What Makes A Leader?
An Analysis of Academic Library Leadership and Organizational Vision

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Introduction
As concerns over the ability of libraries to remain relevant, vibrant, and valued institutions have grown increasingly impassioned, so have efforts to identify solutions. Among a panoply of specific policy proposals, general calls for societal change, and visions for adaptation to new economic and technical realities, there have been a number of claims that what is most needed are leaders who have the desire and capacity to make difficult decisions. Given the moribund state of most library budgets, these claims have given rise to a great deal of thought about how to attract, cultivate, and develop individuals who act as leaders regardless of their formal positions.

Studies have shown that flat organizational structures are more conducive to expression of leadership than hierarchical structures. A culture that embraces risk-taking and does not punish failure engenders more willingness among employees to challenge themselves and try their hand at leadership. Evaluation systems that reward experimentation, teamwork, and support of others foster leadership more strongly than systems tied to objective productivity. There are tantalizing hints that in non-profit institutions, organizational vision may have great power to grow leaders.

Organizations with top-level leaders who articulate a clear vision and align their mission and actions with that vision are likely to be filled with employees who are both highly engaged in their positions and who exhibit leadership (even without serving in a formal leadership role). While it could be that this effect stems from modelling, it is also possible that vision inspires engagement. Furthermore, it could be argued that engaged individuals first find themselves exhibiting leadership behaviors, then begin to slowly perceive themselves as leaders, and subsequently embrace and cultivate that identity. This hypothesis is consistent with the reasons individuals give for wanting to exhibit leadership: desire for advancement, desire for personal accomplishment or autonomy, and, crucially, the wish to be a part of something bigger than themselves.

In this paper, the researchers describe a study they undertook to investigate the relationships among a person's attitudes about their organization's vision, that person's self-perception as a leader, and that person's perception of the degree to which they are engaged in their job. The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the general characteristics of library employees who consider themselves leaders in their organizations?
2. What is the relationship between the degree to which a person perceives themselves as a leader and their judgment of the quality of their organization's vision?
3. How does a person's self-reported job engagement relate to their self-perception as a leader and their judgment of the quality of their organization's vision?

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4. Are the relationships among the three variables (self-perception as a leader, judgment of quality of organization's vision, self-reported job engagement) different for individuals who occupy formal leadership positions than they are for those who do not?

**Literature Review**

The last several decades have seen numerous articles and books published about leadership in academic libraries. While much of this literature has addressed attributes, histories, or activities of those in formal leadership positions, several recent publications have taken a broader view and examined leadership as a skill or trait that can operate in any formal role. One of the most widely-reported findings is that the ability to be a visionary is vital to success as a leader. This and other claims about personal attributes that lead to expressions of leadership provide useful information for those interested in hiring individuals who might be likely to develop into leaders. But the relevance for organizations who do not have much ability to hire is minimal. The literature on the relationship between organizational attributes and the emergence of leaders is less well developed. One gap of particular interest is research addressing the relationship between employee self-identification as a leader and either job engagement or perceptions of their library's strategic vision.

A large number of the baby boomer generation of librarians are set to retire in the coming years and it is projected that library programs will not be graduating enough degree holders to take their places. Many of these librarians that are set to retire have reached management or leadership positions, which makes replacing them even more difficult, as newer librarians have not had the time to develop the necessary qualifications for those positions. One option the library profession is taking is to develop the next generation of leaders via library leadership institutes. Professional development opportunities such as the Harvard Leadership Institute for Academic Librarians, the Association of Research Libraries Leadership Fellows Program, the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Advanced Leadership Institute for Senior Academic Librarians, and the American Library Association Emerging Leaders program are all targeted at librarians of various experience levels, and share the common goal of equipping librarians with the problem solving skills to tackle major challenges in the field of librarianship. Several studies have shown that these leadership institutes have helped their participants gain valuable skills and experience in becoming leaders.

While many leaders are in positional leadership roles, such as director or department head, many are not. However, the correlation between acting as a leader and being in a position with authority is not perfect. This is partly because individuals in power sometimes act more as managers than leaders. Riggs defines managing as “work within defined bounds of known quantities, using well established techniques to accomplish predetermined ends.” Leaders, in contrast, “maintain an understanding of what the mission and goals of an organization are and how these can be fulfilled”. This distinction establishes the important relationship between library leadership (as opposed to management) and organizational vision statement, which, in turn has implications for library leaders.

The vision statement provides a direction for the organization. In a study on the quality of the vision statement and the performance of hospitals, there were marginal, positive correlations between the two. In another study, Kantabutra reported a positive but indirect correlation between vision content and vision alignment with employee satisfaction. The mechanism underlying these effects is of particular interest for those seeking to harness the ability of vision statements to drive positive outcomes. When it comes to the library’s current organizational impact and the aspirational vision statement, Griffin, Parker, and Mason note that “the discrepancy implicit in a compelling vision motivates employees who have the openness and confidence to do so to be more adaptive and proactive, respectively.”
An organization’s vision statement can go a long way to both bond and connect leaders (both informal and formal) within that organization. Pielstick found that shared vision is “the most common distinguishing characteristic with leadership overall.” He goes on to note that a leader “does not impose, but may initiate, the vision. Shared vision derives from shared needs, values, beliefs and purposes(s) of the leader and the followers.” Communicating and clearly articulating this vision is an extremely important task for leaders, particularly if they hope to align the organization’s goals and activities with that mission. An articulated and shared vision is crucial to employees’ perception of their leader as an authentic leader who is worth following.

Methodology
The authors developed a 34-item survey, administered through Qualtrics, to address each of the research questions. It was distributed via several library listservs for two weeks in early March, 2016.

Participants
In order to reach a range of academic library employees, the survey was distributed to a number of professional library email lists. The invitation included an explanation of the survey, a statement of the goal of the project, and a hyperlink to the survey. The survey, included a consent form and 34 questions consisting of a mix of multiple choice, yes/no, and open-ended questions. Upon completion of the survey, participants were presented with a message thanking them for their time. The survey was active between March 1st and March 15th, 2016. There were 459 respondents, reporting personal characteristics, perceived level of job engagement, their colleagues’ level of job engagement, and perceptions of the quality of their library’s vision statement.

In order to protect respondents’ confidentiality, all responses were completely anonymous. The survey instrument was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the University of Alabama, Vanderbilt University, and Kansas State University, institutions of the researchers at the time of the survey.

Survey Design
The survey questionnaire began with two screening questions that required respondents to indicate whether they are over 21 years of age and the type of library in which they work. Respondents who were under 21 years old and/or did not work at academic libraries were directed to a thank you message and the end of the survey.

The research design of this study was non-experimental. It sought to examine the relationships of library employee’s self-identification as leaders and how they view their job engagement, as well as their perceptions of their libraries’ organizational vision statements. An additional aim of the survey was to explore library employees’ personal vision statements (if they had one) of their own careers, and to explore how aligned their actions are with their visions. These data and results will be presented in a separate paper.

Results
A screening question asked respondents to indicate whether or not they work in an academic library; 450 individuals responded. Respondents who selected “no” (n=14) were directed to the end of the survey. The remaining respondents, 96.89% (n=436), selected “yes”.

The survey also asked respondents if they consider themselves leaders in their organization. Out of 433 respondents, 44.11% of the respondents (n=191) answered “Yes”; 38.80% (n=168) answered, “Kind of”; and 17.09% (n=74) answered, “no.” The distribution is shown in Figure 1.

The survey identified respondents’ current positions at their libraries. Of the 433 individuals who responded to this question, 47.34% (n=205) indicated that they were in “Professional level” positions, which was by far the
The largest group, followed by “Department Head level” (26.33%; n=114), “Dean/Director level” (10.16%; n=44), and “Associate/Assistant Dean/Director level” (10%; n=96). A small percentage, 3.70% (n=16), were “Para-professional level”. The distribution is shown in Figure 2.
Respondents were also asked to indicate their gender and age. Among the 364 individuals who reported their gender, 19.78% were Male (n=72) and 80.22% were Female (n=292). Out of 366 individuals who reported their age, 1.37% were 25 years old and under (n=5), 36.07% were between 26-40 years old (n=132), 40.16% were between 41-55 years old (n=147), 18.58% were between 56 and 65 years old (n=68), and 3.83% were 66 years old and over (n=14). This distribution of respondents’ age is shown in figure 3.

![Figure 3](image)

Respondents were asked to indicate the size of their libraries. The largest group of respondents (38.08%; n=139) worked in libraries with “66 or more employees”. The next largest group is libraries with “6-20 employees”, which has 23.01% of the respondents (n=84), followed by “21-35 employees” (15.62%; n=57), and “36-50 employees” (12.88%; n=47). The two smallest groups were “51-65 employees” (6.30%; n=23) and “1-5 employees” (4.11%; n=15). The distribution is shown in Figure 4.

The survey also asked the respondents how long they have worked at their current library. About a third of the 365 respondents (33.42%; n=122) reported that they have worked at their current library for “More than 10 years”. The second largest group were new employees who have only worked at their libraries for “1-3 years” (22.74%; n=83), followed by “4-6 years” (18.63%; n=68), and “Less than 1 year” (10.41%; n=38). The two smallest groups were “9-10 years” (6.85%; n=25) and “7-8 years” (7.95%; n=29). The distribution is shown in Figure 5.

The researchers then asked the respondents if they knew if their library had an up-to-date vision statement. Of the 414 responses, 213 (51.45%) selected “yes”, and 66 (15.94%) selected “Maybe”. One hundred and thirty-five (32.61%) selected “no”. For those who did not select “no”, the researchers ask whether they knew what their library’s vision statement was. Of the 277 responses, 111 respondents (40.07%) selected “yes”, 70 (25.27%) selected “yes, I was heavily involved in the creation of my library’s vision statement”, and 73 (26.35%) were only “kind of” involved. Twenty-three (8.30%) selected “no”.

FIGURE 4

What is your age?

![Figure 4](image)

FIGURE 5

What is your age?

![Figure 5](image)
Respondents were asked about how much they agree or disagree with statements about their job engagement. For the statement, “I am highly engaged in my job”, 42.78% (n=157) of the 367 respondents selected “strongly agree” and 32.43% (n=119) answered “agree”. Only 1.63% (n=6) and 1.09% (n=4) selected “disagree” and “strongly disagree” respectively. For the statement, “I look forward to going to work every morning”, 14.71% (n=54) of the 367 respondents selected “strongly agree”, and 33.51% (n=123) selected “agree”. The number of respondents who selected “strongly disagree” (4.36%; n=16) and “disagree” (7.63%, n=28) was higher than the number who chose those categories when responding to the previous statement. The distribution is shown in Figure 6.

**FIGURE 6**

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Analysis of Data and Discussions

In this section, the authors discuss the data within the thematic context of the research questions. The Conclusions section discusses overall trends and next steps.
The general characteristics of library employees who consider themselves leaders in their organizations

Out of the 191 respondents who considered themselves leaders in their organizations, over 80% (n=155) were in department head level or higher positions. In total, 85% of this group of 191 respondents formally supervised someone else. Those who have formal leadership responsibilities are more likely to consider themselves leaders. Over 90% of respondents who do not consider themselves leaders were at the professional level or below. Of the approximately 15% of those who do not formally supervise anyone but still considered themselves leaders (n = 25), all of them either know or kind of know what their libraries' vision statements are (n = 16). However, nine of those respondents did not respond to this question.

Chi-Square statistical tests show that there is a statistically significant relationship (χ² (8, N= 366) = 0.00, p = .05) between the respondent's age and whether they consider themselves a leader within their organization. Respondents who answered “yes” to the question “do you consider yourself a leader” were older than those who did not answer “yes”; over 70% of those answering “yes” were 41 years or older. On the other hand, over 53% of respondents who answered “no” were 40 years or younger. One possible explanation could be that older respondents have had more leadership experience in their career than younger respondents. Another association also supports this explanation. Chi-Square statistical tests show that there is a statistically significant relationship (χ² (10, N= 433) = 0.00, p = .05) between the respondents' positions within the library and whether they consider themselves a leader within their organization. For example, those who hold higher-level administrative positions are more likely to consider themselves leaders (see below for more discussion).

The relationship between the degree to which a person perceives themselves as a leader and their judgment of the quality of their organization’s vision.

The data show several other interesting characteristics of self-identified leaders. For example, there is a strong relationship between considering oneself a leader in one's organization and perceiving the library's vision statement as inspiring. Almost half (48%) of those who consider themselves a leader in their organization either strongly agreed (19%) or agreed (29%) that their library's vision statement is inspiring. About 26% of those who “kind of” consider themselves a leader in their organization felt the same way. For those who do not consider themselves a leader in their organization, only 12% strongly agreed or agreed that their library's vision statement is inspiring. Looking at the data from the reverse perspective, only eight percent (n =2) of those who strongly agreed that their library’s vision statement was inspiring (n =26) did not consider themselves leaders in their organizations.

The data clearly show that those who identify themselves as leaders are much more likely to have a positive view of their organization's vision statement. This statistic is even more striking when compared with how all respondents view their organization's vision statement, as only 11% of ALL respondents strongly agreed that their library's vision statement is inspiring.

How does a person’s self-reported job engagement relate to their self-perception as a leader and their judgment of the quality of their organization’s vision?

Chi-Square statistical tests show that there is a statistically significant relationship (χ² (14, N= 367) = 0.00, p = .05) between whether a respondent considers themself a leader within their organization and how engaged they are at their jobs. About 60% (n = 96) of those that considered themselves leaders strongly agreed they were highly engaged in their jobs. On the other hand, only 24% (n = 15) of those who did not consider themselves leaders felt the same way. There is also a statistically significant relationship (χ² (14, N= 367) = 0.00, p = .05) between whether a respondent considers themself a leader within their organization and how much they look forward to
going to work each morning. About 24% (n = 39) of those who considered themselves leaders strongly agreed that they looked forward to going to work every morning. Comparatively, only 6% (n = 4) of those who did not consider themselves leaders strongly agreed that they look forward to going to work every morning. Furthermore, 51% of those who reported that they know their library’s vision statement strongly agreed that they are highly engaged in their job. In contrast, among those who report that they kind of know or do not know what their library’s vision statement is, only 29% strongly agreed that they are highly engaged in their job. 

Over 90% of self-reported leaders (n = 162) either strongly agreed or agreed that they volunteer to participate in ad-hoc meetings and initiatives beyond what is required. Only about 63% of the non-leaders (n = 62) reported that they do the same. The self-perceived leaders were also much more likely to feel that their colleagues were highly engaged as well. About 27% of them strongly agreed that their departmental colleagues were highly engaged; about 23% of them strongly agreed that their colleagues throughout the library were highly engaged. Of the individuals who do not perceive themselves as leaders, only 13% felt the same about their departmental colleagues and only 8% felt the same about their colleagues throughout the library.

There is a statistically significant relationship (χ² (49, N= 216) = 0.01, p = .05) between employee engagement and how inspiring they found their organization’s vision statement. Out of the 96 respondents who report that they “strongly agree” that they are engaged in their job, over 51% reported that they either “agree” or “strongly agree” that their library’s vision statement is inspiring. More than half of this group of 96 also strongly agreed or agreed that their library’s vision statement is well articulated by library administration. And more than half agreed that their library’s vision statement is communicated to the library’s employees.

Are the relationships among the three variables (self-perception as a leader, judgment of quality of organization’s vision, self-reported job engagement) different for individuals who occupy formal leadership positions than they are for those who do not?

Of the 44 respondents at the Dean/Director level, 81% strongly agreed or agreed that their library’s vision statement is well articulated; 69% felt that way about the statement being inspiring; 87% strongly agreed or agreed that the statement was communicated to the library is inspiring to employees; and 78% strongly agreed or agreed that the statement was communicated to the university community. It is not surprising to see such high percentages from the dean/director level respondents, as they most likely were the main driver of developing those statements in the first place. At the Associate Dean/Associate Director level or below, there were about 20-50 percentage points drop for each category.

At the Dean/Director level, about 97% of those who gave a response reported that they were highly engaged in their job and 73% reported they looked forward to going to work every morning. Moving down the respondents’ rank of formal positions, the percentages drop. For Associate Dean/Associate Director respondents (n = 35), about 89% felt that they were highly engaged and 60% looked forward to going work. For department heads (n = 95), 77% were highly engaged and 46% looked forward to going to work. Among professional level respondents (n = 175), about 67% felt they were highly engaged, and 41% looked forward to going to work.

Conclusions

The genesis of this study was a conversation among the authors about the potential for vision statements to be proactive agents in transforming culture. After several hours of debate, we had become intrigued by the idea that a compelling vision statement could engender high levels of engagement, which would in turn lead employees
to launch initiatives and exercise leadership, no matter their role in the organization. Recognizing that we could not implement an experimental study to establish ideas about causation, we decided to start by checking to see if there is evidence for connections among the three variables of interest.

This study reveals that these connections are robust. Self-identification as a leader is strongly associated with assessments of the quality of an organization's vision statement and with job engagement. The associations are in the expected direction, with individuals who self-identify as leaders being much more likely to report that their organization's vision statement is inspiring and that they are highly engaged in their jobs than those who do not strongly self-identify as leaders. Intriguingly, there is also a strong association between job engagement and reporting that their library’s vision statement is inspiring. And again, this association is in the expected direction, with those who are highly engaged being more likely to report that their organization's vision is inspiring.

The exceptionally strong association between job title and self-perception as a leader suggests that position in hierarchy could be the driving factor behind the connections of our three variables of interest. It is possible that individuals do not self-identify as a leader until they occupy formal leadership positions, and that this self-identification then drives more positive views of vision statement and greater job commitment. In order to weigh the relative merits of these two competing models, we propose conducting a follow-up study that specifically recruits individuals who do not occupy formal leadership positions, but who do consider themselves leaders. With a large sample of these individuals, it would become possible to draw more powerful conclusions about the connections between perceptions of organizational vision statements, self-identification as a leader, and job engagement.

If our original hypothesis is shown to have merit, then an additional observation from this study becomes even more intriguing: only 11% of respondents reported that they strongly agree that their organization’s vision statement is inspiring. Our hypothesis suggests that concerted efforts to boost that percentage could increase the number of individuals in libraries who self-identify as leaders.

Notes
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16. Ibid., 111.


Bibliography


