I'm] trying to make a change here, okay, great. And then I've had one colleague in particular who's been in their role a long time, and does not seem particularly interested in changing some of the old ways of doing things. So I'm not universally successful. ... This may come down to the sort of the personality of my library. ... I think that we're a great organization because we are very flexible and adaptable and dynamic, and not stuck in old ways.

I was tasked by our library administration with creating our subject liaison program, because they didn't have one in our library system at the time, and so I had to build that from the ground up, but also make sure that I was getting a lot of buy-in from the other librarians and asking them to trust in me about this program that didn't exist before and needed a lot of work on their part to make successful. And I feel like that has been a successful enterprise since we've had the program going now for about five years. And it has certainly grown beyond me because we had to hire someone else to take over as coordinator for that position. But I did build that trust first ... And I think that that was a big initiative, that was a success story in our organization that really did involve a lot of leadership on my part to get off the ground.

## **Discussion**

While the small number of research participants prevented the researchers from deriving generalizable conclusions from the data, the researchers did observe that all the research participants seemed to be thriving in their current positions, have had an overall positive experience as middle managers, and described at their current institution a favorable organizational culture, professional relationships with supervisors, staff, and colleagues, and support for professional development. Some participants described past experiences that were less positive, or relationships with former supervisors or library administration that were less supportive, but many of those same participants framed past experiences as learning and growth opportunities rather than a negative reflection of middle management as a whole.

The researchers further observed that organizational culture and professional relationships have a real impact on job outlook, performance, and middle managers' growth as leaders. Middle managers prefer to work under supervisors who are engaged and have some knowledge about or interest in the work of those who report to them. Additionally, middle managers value professional relationships built on trust. They

want to know they are valued, and that their own managers and leaders have confidence in their capacities and professionalism. They also appreciate opportunities to share their ideas with upper-level management and to make substantive contributions to the organization. Middle managers benefit from high-quality communication with colleagues on various steps of the organizational hierarchical ladder.

Furthermore, middle managers are receptive to opportunities to gain new skills and look to continue developing as leaders and librarians. They thrive in supportive environments that facilitate professional development and organizational cultures that are flexible and encourage growth. Middle managers are adaptable and capable learners. Over time, they expand their technical abilities, social and interpersonal skills, and organizational and cultural awareness. They are able to meet the challenge of taking on new or different roles. Finally, middle managers can and will lead change when given the chance. They are attuned to the evolving needs of the organization, trends and new directions in librarianship, and the expectations of upper-level management. They see opportunities for change and take action, and were often not satisfied with the status quo.

Research participants had mixed responses to questions that asked about how colleagues perceived the participants' role as leaders and their leadership behavior or initiatives. While most interviewees expressed confidence that colleagues respected their role and saw them as leaders, one research participant described challenges associated with being in an interim position. Many research participants cited both professional and personal experience as factors in their leadership skill development, while almost as many participants described aspects of their personality or work ethic that led them to become and excel as leaders. The notion of professional identity is significant to the research questions as many of the interviewees demonstrate leadership

behavior – the type of behavior that one might associate with upper management – despite their role in a lower, middle tier of management.

Communication was a recurring theme in responses to multiple interview questions, with relevance to all the research questions. Communication played a significant role in middle managers' job performance and satisfaction, as well as how they understood their own leadership style and interpreted colleagues' reactions to the middle managers' leadership initiatives. Another interesting theme, and possible route for further investigation, was that some middle managers had already developed an aptitude for leadership (either from past experiences, or through their own personal development) before entering a managerial role, while other middle managers learned leadership skills and developed their own leadership style on the job.

The researchers acknowledge that the interviewed research subjects represent a small and self-selected group. Interviewees tended to share common attributes including an ability to reflect on their experiences and articulate thoughts about those experiences as well as firm opinions, feelings, and overall strong personalities. Of this group, most interviewees expressed positive comments and cited organizational and workplace examples that were positive in nature regarding support they received from their departments, libraries, and/or organizations, relationships with staff and supervisors, and work culture and environment. The researchers see an opportunity to investigate the experience of middle managers who are not thriving or do not share the same overall positive reaction to their positions in the same way this group seemed to.

The researchers see further opportunities in exploring the role of gender and age as well as race, sexual orientation, and workplace longevity in the experience of academic librarian middle managers. While the researchers gathered demographic information from interviewees, the gathered data was not used to draw conclusions or

support the research questions. Interestingly, only one interviewee identified as male and during his interview, stated the following:

Being male, all my life I've had leadership potential validated for me. If I thought I wanted to be in charge of something, I could look around and see tons and tons of leader models who looked exactly like me because they're white males. So I probably, at some level, always assumed I would end up managing something.

This perspective is unique to the male interviewee and did not present itself in any of the other interviews. As further evidence that continued exploration may prove valuable, one research participant said the following when asked about her age:

I spent a good deal of my professional career not talking about my age because I've been in positions of authority and responsibility and I've always had to give people the confidence in my abilities beyond my age.

Additionally, the researchers remain curious about the role of authority in middle management. In particular, the researchers see an opportunity for further investigation into the potential for conflict between or frustration with a middle manager's established position in the organizational hierarchy and interest in leadership that goes beyond middle management. During one interview, a participant noted:

You have to watch your step sometimes because you can get stuck in that place where you might want to move things forward, but you don't have the authority, and so you end up treading lightly to maybe feel the waters and see how this is going to be accepted ... It can be frustrating, ... you're in on a lot of the decisions and a lot of the plans, you see them, they're described to you, they're explained to you, but you can't necessarily have an impact on them.

While this study did not ask participants to share their view or interest in entering higher-level management – or their views on future career paths in general – the researchers do see the potential for future research in analyzing middle managers'

career progression. The researchers also see potential for similar research about middle management in academic libraries in functional areas and departments other than collection management and technical services.

It is the authors' hope that the outcomes of this study offer value for technical services and collection management units, including enhanced understanding of the leadership landscape and working environment as well as how middle managers contribute to unit and library success and can be better supported with leadership development opportunities. Further, the researchers hope this research encourages conversations between higher administrators and middle managers that lead to the development of organizational cultures in which middle managers can thrive.

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