So You Want to Be a Leader? Examining Pathways to Special Collections Administration

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This article seeks to understand the current state of the field of special collections library administration in the United States. Using a dataset gathered through publicly available information about special collections directors from the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), Independent Research Libraries Association (IRLA), and the Oberlin Group institutional members, the authors explore the educational backgrounds of directors, the types of positions they held prior to taking on their current roles, and the effect of gender on leadership advancement. This article also discusses the similarities and differences between institution types as well as promotions within institutions and across types of institutions.

Introduction

Special collections educational programs may prepare librarians and archivists to get their first position, but they offer little guidance on career advancement and the skills and background necessary for special collections leadership. That preparation often comes anecdotally at conferences and through conversations with colleagues or mentors. Since there is little formal leadership and management training for many library administrators, the authors wanted to explore what educational backgrounds and professional pathways were most likely to lead someone to special collections administration. Given the recent focus on the historical feminization of the profession, the authors were also interested in seeing how gender may impact administrative prospects for special collections practitioners. Questions specifically explored were whether those backgrounds and pathways could change depending on institutional type, if administrators must commit to changing institutions and geographic areas to advance, and how easy it is to move between institution types; these findings were also compared according to the administrator's gender.

Findings reveal that the most common degrees for special collections administrators are the MLIS with a second, subject-related master's degree. A wide variety of professional backgrounds can lead to special collections leadership, but those based purely in public services are underrepresented. While there are more women leaders in this data set than men, women are not represented at the same level that would be expected given their predominance in the profession. This glimpse into the state of current special collections leadership in the United

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States can serve as a foundation on which to build future research on the role and background of special collections administrators and pathways to special collections leadership.

Literature Review

Much is still unexplored in the literature about promotion, administration, and leadership in special collections departments and institutions. While it is generally accepted wisdom that special collections librarians need a subject master's degree in addition to an MLIS and must be willing to geographically relocate to advance in the field, this has not been studied in a comprehensive way. Neither has the population of those with PhDs as opposed to MLIS degrees in the field, especially since the advent of the CLIR post-doctoral program designed to give humanities PhD graduates the "chance to develop research tools, resources, and services while exploring new career opportunities."[1] Literature on promotion, administration, previous types of experiences, and gender in library leadership tends to focus on library directors rather than on special collections. This literature review considers studies of libraries, rare books, manuscripts, and archives, as these can all fall under the heading of special collections.

Professional organizations do not currently offer an official stance on the ideal type and number of degrees required of a special collections administrator. The Rare Book and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) of the Association of College and Research Libraries publishes competencies for special collections practitioners. The RBMS Competencies do not specify how any of these competencies are to be acquired, instead noting that "While this document does not assume that a degree in library and information studies is required for appointment at the professional level, it recognizes the important role played by library schools in creating a knowledge base…. Advanced subject degrees may be appropriate as an additional qualification for specialized positions."[2] The Competencies also include a section on management, supervision, and leadership, which, with 14 guidelines, is the longest section in the document. The Society of American Archivists Guidelines for a Graduate Program in Archival Studies also include leadership and administration as one concept that is part of core archival knowledge.[3] This document differs from the RBMS document in that it is specifically aimed at educational programs centered on archival studies. The Academy of Certified Archivists, which notes that their members find certification useful for "increasing career opportunities," requires a master's degree of some kind to qualify for certification but does not specify what type.[4]

Previous studies provide some information about education for general library administration and leadership. Many of these focus on library directors at ARL institutions. Condic found that the number of ARL directors who held an MLIS and another master's was equivalent to the number who held an MLIS degree alone. While ARL library administrators in 2019 were less likely to hold MLIS degrees than in previous studies, the number holding PhDs remained the same.[5] Studies have also explored education for special collections practitioners more generally. In a study of entry-level special collections positions between 2004 and 2009, an MLIS degree was required just over 50% of the time, while a second master's degree was required 8% of the time and a PhD 1%. Among job ads that included preferred degree qualifications, 82% wanted a specialized advanced degree beyond the MLIS.[6] A study of job ads for archivists from 2006 to 2014 found that 68% required a master's degree.[7] The MLIS is still the most common degree for special collections librarians: 89% of those responding to the 2015 RBMS membership survey hold one. Within the same survey, department heads of special collections were most likely, of all the professional subfields, to have a subject mas-

ter's degree. The RBMS survey also found that "although only 11% of all respondents hold a doctoral degree, 40% of associate or assistant directors, 35% of library directors, and 35% of curators of 'mixed or other formats' report having this degree …[W]hile men make up just 23% of survey respondents, they account for half of doctoral degrees."[8]

Literature on career paths to special collections administration is scarce, as are specific studies of the types of requirements for positions in various special collections fields. When Colleen S. Harris explored whether library administrators at baccalaureate degree granting institutions perceived their previous positions as preparation for leadership roles, she found no particular path or position that those surveyed found especially helpful.[9] Forty one percent of ARL library directors who responded to a survey indicated that they believed it was necessary for them to earn an additional degree beyond the MLIS in order to achieve their positions as administrators.[10] While the skills needed for special collections administrators no doubt differ from that of those working in special collections at large, Hansen found that entry-level positions most often listed skills and qualifications related to a variety of areas, with management and administration being the fifth most common, required in one-third of the job ads and preferred in two-thirds.[11] It is interesting to note that management and administration is a part of so many entry-level job requirements, meaning that many special collections librarians may be gaining this experience early in their careers, and thus be well-prepared for leadership roles both within and beyond special collections. Warren and Scoulas found that almost all special collections public services job advertisements that they reviewed required supervisory experience, suggesting that this is common in this section of the field.[12]

There are numerous studies of gender, library directors, and leadership, usually focusing on ARL libraries and almost exclusively on white women rather than minority leaders.[13] Although there are far more women in academic library leadership positions than in previous years, women are underrepresented as leaders;[14] 83% of librarians are women, but women hold only 58% of management positions in ARL libraries.[15] While women hold the majority of library directorships,[16] these numbers do not achieve parity with the percentage of women in the library/archives field overall. There have not been similar in-depth studies of special collections administrators, but surveys from membership organizations provide relevant data. A survey conducted by the Women Archivists Section of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) in 2017 found that 82% of the archivists surveyed identified as women.[17] In the most recent survey of RBMS membership in 2015, women made up 74% of the respondents, an increase from the previous survey of fifteen years before.[18] In the same RBMS survey, men held 30% of the library director positions, 40% of the associate or assistant director positions, and 38% of department head positions; 39% of male respondents were administrators of some kind, while only 30% of women were.[19] The work of early women special collections librarians has often been elided or uncredited,[20] meaning that it is harder to trace their contributions to the field, and a distinction between the roles typically held by men and those by women may still continue. There is wide agreement between special collections administrators and their reports about the value and goals of the special collections profession; however, women feel more strongly than men about creating relationships with other departments outside of special collections. [21] Women library managers report doing more emotional labor than their male colleagues.[22] Women library staff also feel that male leadership receives more institutional support than female leadership.[23]

Studies have also explored why librarians take other positions, and interest in promotion and administration is one reason. Promotion and salary are important reasons why librarians leave institutions and take other positions;[24] the RBMS membership survey found that those with second master's or PhDs earned higher salaries and that men had higher salaries than women.[25] Better opportunities for career development and growth are important factors in librarians' decision to take new positions.[26] The few opportunities for advancement, or feeling "stuck," can lead to burnout and librarians leaving positions or the field entirely.[27]

Methodology

Data were collected between January 18, 2021, and March 2, 2021, after the University of Kentucky IRB determined that the project was not human subject research on January 15, 2021. The authors decided to focus on three groups in their analysis: The Association of Research Libraries (ARL), the Independent Research Libraries Association (IRLA), and the Oberlin Group. ARL is "a membership organization of libraries and archives in major public and private universities, federal government agencies, and large public institutions in Canada and the US."[28] Most ARL libraries are part of larger academic institutions and are Research 1 or other advanced degree–granting institutions. There are 125 members in the United States and Canada. IRLA was founded "to address the future of independent, privately supported research libraries;"[29] most of its members are not affiliated with larger institutions. There are nineteen members, mainly located in the United States. The Oberlin Group is an organization of leading liberal arts college libraries.[30] Most Oberlin Group institutions have no graduate programs and are teaching- rather than research-focused. There are eighty members, all located in the United States. Although some Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are included on the ARL and Oberlin Group lists, a majority of them are not included in this dataset.

The authors chose these three groups for a variety of reasons. First, each had an easily accessible list of members, which helped to prevent the inclusion or exclusion of any specific institutions based on unintentional biases the authors hold, whether related to geography, size, perceived prestige, public/private funding status, etc. Each group also represented a specific type of organization, meaning the authors could compare data across the different types of institutions. Although these three lists limit the types of institutions studied—for instance, mid-sized, non-flagship state institutions appear on none of them—the authors determined that using existing lists would be helpful for future comparative research. The lists are also well known in the special collections community. This is not the first study to combine these groups; the 2010 OCLC "Taking Our Pulse" survey used these three groups in addition to the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) and the Research Libraries Group (RLG) partnership.[31] While many leadership studies focus on ARL libraries, the authors did not want to limit themselves given that the group is not representative of all special collections work.

For each institution in the selected groups, the authors searched the library website to identify the head of special collections (or similar title), relying on library directories and organizational charts. In all of these datasets, in cases where the authors could either not identify a position such as head of special collections or could not find the name of the person holding it, the authors labeled this "unfound." If the position was open, the authors labeled it "vacant." For the Oberlin Group dataset, the authors knew that many libraries would be too small to have a true head of special collections. The authors thus decided to include libraries from this list only if they had at least three people in a special collections department. This

allowed the authors to identify people whose jobs include both intellectual and strategic leadership for special collections, as well as supervision of staff, tasks similar to those of the heads of institutions on the other organizational lists.

The authors included only special collections departments or libraries that reported to the library administration in the ARL and Oberlin Group datasets. The authors did not include independent libraries affiliated with academic institutions located on their campuses that did not report through library administration (unless they were IRLA members, in which case they appear in that dataset); for example, the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin does not, according to online organizational charts, report to the University Libraries, so it is not included here. The authors also did not include library or archives branches of NARA or any Canadian institutions in the dataset given the differences in hiring in governmental and non-US institutions. In several cases in both the ARL (nine) and Oberlin Group (one) datasets, the authors identified more than one special collections library or department per institution. In order not to skew the data set toward one institution's hiring preferences, the authors included no more than three special collections libraries or departments per institution. The authors tried to include the largest and most general special collections, as they could determine this information, for each institution.

After identifying the name of a head of special collections, the authors used their institutional profile, LinkedIn, and Google searches for information such as press releases about new appointments to identify the degrees they held and their three most recent positions, including the title of each position, institution, and type of position.[32] The authors also inferred gender presentation based on pronouns listed on websites and other available information; the authors were prepared to include non-binary and trans identifying librarians in this analysis, but did not find any in the dataset using the selected search means. The authors had also hoped to include race in this analysis but were unable to ethically or responsibly determine this information through their chosen method of data collection. When identifying degrees, the authors recorded whether the person had one of the following: MLIS, MA, MLIS and MA, MLIS and PhD, and PhD.[33] The authors also recorded when they could not find this information. They did not record information on whether the person was or had been a certified archivist (CA). The authors attempted to identify the last three positions prior to their current job for each head of special collections in the dataset. They did not include internships, student worker positions, or part-time jobs in this analysis if they were identified as such.

After identifying previous positions, the authors coded each as one of the following based solely on the position title: administrative, public services, technical services, curatorial, mixed, administration-public services, administration- technical services, administration-curatorial, and other. The authors described administrative jobs as being a head or assistant head of a department. Public service jobs were those with titles that involved research support, reading rooms, and instruction; technical services positions focused on processing, cataloging, and metadata; and curatorial positions focused on collecting and collection building, including the position of university archivist. Mixed jobs involved multiple areas already identified. Administrative hybrid jobs were those aligned with a specific aspect of special collections work, such as "head of technical services." Other indicated something not listed, such as a research librarian outside of special collections or a teaching faculty position.

Throughout the data collection and coding process, the authors consulted on any questions to make sure that they were coding materials the same way. Each author also reviewed

the coding done by the other to be sure they were in agreement. Following coding, results were analyzed using Excel and basic statistical analysis.

Results and Discussion

Overall Dataset

Of the 116 ARL special collections departments investigated, 105 position holders (90.5% of the dataset) were identified, while 10 were unknown or unclear (8.6%) and 1 was vacant (0.9%). There were nine institutions where multiple departments were recorded as discussed in the methodology section.[34] Of the eighteen IRLA institutions investigated, 14 position holders (77.8% of the dataset) were identified, while 3 were unknown or unclear (16.7%) and 1 was vacant (5.6%). Of the eighty-one Oberlin group departments investigated, forty-two fit into our research parameters of having three or more staff members in the department (51.9% of the group). Of the institutions that the authors included in the dataset, 39 position holders (92.9% of the dataset) were identified, while 3 were unknown (7.1%). Only one Oberlin Group institution fell within the study's parameters for investigating multiple departments.[35]

Gender Overall

Of the 105 ARL institutions with position holders, 70 (66.7%) had a presumed gender of female and 35 (33.3%) male. Of the 14 IRLA institutions with position holders, 2 (14.3%) had a presumed gender of female and 12 (85.7%) male. Of the 39 Oberlin Group institutions with applicable position holders, 22 (56.4%) had a presumed gender of female and 17 (43.6%) male. Combined, of the 158 positions investigated, 94 (59.5%) had a presumed gender of female and 64 (40.5%) male. These numbers show that special collections administrators conform to the national trend, outlined in the literature review section, of having more men in administrative positions than would be expected based on their numbers in the field of librarianship as a whole.

Educational Background

Of the 105 ARL institutions with position holders, degrees held were identified for 88 (83.8% of the dataset). Of those 88 position holders, 23 (26.1%) held only a MLIS, 6 (6.8%) held only a MA, 33 (37.5%) held a MLIS and MA, 11 (12.5%) held a MLIS and PhD, and 15 (17%) held only a PhD. Of the 14 IRLA institutions with position holders, degrees held were identified for 13 (92.9% of the dataset). Of those 13 position holders, 3 (23.1%) held only a MLIS, 1 (7.7%) held only a MA, 1 (7.7%) held a MLIS and MA, 1 (7.7%) held a MLIS and PhD, and 7 (53.8%) held only a PhD. Of the 39 Oberlin Group institutions with applicable position holders, degrees held were identified for 33 (84.6% of the dataset). Of those 33 position holders, 7 (21.2%) held only a MLIS, 4 (12.1%) held only a MA, 17 (51.5%) held a MLIS and MA, 2 (6.1%) held a MLIS and PhD, and 3 (9.1%) held only a PhD (see table 1). Combined, of the 134 position holders with degrees held that were identified, 33 (24.6%) held only a MLIS, 11 (8.2%) held only a MA, 51 (38.1%) held a MLIS and MA, 14 (10.4%) held a MLIS and PhD, and 25 (18.7%) held only a PhD.

A majority of administrators in both the ARL group (67 of 88, 76%) and the Oberlin group (26 of 33, 79%) hold an MLIS with or without an additional degree. Several IRLA administrators do as well, although they are not a majority (5 of 13, 38%). In both the ARL and the Oberlin Group data, the combination of MLIS and MA was the most common, sug-

TABLE 1
Educational Background*

	ARL		IRLA		Oberlin	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
MLIS	23	26%	3	23%	7	21%
MA	6	7%	1	8%	4	12%
MLIS and MA	33	38%	1	8%	17	52%
MLIS and PhD	11	13%	1	8%	2	6%
PhD	15	17%	7	54%	3	9%

*Percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole percentage.

gesting that some combination of library and subject-specific education is valued for special collections administrators. Conversely, in the IRLA data, PhDs were the most common degree, which may reflect the strong subject orientation of many IRLA institutions and the specialized contents of their collections. These data indicate that the commonly received wisdom that special collections practitioners need a second degree beyond an MLIS does seem to hold true for a majority of special collections administrators, while also showing that the skill sets provided by an MLIS are clearly valued by hiring committees. The number of PhDs that appear throughout the dataset suggest that the subject expertise, respect from teaching faculty, and prestige of a PhD are also valued by hiring committees and institutional administration.

Gender and Educational Background

Of the 61 women in the ARL dataset, 18 (29.5%) held only a MLIS, 5 (8.2%) held only a MA, 25 (40.9%) held a MLIS and MA, 5 (8.2%) held a MLIS and a PhD, and 8 (13.1%) held only a PhD. Of the 27 men in the ARL data set, 5 (18.5%) held only a MLIS, 1 (3.7%) held only a MA, 8 (29.6%) held a MLIS and MA, 6 (22.2%) held a MLIS and PhD, and 7 (25.9%) held only a PhD. For both men and women, the most common degree combination was that of MLIS and MA. When looking at the ARL data, men were more likely to hold a PhD than were women (almost 50% of the total positions), while fewer than 25% of the female directors had PhDs.

Of the two women in the IRLA dataset, one (50%) held only a MLIS, while the other (50%) held a MLIS and MA. Of the 11 men in the IRLA dataset, 2 (18.1%) held only a MLIS, 1 (9.1%) held only a MA, 1 (9.1%) held a MLIS and PhD, and 7 (63.6%) held only a PhD. Once again, it is more common for male directors to hold PhDs than for women to do so.

Of the 20 female Oberlin Group directors, 4 (20%) held only a MLIS, 2 (10%) held only a MA, 11 (55%) held a MLIS and MA, 1 (5%) held a MLIS and PhD, and 2 (10%) held only a PhD. Of the 13 male Oberlin Group directors, 3 (23.1%) held only a MLIS, 2 (15.4%) held only a MA, 6 (46.2%) held a MLIS and MA, 1 (7.7%) held a MLIS and PhD, and 1 (7.7%) only held a PhD. The MLIS and MA combination is once again the most common educational background. Data within the Oberlin Group institutions show that the percentage of men and women holding at least a PhD is much closer than in ARL or IRLA libraries; Oberlin Group special collections administrators also hold fewer PhDs overall. The smaller number of PhDs may correlate with the lack of graduate students at Oberlin group institutions, and therefore a perception that less subject expertise is needed.

TABLE 2
Gender and Educational Background*

	Female		Male	
	#	%	#	%
MLIS	23	28%	10	20%
MA	7	8%	4	8%
MLIS and MA	37	45%	14	28%
MLIS and PhD	6	7%	8	16%
PhD	10	12%	15	29%

*Percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole percentage.

When all three institution types were combined, of the 83 female directors with identified degrees 23

(27.7%) held only a MLIS, 7 (8.4%) held only a MA, 37 (44.6%) held a MLIS and MA, 6 (7.2%) held a MLIS and PhD, and 10 (12%) held only a PhD. Of the 51 male directors, 10 (19.6%) held only a MLIS, 4 (7.8%) held only a MA, 14 (27.5%) held a MLIS and MA, 8 (15.7%) held a MLIS and PhD, and 15 (29.4%) held only a PhD (see table 2).

In the overall dataset, the authors see that special collections administrators who they identified as male held a PhD more than twice as often than those the authors identified as female (those holding at least a PhD were 20% of women and 45% of men). While it is not possible to determine the reason for this discrepancy using this dataset, PhDs have far more prestige than an MLIS throughout academia. In a feminized profession where men still hold a greater percentage of leadership roles than their overall numbers in the profession would predict, it is interesting to see that men more often do not have to have the most traditional library credential when they advance to leadership in special collections. This finding indicates the complicated interplay of gender, degree prestige, and advancement within the special collections field.

Previous Professional Background

Of the ARL institutions for which the authors could identify a position holder (105), the authors were able to identify a most recent previous position type for 82 (78.1%). Of those identified, 36 (43.9%) were administrative, 3 (3.7%) public services, 4 (4.9%) technical services, 12 (14.6%) curatorial, 6 (7.3%) mixed, 8 (9.8%) administration-technical services, 7 (8.5%) administration-curatorial, and 6 (7.3%) other. Of the most recent positions that were not solely administrative, then, fewer than 4% came from public services, while 14.7% were from technical services, and 23.1% were curatorial. The authors also aggregated data for the three most recent positions held by ARL directors.[36] Of the total ARL position types for all three previous positions collected, 60 (30.6%) were administrative, 16 (8.1%) public services, 25 (12.7%) technical services, 30 (15.3%) curatorial, 17 (8.6%) mixed, 3 (1.5%) administration-public services, 15 (7.6%) administration-technical services, 11 (5.6%) administration-curatorial, and 19 (9.6%) other. Overall, across all three previous positions, the number of people holding administrative positions of some type is the largest (45%), followed by positions with at least some curatorial responsibilities (20.9%) and then at least some technical services (20.3%).

Of the IRLA institutions for which the authors could identify a position holder (14), they were able to identify a most recent previous position type for 13 (92.9%). Of those identified, 7 (53.8%) were administrative, 2 (15.4%) curatorial, 1 (7.7%) mixed, and 3 (23.1%) other. Previous positions in administration are by far the most common for IRLA administrators, followed by other and then curatorial. The authors also aggregated data for the three most recent positions held by IRLA directors.[37] Of the total IRLA position types for all three previous positions collected, 14 (45.2%) were administrative, 1 (3.2%) technical services, 4 (12.9%) curatorial, 1 (3.2%) mixed, 1 (3.2%) administration-public services, 2 (6.5%) administration-technical services, and 8 (25.8%) other. Once again across all three previous positions, the number of people previously holding administrative positions of some type is the largest (54.9%). However, in this part of the dataset, other (25.8%) is the second most prevalent type. This may correlate with the large number of PhD-holding directors at IRLA institutions, as many came from faculty or faculty-administrative backgrounds rather than directly through libraries.

Of the Oberlin Group institutions for which the authors could identify a position holder (39), they were able to identify a most recent previous position type for 31 (79.5%). Of those identified, 7 (22.6%) were administrative, 2 (6.5%) public services, 4 (12.9%) technical services,

7 (22.6%) curatorial, 4 (12.9%) mixed, 1 (3.2%) administration-public services, 5 (16.1%) administration-technical services, and 1 (3.2%) other. Following administrative roles, both kinds of technical services positions make up 29% of the total, curatorial positions make up 22.6%, and both kinds of public services positions make up just 9.7%. The authors also aggregated data for the three most recent positions held by Oberlin Group directors.[38] Of the total Oberlin Group position types for all three previous positions collected, 14 (21.5%) were administrative, 4 (6.2%) public services, 12 (18.5%) technical services, 9 (13.8%) curatorial, 11 (16.9%) mixed, 2 (3%) administration-public services, 10 (15.4%) administration-technical services, and 3 (4.6%) other. Once again across all three previous positions, the number of people previously holding administrative positions of some type is the largest (39.9%). The other major categories were jobs with technical services components (33.9%), curatorial components (13.8%), and public services (9.2%). Curatorial and technical services roles are the most common after administrative positions; however, unlike in ARL and IRLA libraries, technical services positions are more common than curatorial positions (see table 3).

TABLE 3
Previous Professional Background*

	ARL		IRLA		Oberlin	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Administrative	60	31%	14	45%	14	22%
Public services	16	8%	0	0%	4	6%
Technical services	25	13%	1	3%	12	19%
Curatorial	30	15%	4	13%	9	14%
Mixed	17	9%	1	3%	11	17%
Administration — public services	3	2%	1	3%	2	3%
Administration — technical services	15	8%	2	7%	10	15%
Administration — curatorial	11	6%	0	0%	0	0%
Other	19	10%	8	26%	3	5%

*Percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole percentage.

Across all three types of institutions, the percentage of administrative jobs was lower in the aggregate data than in the most immediate previous position data. This is not surprising, as newer special collections administrators are less likely to hold administrative positions as they go farther back in their careers. Aside from other administrative roles, curatorial and technical services backgrounds are the most common for special collections administrators.

There may be several reasons for the lack of representation of experience in public services positions among special collections administrators.[39] Some of the positions in this subfield, such as primary source instruction and assessment, are still relatively new to the special collections field (within the last ten to fifteen years), and thus many administrators may have moved into leadership positions before these aspects of the profession became more prominent and respected. In many special collections, public services positions include large commitments to working with researchers in the reading room, including time on the reading room desk. Such responsibilities may make it harder for those holding public services positions to attend professional development opportunities, conferences, trainings, and networking events that

develop networks and skills that would allow them to move into higher administrative roles. Studies have also found that despite increased use of materials and requests for access, jobs in public services are often at risk for cuts,[40] and public services librarians have identified "needs more staff" as the top issue which prevents them from successfully completing daily work.[41]

Gender and Previous Professional Background

Of the 57 women in the ARL dataset with at least one previously identified position, the authors were also able to identify a second most recent position for 48 and third most recent for 34. When aggregated, 43 (30.9%) were administrative, 11 (7.9%) public services, 18 (12.9%) technical services, 20 (14.4%) curatorial, 15 (10.7%) mixed, 3 (2.1%) administration-public services, 10 (7.2%) administration-technical services, 7 (5%) administration-curatorial, and 12 (8.6%) other.

Of the 25 men in the ARL dataset with at least one previously identified position, the authors were also able to identify a second most recent position for 20 and third most recent for 12. When aggregated, 17 (29.8%) were administrative, 5 (8.8%) public services, 7 (12.3%) technical services, 10 (17.5%) curatorial, 2 (3.5%) mixed, 5 (8.8%) administration-technical services, 4 (7%) administration-curatorial, and 7 (12.3%) other (see table 4).

Of the 2 women in the IRLA dataset with at least one previously identified position, the authors were also able to identify a second most recent position for both and third most recent for 1. When aggregated, 1 (20%) was administrative, 2 (40%) mixed, 1 (20%) administration-technical services, and 1 (20%) other.

Of the 11 men in the IRLA dataset with at least one previously identified position, the authors were also able to identify a second most recent position for 8 and third most recent for 7. When aggregated, 13 (50%) were administrative, 1 (3.8%) technical services, 4 (15.4%) curatorial, 1 (3.8%)

TABLE 4
ARL: Gender and Previous Professional Background*

	Women		Men	
	#	%	#	%
Administrative	43	31%	17	30%
Public services	11	8%	5	9%
Technical services	18	13%	7	12%
Curatorial	20	14%	10	18%
Mixed	15	11%	2	4%
Administration — public services	3	2%	0	0%
Administration — technical services	10	7%	5	9%
Administration — curatorial	7	5%	4	7%
Other	12	9%	7	12%

*Percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole percentage.

TABLE 5
IRLA: Gender and Previous Professional Background*

	Women		Men	
	#	%	#	%
Administrative	1	20%	13	50%
Public services	0	0%	0	0%
Technical services	0	0%	1	4%
Curatorial	0	0%	0	0%
Mixed	2	40%	0	0%
Administration — public services	0	0%	1	4%
Administration — technical services	1	20%	1	4%
Administration — curatorial	0	0%	0	0%
Other	1	20%	6	23%

*Percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole percentage.

administration-public services, 1 (3.8%) administration-technical services, and 6 (23.1%) other (see table 5).

Of the 18 women in the Oberlin Group dataset with at least one previously identified position, the authors were also able to identify a second most recent position for 13 and third most recent for 8. When aggregated, 6 (15.4%) were administrative, 2 (5.1%) public services, 9 (23.1%) technical services, 2 (5.1%) curatorial, 7 (17.9%) mixed, 1 (2.5%) administration-public services, 10 (25.6%) administration-technical services, and 2 (5.1%) other.

Of the 13 men in the Oberlin Group dataset with at least one previously identified position, the authors were also able to identify a second most recent position for 9 and third most recent for 4. When aggregated, 8 (30.8%) were administrative, 2 (7.7%) public services, 3 (11.5%) technical services, 7 (26.9%) curatorial, 4 (15.4%) mixed, 1 (3.8%) administration-public services, and 1 (3.8%) other (see table 6).

TABLE 6
Oberlin Group: Gender and Previous Professional Background*

	Women		Men	
	#	%	#	%
Administrative	6	15%	8	31%
Public services	2	5%	2	8%
Technical services	9	23%	3	12%
Curatorial	2	5%	7	27%
Mixed	7	18%	4	15%
Administration — public services	1	3%	1	4%
Administration — technical services	10	26%	0	0%
Administration — curatorial	0	0%	0	0%
Other	2	5%	1	4%

*Percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole percentage.

The trends seen in the aggregate data without gender breakdowns mostly hold for this analysis. Across gender backgrounds, previous administrative jobs remain important for higher administrative positions. Curatorial and technical services backgrounds also remain important for both men and women. Of note is the fact that despite few administrators possessing backgrounds in public services, men are overrepresented; the data from ARL indicates an almost equal number of men and women with positions containing at least some public services component, while IRLA and Oberlin Group data show more men than women with public services backgrounds. If gendered expectations of leadership value "masculine" qualities such as ambition, dominance, and action,[42] while public services roles are often stereotyped as "helper" (and therefore feminized) roles, there may be a perception that the personalities and traits that make a good public services librarian do not make a good special collections leader, but that this can be overcome when someone identifying as male is in the position. Future work on this topic should further explore these questions and their implications.

Internal Promotions and Cross-Institutional Type Movement

While educational background and work experience are obviously important for a candidate's success in a position, the authors also wondered how a person's immediately previous place of employment may impact their administrative prospects, from internal promotion to possible institutional type bias.

Of the 82 administrators at ARL institutions where the authors had identified their previous positions, 35 (42.7% of the dataset) were most recently employed at the same institution, 24 (68.6%) women and 11 (31.4%) men. Of the 14 IRLA administrators, only one (7.1%

of the dataset) fit this category, a woman. Of the 32 Oberlin administrators, 12 (37.5% of the dataset) fit this category, 7 (58.3%) women and 5 (41.7%) men. Combined, previous positions were identified for 128 administrators (81% of the total dataset gathered). Of those position holders, 48 (37.5%) were immediately previously employed at the same institution. These findings seem to be in direct conflict with the general wisdom that if one wishes to gain a leadership position, advance administratively, or receive a significant raise, one must be willing to change employers. This finding is particularly important for the special collections field because so much institutional memory and knowledge is held by those working at an institution. Opportunities for internal advancement are key to keeping that knowledge and memory at the institution. It is further significant because women are twice as likely as men to note that geographic location is a factor in accepting a position.[43] It is also worthwhile to note that two studies of women's paths to library leadership found that women were more likely to become library leaders as internal candidates, while men were more likely to be hired from the outside.[44] Thus, allowing more opportunities for internal promotion could lead to more leadership opportunities for women.

Given that the dataset included many flagship research institutions, independent libraries outside traditional academia, and small liberal arts colleges without graduate students, the authors sought to determine whether it was possible for administrators to move among different types of institutions. When the authors examined the dataset for administrators with immediately previous positions at institutions from different groups, there were very few examples of going from a smaller institution type to a larger one. Only one ARL administrator immediately came from an Oberlin Group institution. Six IRLA administrators had moved from one institutional group to another, though two of these were academic faculty members and only one came to their IRLA institution from an Oberlin Group institution. However, there were more examples of going from large institution types to smaller ones. Eleven Oberlin Group administrators had last worked at an ARL institution, which is 34.4% of Oberlin administrators with previous positions identified. This data may indicate a higher perceived value for work experience from ARL institutions, and may also indicate a reluctance in ARL hiring practices to consider those without experience working with graduate students or supervising large numbers of staff.[45]

Suggestions for Future Research

This study provides a snapshot of current special collections administrators in different types of institutions in the United States; however, there remain many questions and avenues of study. The field could learn more over time through replicating this study over a period of years to determine if these findings change or if they still hold true when a new generation of administrators is hired or promoted. The data and conclusions in this article might also be used to compare American institutions to international ones.

Given that the authors identified far fewer administrators with known backgrounds in public services, further study on why this is so. Given the increase in attention to some aspects of public services, such as instruction, in the past ten years, will this have an effect on future paths to leadership? Will the attitude toward public services special collections librarians as handmaidens[46] affect these workers' ability to gain leadership positions? Questions could also be asked about prestige, and how different subfields of special collections such as curatorship, public services, and technical services are viewed in terms of prestige, specialized versus

general knowledge, and potential for growth. Future studies could also survey special collections administrators to learn what responsibilities from their previous positions prepared them for administrative and leadership roles, and whether this correlates to specific types of positions within the profession, as well as their age and length of career before moving into special collections administration.

Future studies might also examine the effects of the large number of unemployed, underemployed, contingent, and grant-funded workers on paths to special collections leadership. Questions might be asked about whether those in contingent and grant-funded positions can gain the skills needed to advance, whether the large number of people looking for work in the special collections field has led institutions to require more or higher degrees at all levels as a way to narrow down large application pools, and how the covid-19 pandemic has affected the pipeline for special collections administrators. Such studies might also examine whether there have been changes in the educational backgrounds of special collections administrators, and how those might be different along the gender spectrum.

Future research should also explore how the profession can collectively make paths to special collections leadership more equitable. An examination of racial diversity in special collections administration would help uncover just how far the field must go to better represent all users of special collections. Such a study could also contribute to the discourse around retaining and promoting Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) practitioners. Surveying BIPOC special collections practitioners with an interest in leadership could illuminate the pathways and obstacles that may differ from their white colleagues.

Conclusion

This study has shown that special collections administrators come from a variety of professional backgrounds and hold different types of degrees. While women outnumber men, men are overrepresented based on their numbers in the profession. The combination of the MLIS and MA is the most common degree grouping for special collections administrators. Men are more likely to hold PhDs than women. Previous administrative experience is important to gaining a director position, but curatorial and technical services backgrounds are also common for special collections administrators.

There is still much to be learned about pathways to special collections administration and how those aspiring to such positions might position themselves. The authors hope that future research will illuminate some of the questions raised by this study.

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Notes

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30. Oberlin Group of Libraries, accessed October 22, 2021, https://www.oberlingroup.org/about-oberlin-group

31. Jackie M. Dooley and Katherine Luce, *Taking Our Pulse: The OCLC Research Survey of Special Collections and Archives* (Dublin, OH: OCLC Research, 2010) https://doi.org/10.25333/gj2r-8172.

32. The authors did not use personal knowledge when filling in this data, as they want this study to be replicable in the future.

33. All degrees were considered comprehensively. For instance, MLS, MIS, and other degrees from library science programs were grouped under "MLIS," while an MS would have been grouped with the "MA" category, and any doctoral degree beyond the PhD would have been categorized there.

34. Harvard University, Indiana University Bloomington, Ohio State University, Temple University, University of Iowa, University of Miami, University of Notre Dame, Virginia Commonwealth University, Yale University

35. Oberlin College

36. For the second most recent job, the authors were able to identify position types for 68 (64.7%) position holders. The authors were able to locate data on a third most-recent position for 46 (43.8%) position holders.

37. For the second most recent job, the authors were able to identify position types for 10 (71.4%) position holders. The authors were able to locate data on a third most-recent position for 8 (61.5%) position holders.

38. For the second most recent job, the authors were able to identify position types for 22 (56.4%) position holders. The authors were able to locate data on a third most-recent position for 12 (30.8%) position holders.

39. Harris found a perception that public services positions (in general libraries) have fewer leadership development opportunities than administrative positions, but she found the same thing for technical services positions, which does not hold in this data.

40. Dooley and Luce, "Taking Our Pulse," 64.

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43. Kathleen DeLong, "Career Advancement," 65

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45. When looking for institutional crossover, the authors only looked at an administrator's most recent previous position, not all previous positions. The authors also only counted a change in institution type if the institution was on one of our lists—the authors did not count equivalent large research institutions or small liberal arts colleges if they were not identified as an ARL or Oberlin institution.

46. Among many other examples, see the egregious letter from the AHA to NARA (later retracted). https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-letter-to-nara-regarding-planned-research-room-capacity-(august-2021)