

Guest Editorial

Inspiration for Academic Museums: Two Decades of Academic Library Leadership Research

Craig Hadley

After years in the field and countless conversations with colleagues, I have come to appreciate that academic museums and libraries have much in common. From organizational structures to digital and physical collection challenges, staff in both campus departments can benefit greatly from enhanced collaboration and research sharing. Academic museum professionals can learn from the rich research base in leadership studies created by academic librarians, while academic librarians can leverage the work of visual thinking strategies and museum studies curricula to enhance student and faculty engagement.

In essence, this brief opinion is all about leveraging new perspectives and the power of reframing our present situation to solve problems in new ways. To borrow from my own past experience, I once found myself trying to reframe and reinterpret a situation over twenty years ago in the small cockpit of a two-seater Cessna 152 aircraft. Like many student pilots before me, I ended up losing track of my position at some point during a solo cross-country trip from Joliet to Champaign, Illinois. Climbing to a higher altitude where I could see the landscape differently and improve radio communications made all the difference. This was particularly true in an era where stopwatches, paper maps, and plotters in the cockpit were standard navigational aids before GPS was commonplace.

Thanks to the patience and support of air traffic controllers in Champaign that morning, I was able to quickly and safely reestablish my position and make it to the airport. That experience—of feeling lost and vulnerable yet searching calmly for a way to reframe the situation differently—has stuck with me after all these years.

In academia, we often talk about different lenses or theoretical perspectives that can shape or reshape our approach to a problem or an issue; in my case today, that problem happens to be academic museum leadership. After more than fifteen years in the profession at three different higher education institutions, I have come to recognize this as both a problem of practice and a critical gap in the professional academic museum literature. Sure, there are plenty of trade magazines and white papers that refer to leadership within the broader museum profession, but nothing that resembles a comprehensive research study for academic museums.

Academic libraries have provided one of the most crucial lenses through which I can better understand my own profession and where it might be going. Indeed, our two fields are more closely aligned than many of us might realize, given the similarities in organizational structures,

* Craig Hadley is Executive Director and Chief Curator of the Dennis Museum Center at Northwestern Michigan College, email: hadley.craig@gmail.com. ©2023 Craig Hadley, Attribution-NonCommercial (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) CC BY-NC.

digital and physical collection concerns, and the various audiences we serve. For instance, a 2016 white paper entitled “Prospects and Strategies for Deep Collaboration in the Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums Sector,” by Dr. Jill Deupi and Dr. Charles Eckman, outlined a number of areas in which our two fields might more diligently align work around three common areas.¹ Deupi and Eckman described these collaborative areas for leaders to think about as teaching and learning, collections sharing and exhibitions, and strategic alignments.

From my perspective as a museum professional, one of the most fascinating aspects of academic libraries is their continued persistence to ground articles and findings in thoughtful, empirical study. Since the year 2000, over twenty-two research studies pertaining to academic library leadership have been identified, including many journal articles and dissertations that build on one another in an appropriate and predictable manner.² However, searching for comparable qualitative and quantitative leadership studies in the allied field of academic museums will yield disappointingly few results.

Academic library leadership studies in recent years have employed a variety of research approaches, including transformational leadership theory as well as Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal’s four frames of leadership model.³ Studies within the academic library field have been conducted for a variety of reasons in service to leadership: to reveal a more thorough understanding of organizational structures, train and prepare the next generation of library leaders, build more comprehensive roadmaps and strategic plans, and trace the connection between library leaders and the larger university structure within higher education.

Stepping outside of my very small and very insular field has been a spectacularly rewarding experience. Given the uncertainty surrounding enrollments and program delivery in higher education, there is a significant need to understand how academic museum leaders operate within higher education, particularly since many museum leaders will reach retirement eligibility by 2030. Like our academic library counterparts, leadership alignment impacts everything from succession planning and organizational effectiveness to team performance and college-community integration of resources.

Please know that I am sincerely grateful for the leadership research that my academic library colleagues have already completed. You are truly paving the way for future studies in our respective fields.

Notes

1. J. Deupi and C. Eckman. 2016, “Prospects and Strategies for Deep Collaboration in the Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums Sector,” University of Miami, 1–33, <https://scholarship.miami.edu/esploro/outputs/report/Prospects-and-Strategies-for-Deep-Collaboration/991031447656302976>.

2. Murtaza Ashiq, Shafiq Ur Rehman, Muhammad Safdar, and Haider Ali, “Academic Library Leadership in the Dawn of the New Millennium: A Systematic Literature Review,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 47, no. (2021): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2021.102355>.

3. Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal. *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2021.