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Humanism: Reflections on a Changing Profession

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Librarianship in America typically has been regarded as a woman’s occupation, and the lack of prestige, low pay, and opportunities for the advancement for women in the profession has been well documented in the library literature. The first area of concern—the lack of job prestige—is still unaddressed and particularly vexing, considering the gains women have made in all the professions generally and the fact that librarianship is transitioning into a technical (e.g., masculine) field. Historically in this country, male-dominated fields have been awarded higher status and better pay. The advances that women librarians have made in terms of economic and professional parity with their male counterparts are a much brighter story. This chapter will focus on the ties between library feminism and second wave feminism that led to this success, and examine the results of a 2012 survey of over 200 academic library women administrators on the impact of feminism on the profession.

Works on recent library history (Moran, Marshall, Rathbun-Grubb, 2010; Hildenbrand, 2000) have shown the connections between the struggle for gender equality in the United States and the struggle within librarianship to define itself as both a female-majority and a female-led profession. Moran (2009) has described the slow but generally upward rise of women into leadership positions, particularly at the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), where women now make up the majority (60 percent) of library
directors. This gain is similar to those made in other women’s professions such as nursing and primary and secondary school teaching.

Academic librarianship, the focus of this chapter, is different from nursing and teaching. For most of its history, the profession was male and its hierarchical organizational structure reflects this. At the top tier—the level of library director or dean—academic librarians are more similar to CIOs or CEOs in terms of their job responsibilities than they are to heads of other academic divisions (Deyrup, 2004). Thus, the stakes are much higher than many other “women’s” professions.

Women began to enter the field of academic librarianship in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. These middle class, educated women were recruited by male library directors because they were an inexpensive, competent labor force. Fennell, whose dissertation *Career Profile of Women Directors of the Largest Academic Libraries in the United States: an Analysis and Description of Determinants* draws on the work of Justin Winsor, quotes Winsor as saying that “women were wanted in this field because they lighten our labour, they are equal to our work and for the money they cost…they are infinitely better than equivalent salaries will produce by the other sex” (Fennell, 1978, 1). Their numbers in academic libraries varied according to the economic situation of the time; for example, in the 1920s 90 percent of all librarians were women, whereas after World War II this number fell sharply as women librarians were replaced by male veterans who needed jobs (Fennell, 1978, 1). The number of women academic librarians again increased during the 1970s, and in 2013 women again form the majority of the academic library workforce.

Generally, American feminism is seen as having developed in three phases: first wave feminism, which was largely concerned with women’s suffrage and the temperance movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; second wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, otherwise known as radical feminism, which was involved primarily with gaining economic and civil rights for women; and third
wave feminism, which focused on issues such as work-life balance, multiculturalism, and social equity; and what might be called new humanism or post-feminism, which is just taking form.

Of these movements, radical feminism has had the most impact on academic librarianship. The 1960s and 1970s saw major advances for women with the passage of affirmative action legislation, specifically, Title VII and Title IX. Title VII, passed in 1964, prohibited workplace discrimination “based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin” (United States Department of Labor Title IX, Education Amendments of 1972). Title IX prohibits discrimination “based on sex in education programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance” (Fast Facts). With the expansion of Title IX, women were allowed to enroll in previously male-only universities and colleges and began to make inroads into professions that were traditionally regarded as male, such as business, engineering, and medicine. They also gained the right to sue their institutions for gender discrimination.

It was also a time of upheaval for many women as they struggled to reconcile having a family and a career. For these women, their personal life could not be separated from their professional life, and the feminist rhetoric of that time accurately reflected their situation. As Mack-Canty writes,

Feminists of the second wave adopted as their motto ‘the personal is the political.’ In so doing they challenged women’s exclusion from the public world of politics and economics, while reintroducing the personal experience of being female into the political discourses of the day. They worked to extend the meaning of the ‘political’ to include areas of social life previously treated as ‘personal’ and positioned in the private realm of the household (Mack-Canty 2004, 154).

Radical feminism also coincided with what was in many respects a golden age for U.S. academic libraries; there was money available to spend on books, and libraries were among the most technologically advanced institutions in the country. It was also a time of great frustration for many women who were prevented from entering higher management. Much of the activism of women
librarians of that period was in fact rooted in the tactics of radical feminism. Hildenbrand comments that the “upsurge in library feminism… [was] attested to by the creation within the ALA” of the Feminist Task Force (1970) Women’s Library Workers (1975) and the Committee on the Status of Women in Librarianship (1976) (Hildenbrand 2000, 53). It was only through the actions of organizations like the American Library Association, which gave women the opportunity to gain professional experience through mentoring, networking, and by serving in leadership positions on committees, and legislation such as Title IX, that women were able to advance within academic librarianship. Golub writes about the discrepancy between the status of men and women librarians, noting that in 1983 the first comprehensive study of librarians for ALA’s committee on the status of women in librarianship, completed by Heim and Eastbrook in 1983, found that 78.3 percent of ALA’s members were female and 21.7 percent were male. While almost half of men and 30.4 percent of women were then categorized as administrators, by 1997 “there was three times the number of women in management positions than men” (Golub 2010).

Men, in fact, have done an extremely good job leading the profession. What is considered today to be the “gold standard” in libraries was a uniquely American (e.g., male) invention. The first private lending library was established in the eighteenth century by Benjamin Franklin; the first national library, the Library of Congress, belonged to Thomas Jefferson; and the current public library system was the result of Andrew Carnegie’s generous endowment. Although academic libraries have their roots in German nineteenth-century research universities, and were organized primarily as departmental collections, the influence of a strong civic public library system in this country encouraged university librarians to experiment with new models of service. An example of this is the “open stack” arrangement of collections, which was developed first in public libraries and later adopted by the academic library community.

Male librarians then, as now, were able to advance the profession because they were confident in their own ability to lead—and they continue to do so. In 2011 40 percent of library dean and director positions were still held by men, although men account for 17 percent of academic library positions
Several explanations have been given for this. The first is historical. Women only began to enter the U.S. workforce in great numbers in the 1960s and 1970s, and academic librarianship, although composed of a female-majority workforce, did not become a female-led profession until the twenty-first century. One can argue, therefore, that there have been very few women who could provide leadership models for a younger generation. The second is cultural. Studies have shown that men and women are socialized differently and therefore lead differently. As Helgeson notes, “social role theory states that differences in men’s and women’s communication styles have to do with the social roles men and women hold in our society, the male role being agentic and the female role being communal.” Helgeson goes on to write that “according to status theory, men’s communication of their higher status and women’s communication is a function of their lower status. Men’s task behavior and women’s positive social behavior fit their social roles.” Even in today’s society, girls are rewarded for being empathetic, nurturing, and collegial, whereas boys are praised for being assertive and self-assured, characteristics which are identified with leadership and which still are rewarded at the workplace ((270-271).

Ambivalence as to whether men and women should be judged by the same criteria has been a consistent theme throughout feminist history. First wave feminism began as a movement that was closely linked to the temperance movement and a significant argument both for and against universal suffrage was that women were the “better sex” and should be either included (or excluded) from the vote for this reason. The leaders of the radical feminist movement rejected the idea that there were significant differences between men and women and as a result, never satisfactorily addressed family issues, in particular family caregiving—a task that falls primarily on women. In 2012 this issue has not been resolved, although women constitute almost 47 percent of the United States workforce (see the statistics provided by Catalyst.org http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/statistical-overview-women-workplace).

Researchers, such as Eagly (2003, 171) have argued that differences between men and women are a “culturally constructed phenomenon” and that male and female behavior is determined by the situational
position of men and women within society, rather than the result of biological differences. Eagly in particular has done studies which show that in “organizational settings, behavior…lose much of its gender-stereotypical character” (Eagly, 2003 171)

What is considered to constitute “good” leadership is largely based upon role models that were established by men. Koenig et al. wrote:

The implications of the masculinity of leader roles for prejudice against female leaders are straightforward: Men fit cultural constructs of leadership better than women do and thus have better access to leader roles and face fewer challenges in becoming successful in them. Despite some overall change toward more androgynous beliefs about leadership, stereotyping continues to contribute to the labyrinthine challenges that women encounter in attaining roles that yield substantial power and authority. Given the strongly masculine cultural stereotype of leadership quantified by this meta-analysis, these challenges are likely to continue for some time to come.” (Koenig, 637)

Thirty years ago, it was widely believed that leadership traits were gender-specific. For example, Robert Swisher, Rosemary Dumont, and Calvin Boyer (1985, 230), noted that “professions dominated by women such as librarianship are widely believed to emphasize “feminine” qualities such as nurturance, empathy, understanding, helpfulness, and intuitiveness….Managerial positions …are characterized by such personal attributes as decisiveness, consistency, objectivity, emotional stability, and analytical ability.” More recently, Peter Hernon, Ronald Powell, and Arthur Young, published an influential two-part article “University Library Directors in the Association of Research Libraries: The Next Generation” that examined leadership traits among academic library leaders. These authors concluded that there was very little difference between the leadership styles of men and women. Herbert White refuted the idea that women led differently from men, writing in Library Journal that “I think of good management as a sex-neutral process, in which the gender of the participant is irrelevant.” He noted that “good library managers” must have characteristics of fairness, consistency, the ability to grasp new ideas when articulated by others, open-mindedness, ambition, the ability to communicate, leadership, idealism, the ability to set priorities and to delegate, and courage” (White 1987, 58).
Unlike their male counterparts, influential feminists such as Betty Turock, former ALA president and professor at Rutgers SCILS, and Paula T. Kaufman, now dean of libraries at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, took a very different approach. Both women predicted that leadership would indeed change as women became more secure in their role in higher library management. Turock wrote that librarianship was entering a “new stage of leadership” in which “women’s values enter leadership paradigms” (Turock 2001, 128). Kaufman believed that “organizational cultures are also being transformed to a gentler, or in terms of stereotypes, to a more ‘feminine’ style of leadership. Some authors suggest that the nurturing management behavior shown by new library directors, regardless of gender, suggest that women are influencing and changing the library workplace rather than adopting the stereotypical male role model” (Kaufman 1993, 122). In part, Kaufman and Turock were responding to the emergence of third wave feminism in the 1980s and 1990s. Third wave feminism was adopted as a term to describe diverse, often localized women’s movements that focused on a variety of issues ranging from eco-feminism and post-colonial feminism to youth feminism (Mack Canty 167). Most importantly, third-wave feminist theory rejected a dualistic conceptual framework (white/black, male/female, etc.), preferring an approach that was more inclusive.

The lack of discussion of third wave feminism in the library leadership and management literature is not surprising. Unlike second wave feminism, which enabled female academic librarians to move into high-level administrative position in the mid- to late-twentieth century, third wave feminism as a movement focuses on inclusiveness and personal choice.

Because the generation who benefited the most from Title VII and Title IX has for the most part now retired, it seemed appropriate to ask how the two subsequent generations of academic library administrators, those born in the between 1940-1960 and 1961-1980 perceive the feminist movement and what impact it had on their professional careers. To begin to answer these questions, the author conducted a survey of women academic library administrators intended to elicit responses about their perception of gender discrimination or bias at their institutions, whether they had achieved a satisfactory balance.
between their professional and family life, and how they chose to lead and manage their employees. Although the sample size was small, the data collected provides information about the educational background, personal values, and career choices these women made. Lastly, it provides some evidence, although largely anecdotal, that the women library administrators, although aware of the goals and strategies of radical feminism, are actually entering what Turock and Kaufman referred as the next stage of feminism, one focused on humanistic values.

The survey link was posted through listservs of various associations, such as LLAMA, ACRL administrators, ARL administrators, and ALA women’s issues lists, and the survey was completed by over two hundred women (Deyrup 2012). A snapshot of the survey participants shows a group of women who have been extremely successful in their professional careers. 43 percent identified themselves as library deans, or directors, 16 percent as associate directors or deans, 6 percent as assistant directors or deans and 34 percent as department heads. One individual was an assistant vice president. The greatest percentage of respondents (43 percent) worked at large (over 10,000 FTE) institutions. Of the 204 individuals who responded, 25 percent identified themselves as working at an ARL library and approximately 65 percent at an ACRL library. The majority (46 percent) had more than eleven years of experience in library administration. Respondents principally were from the Northeast (34 percent) and the South (30 percent). For most of these women, librarianship was their first career (almost 65 percent). The majority of women were in their peak earning years. 7 percent were 65 or older; 40 percent were between the ages 55 and 64, 27 percent were between the ages of 45 and 54, 18 percent were between the ages of 35 and 44, and 8 percent were between the ages of 25 and 34.

What follows below is a summary of the survey findings.

Observation 1: Women library administrators value the academic life

The majority of these women administrators were drawn into librarianship because of their desire to work in an academic environment (86 percent). Although the youngest group of women (between the
ages of 25 and 34) is a much smaller pool, comprising only a little more than 8 percent of the survey group, they nevertheless constituted the greatest number of women who were drawn into librarianship because of what they saw as the opportunity for administrative responsibilities. They and the 35-44 age group were most drawn to librarianship because of the possibilities for work flexibility (18 percent and 25 percent respectively). Those drawn to academic librarianship because of the opportunity to work in their subject areas tended to be the oldest, comprising 21 percent of the 55-64 age group and 20 percent of the 65 and older group. It was these groups that were most likely to have a doctorate in their subject area. This stands to reason, as librarianship has changed in the past thirty years from a largely bibliographic to a more technically oriented field. The majority of respondents valued education and were highly educated, with nearly all having a master’s degree. This is far higher than the percentage of individuals in the U.S. who hold master’s degrees, which is 9 percent (Perez-Pena, 2012).

Observation 2: Academic librarianship is conducive to raising a family

A little over 61 percent of respondents were married and 16 percent were divorced or widowed. These statistics are different than those reflected by the population as a whole. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, a little over 55 percent of women were married and approximately 21 percent were widowed or divorced (U.S. Census, Marital Status of the Population by Sex, 1900–2010). The majority of these women academic library administrators (57 percent) have children. There was an increase in number of the children per age category overall but it is not a simple line. The majority of women were able to juggle both family and a career. This was true as far as the statistical data of the survey showed, and also was apparent from individual responses. The majority of librarians who took time off to care for children were those in the 35-44 age range (50 percent) followed by the 65 and older age range (45 percent), the 45-54 age range (36 percent) and the 55-65 age range (33 percent). In addition, the majority of women who had children shared parenting responsibilities (82 percent).
Observation 3: Women academic library administrators typically report to women directors or deans, who then typically report to male provosts and presidents

Almost three-quarters of the survey respondents said their dean or director is a woman. This corresponds with the literature, which shows a steady increase of the number of women in high-level academic library administrative positions from the 1980s forward. The majority of women reported that they had been mentored during their career (62 percent), with 78 percent reporting that their mentor had been a woman. While a common phenomenon in academia, mentoring has been especially important in academic librarianship because of the opposition women have historically faced in trying to advance their careers through the university structure. Respondents were divided as to whether the appointment of more women academic library deans and directors was the result of the impact of second wave feminism or due to other reasons. The most vocal in their comments were administrators who were in the 65 and older and those in the 55-64 age range (who also were predominantly deans or directors). Several respondents noted that although administrative opportunities had opened up for women at the academic library level, this was not true at the higher level of university administration. This was certainly true from the statistics generated from this survey. 69 percent of these academic librarians reported to a male provost and 71 percent to a male president at their institutions.

While many commented on the discrimination female academic librarians had faced in the past, the majority believed that men and women now have an equal chance of advancement at their institution; 81 percent of respondents believe that women are as likely to obtain top leadership positions at their institution as men; however, there was a difference among the percentage of younger and older women who believed that women are as likely as men to rise to top leadership positions in libraries and that barriers no longer exist, the highest being the 25-34 age range and the lowest the 35-44 and 45-54 age range. 78 percent stated that they had experienced no discrimination in their career at the library because of their gender. The majority also agreed with the statement that women and men are treated equally at their institution.
Observation 4: The biggest impediment women face today in rising through the administrative ranks is not gender discrimination

Although 42 percent of the survey respondents who answered this question took gender discrimination seriously as a barrier to advancement, a greater number (60 percent) believed that ageism followed by family responsibilities (47 percent) were the real problems. Not surprisingly, the group that felt most discriminated against consisted of those individuals in the 65 or older range (40 percent), while those who felt the least discriminated against were in the 25-34 age range (12 percent). The percent of perception of discrimination increased as the age group increased.

Observation 5: Survey respondents see salary equity as a pressing issue for academic librarians

When asked to rank four issues in order of importance: gender and civil rights; employee benefits such as the family and medical leave act, flextime and childcare; job advancement; and equal pay, the majority of respondents (59 percent) chose salary equity as the most pressing issue for the profession. Salary equity became more important as age increased; gender equity and civil rights were ranked less important as age increased. While women academic librarians have gotten closer to having parity. In 2012 the average salary for women academic librarians was 96% of that for male academic librarians, an increase of almost 2 percent since 2003. However a 2011-2012 survey showed that men, even if their female colleagues had more experience, still received in 9 out of 10 case a higher salary” (Fact Sheet 2012, Library Workers).

Observation 6: Survey respondents, independent of age, attribute their professional advancement to a mastery of information technology

Librarians in their 50s, 60s, and early 70s entered the profession at a time when the focus of academic libraries was on collection building; this is reflected in the number of second master’s degrees and doctorates held by women from this generation surveyed for this chapter. Today, academic libraries are considered to be a suite of services, many of them driven by information technology. The uneasy
relationship between the fields of information technology, which is male-dominated, and librarianship, which is female-dominated, has been explored in the literature with no satisfactory result. This tension is also reflected in the discrepancy between the “higher paying male-dominated IT related jobs and lower-paying female librarian jobs” ( ) and, as Golub has noted in speaking of the LIS curriculum, “It is argued that the increasing focus on information and technology is an attempt to shift the image of the profession away from the realm of service that has been viewed as feminine to associate the profession with functions considered to be more masculine” (Golub 2010). ##

Although this shift may be the case, 54 percent of the respondents identified themselves as being proficient and 46 percent as being comfortable with information technology. Over 60 percent believed that their knowledge of information technology had contributed to their career advancement. Many prided themselves as being first or in the lead in adopting technology at their library. Several connected learning new technologies with the ability to embrace change. The youngest age group, 25-34, saw a direct correlation between their technical skill sets and their promotion with their institutions.

Observation 7: The majority of survey respondents describe themselves as feminists

Over three-quarters of the respondents described themselves as feminists, with about a quarter disagreeing. Among the five age groups, the most negative responses came from the 35-44 age group. The least number of women who identified themselves as feminists were from the South (65 percent) and the highest were from the Midwest (83 percent). Of those who did not identify themselves as feminists, almost 14 percent felt that feminist goals had been achieved, 86 percent did not identify with feminist rhetoric, and 17 percent did not identify with feminist objectives.

Observation 8: Women differ in their perception of the impact the women’s movement has had on academic librarianship.

The majority of women (almost 64 percent) agreed that the women’s movement had increased opportunities for women in librarianship; however, the responses of the 25-34 age group were
significantly different from all the others; the majority of those who answered this question disagreed. For this question, respondents were also given the opportunity to comment. On the whole, these responses were ambiguous. Several respondents stressed that librarianship was a women’s profession and therefore not directly affected by a radical feminist agenda.

Observation 9  Women library administrators are generally aware of significant societal gains achieved by radical feminism, but are largely unaware of the impact federal law (principally Title IX) had on their own chances for advancement in the profession

The passage of Title IX in 1972 probably had a greater impact on shaping gender equity law and furthering the advancement of women academic librarians than any other piece of legislation; however, regardless of their age, the majority of survey respondents either never had heard of Title IX or were confused as to its significance. Women, particularly those of the older generations, had much more of a grasp of the impact radical feminism had had on their profession and of the sacrifices of the women who came before them.

Observation 10: Men and women lead differently

As mentioned earlier, the majority of women who participated in this survey were either deans/directors or associate deans/directors and had a great deal of leadership experience. When asked to rank the qualities they considered most important in a leader, the women administrators placed communication skills first, followed by having a vision for the organization, and the ability to tolerate change. In many respects this ranking is not dissimilar to the results of studies mentioned earlier such as those undertaken by Hernon, Powell and Young.

Over 60 percent of respondents said they drew on specific “feminine” skills or traits in their leadership. The respondents then were asked to qualify their answers. Although some women felt uncomfortable with the term “feminine,” preferring “humanistic,” the most overwhelming leadership trait that these women identified as “feminine” was empathy, which was mentioned by 121 respondents. Other
common “feminine” traits were consensus-building, listening, and compassion. In their remarks, the respondents stressed that their leadership style focused on collegiality, collaboration, tolerance, and flexibility. Several observed that their maternal experience played a significant role in their managerial career. Others contrasted their own “horizontal” style of management with the “vertical” style of management exhibited by their male colleagues.

Earlier in the chapter, the author addressed some of the effects of second wave or radical feminism on the academic library profession and the difficulties women library administrators had and still have in defining what leadership is and how they should lead. Library literature published between the 1980s and 2000s showed the ambivalence in how librarians of both sexes saw women in academic library leadership positions and whether female or male leadership styles were preferable. These traits were judged as being situational (Eagly, 2003), undifferentiated (Hernon et al. 2001) and male-centric (Turock, 2001). This survey suggests that a younger generation of women, whom the author would refer to as “new humanists,” are finding a different way to lead. The survey provides only a snapshot of a particular period of time, 2012, but it gives a complex view of female academic library administrators, most of whom seem to have found a satisfactory balance between work and family. Perhaps one of the more surprising results of the survey was the ability of these women to acknowledge the role second wave feminism has played within the larger society, while being ambivalent as to its impact on librarianship. Equally surprising was the ability of these women administrators to recognize their own leadership traits as being distinctively different from men and using them to promote a humanistic work environment.

In many ways, the milestones that occurred over the last hundred or so years in U.S. women’s history and academic library history mirror each other, particularly since librarianship is a “woman’s profession.” The results of this survey perhaps points to issues the library literature can continue to explore, issues such as salary equity and professional advancement, while at the same time giving a fresh
look at others—such as ageism and the effect of technology on the career trajectory of female academic librarians. More importantly, it may lead to a reexamination of whether there are distinctly male and female leadership traits—one of the original questions that was brought up at the beginning of this chapter.

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