
The Impact of Leadership Development for Theological Librarians

Stories from a Mentorship Program

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ABSTRACT This panel presentation explored the transformative impact of leadership development in theological librarianship, highlighting the variety of approaches individuals can bring to leadership. Through a narrative-driven style, the presentation aimed to inspire readers to recognize their potential as leaders and pursue opportunities to cultivate their distinct skills. The Leadership Development for Theological Librarians Program, launched in 2023, celebrated the graduation of its second cohort in May 2025. Funded by a grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion and co-led by Kelly Campbell from Columbia Theological Seminary and Myka Kennedy Stephens from Fosgail, the program provides mentoring and executive coaching for theological librarians from varying backgrounds, roles, and institutions. Panelists shared the origin story of the program, discussed their unique leadership journeys, and reflected on how the program has shaped their professional growth.

INTRODUCTION

In a time of great volatility, authentic leadership in theological librarianship is more critical than ever. Not only do we need to foster leadership in formal library director or supervisory positions, but we also need to develop it at every level with all types of people. If

we constrain our understanding of leadership to those with specific titles, a particular personality type, or a traditional background, we risk missing out on the diversity and creative thinking we need to navigate this volatility into the future.

This panel explores one way in which theological librarians are actively cultivating intentional leadership development across a spectrum of librarians in Atla. We share the history and impact of the Leadership Development for Theological Librarians Program, which is co-led by Kelly Campbell from Columbia Theological Seminary and Myka Kennedy Stephens from Fosgail.

We aim to show that leadership in theological librarianship is not just about formal titles; it is about how every one of us, regardless of our roles or personalities, can contribute to shaping our future. The narratives shared here demonstrate the need for, and impact of, intentional leadership development and shared experiences.

We begin by recounting Kelly Campbell's origin story of the program. Following that, we share the experiences of Aileen Mulchrone, David Kiger, and Christa Strickler, who narrate their experiences of leadership development as members of the two cohorts that have completed the program.

KELLY CAMPBELL

When I started as a theological librarian about 20 years ago, Atla had partnered with the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning. As a new theological librarian, I applied for their week-long colloquium, which required travel to Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana. Even though I'd already had my library degree for a while, I applied for the program and made the trip.

During the colloquium, seasoned theological librarians served as individual mentors. It was wonderful to be together with other new theological librarians, learning from each other and from our mentors. I remember one session where a member of the Wabash staff talked about faculty and how to relate to them, explaining the differences between pre-tenure, tenured, and retiring faculty members. That session was invaluable to me in understanding my context in theological education at that point.

The partnership between Atla and the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning directly impacted Atla and the librarians who participated in the leadership program. I believe they held around three colloquia over the years. My cohort had about ten participants. Of those, three became Atla board members, one became an executive director at the Association of Theological Schools, and quite a few became library directors. From that one leadership development opportunity, Atla gained several leaders who have continued to grow and mentor throughout the association.

The next time the opportunity came around, I was a new library director. I had a brand-new theological librarian working for me, and I sent him to that colloquium, after which he became the director of two theological libraries and a board member of Atla. That program was invaluable in supporting leadership development for theological librarians, but the partnership eventually ended, though I can't remember why.

Then, Atla created a second program called "Creating Leaders of Tomorrow," bringing in a consultant for leadership development. I presented one of the sessions, but I heard the feedback for the program was mixed. I believe it only happened once, and after that, nothing.

Multiple requests were made to the Atla membership staff asking for leadership development opportunities, but nothing happened. So, these members talked about trying to start some opportunities independently. During COVID, I worked with the education person at Atla to set up a monthly Zoom meeting for directors. We were all facing unknowns and needed to talk with someone else about what was going on in our context. But no further leadership development opportunities came from the Atla staff. It had been several years since our guild had any leadership development.

In 2023, at my current location at Columbia Theological Seminary, a faculty member invited Dr. Lynne Westfield, the Executive Director of the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning, and her entire staff to meet with me. Dr. Westfield takes her staff to different locations nationwide for professional development each year, and Atlanta was their choice for that year. This faculty member felt they needed to meet me. So, we met in my office, and in an informal, flowing conversation, Dr. Westfield asked about leadership development for

theological librarians. I was just surprised. Here was someone who was a former faculty member and was now an executive director, and she got theological librarians. She understood what we do. She understood that theological librarians are the glue that keeps things together between faculty and students. I was going into my advocacy mode, which a lot of us do when we're talking to an administrator, but she was already sold. She already understood what we do. So, since she grasped that key point in our conversation, she asked me, "If I gave you a \$30,000 grant, could you develop a leadership program for theological librarians?" And I said, "Yes, I can. I can figure that out." That's how the program started. We've just completed our second cohort this past year.

In 2023, we had our first cohort of four theological librarians. I partnered with Myka Kennedy Stephens, a former theological library director who had achieved her accreditation in coaching and started a consulting firm called Fosgail. We worked together to develop a scaffolded curriculum in which the cohort meets together every other month. Prior to each meeting, they do some professional reading about leadership concepts, which we then discuss. Then we follow up online, unpack that, and have more conversations. During the other months, they meet one-on-one with Myka for a coaching session, where they can talk about a particular context and what is happening in their workplace related to that leadership concept. We start in August and have a three-day retreat in Atlanta, Georgia, in April. From our first cohort, we received tremendous results. Everyone was very appreciative and talked about how much they had grown. It was a delightful experience and we were thrilled, as the results were better than we hoped for.

When I applied for the grant in my second year, I came up with three more specific goals than we had in the first year. First, participants will increase their knowledge and awareness of basic leadership practices. Leadership practices aren't hard or complex. They're simple but so challenging to be aware of and to implement—and we desperately need them in many places in our world today.

The second goal is that participants are introduced to a cohort of fellow theological librarians with whom they can build a professional network and possibly friendships. In our field, many of us work in tiny libraries. We might be the director or the reference person. We

might have two or three people. But if you're the director, it does get lonely at times. That is why we wanted it to be a cohort model, where you start with people in August and end up with them the following May. Having this presentation is exactly what we wanted: the cohorts start talking to each other, and you develop, for lack of a better word, a community of learning where you're building a professional network. You're also building friends who understand what being a theological librarian is like.

The third goal is for participants to deepen their self-awareness and gain perspectives on their context and their unique contributions as leaders. Some may assume they must be a library director to participate in this program. That is not accurate. Everyone can be a leader. It doesn't matter if you're working at the circulation desk, are a part-time employee, or are behind the scenes in technical services; everyone is a leader in their own way. This program tries to help you become self-aware of who you are as a leader. There are all different kinds of leaders. How I lead is going to be different than how someone else leads. The program is designed so you know how you are uniquely created to be a leader in the context you're in, and so that you can build upon that. We've had participants who are directors, who work in technical services, or who come from a variety of other backgrounds.

Intentional leadership development is critical to the development of our industry. Ironically, even though we are in the educational sector, we do not spend time developing each other as leaders in our guild, and we are not intentional about leadership development.

While some might claim that certain people are born leaders (and literature debates this point), true leadership development requires intentional investment in people to help them become leaders. It doesn't happen overnight. Again, the concepts are not complex, but if you are unaware of them or lack self-awareness, that leadership development won't happen. This is especially crucial in theological librarianship.

One of the assessments we use in the program explores how you generally react and respond to conflict. Theological librarians often struggle to engage conflict directly; instead, we tend to avoid it or compromise. This tendency shows up in our advocacy efforts. When I served on the Atla Board of Directors, advocating for ourselves

was a key value, but our profession has always found this difficult. Theological librarians are servants. We want to help and are good at that role, but we also need to advocate for the importance of our work. Recent literature has discussed the concept of vocational awe post-COVID, and I think theological librarians excel at making what we do look easy. Consequently, those in vocational awe of what we do often do not understand or grasp the time and effort our jobs require.

The success of the program has been overwhelming, in my opinion. Comments from the past two cohorts have included feedback like, “This has been the most influential leadership development or professional development that I have done in my career.” Participants talk about how much they’ve grown through the program. After the April retreat, we require participants to submit a personal leadership development plan, which is designed to continue a participant’s growth throughout the year after finishing the program. This plan is a way to hold participants accountable, as leadership growth is continuous. Leadership growth isn’t about figuring everything out and moving on to something else. The plan allows participants to check in with each other and see how things are progressing from year to year.

AILEEN MULCHRONE

My path to librarianship started the way I think a lot of English-major-turned-librarians’ do, with the thought, “I don’t want to be a teacher, what now?” (Little did I know how much teaching my future held.) So, soon after college, I started my MLIS program and began working part-time at a library consortium in Chicago. I worked as a page in the Stacks Management Department, pulling and re-shelving books for requests. After I finished my degree, a job opened up, and I became the supervisor of the department, working under the department head. This was my first supervisory role, and I learned the challenges of managing different personalities while supervising part-time workers. After eight years there, I started working at the Catholic Theological Union four and a half years ago, and I’m currently the Interim Library Director.

I did not aspire to be a leader when I thought about and started my MLIS program. My goal was to work with collections and help people connect with them. Inevitably, as my job titles grew, so did my leadership responsibility. I've now supervised and managed part- and full-time employees for eleven years, the whole of my full-time employment in libraries. In my first full-time role at the Center for Research Libraries, I supervised and trained part-time employees who worked in my previous role as a page. This consisted mostly of answering questions and helping them complete challenging tasks. I was never in charge of hiring, scheduling, disciplining, or potentially ending their employment.

When I started in my role at the Catholic Theological Union, I managed the part-time student workers who worked the evening and Saturday shifts. Although I was now managing fewer employees, two to three instead of eight to ten, my responsibilities covered the full cycle: advertising job openings, interviewing, hiring, training, managing timecards and time off, and ultimately deciding whether or not an employee needed to be let go.

I found managing fewer student workers but with more responsibility far more challenging. I'd never before been in a position where I had to have conversations with employees about perpetual tardiness, or no-call, no-shows for a shift, or even managing schedules and time off. While I was always comfortable training students and answering questions, this was my first supervisory role that required me to address performance issues. Correcting behavior or deciding someone's performance was poor enough to let them go was much more difficult for me. This is something I learned to improve through the Theological Leadership Development Program with the Wabash cohort, where we explored different types of leadership, learned about our own strengths and weaknesses, and received professional coaching.

Throughout the program, we read about and discussed what comprises leadership. We also took a few different assessments that helped us gauge our strengths as people and leaders and identify areas for improvement. These exercises helped me recognize my strengths, rather than focusing solely on what I needed to improve. We also had bimonthly professional coaching. The personality assessments, coupled with the coaching, helped me to turn knowledge

about my strengths and weaknesses into action. I learned it was a positive thing that I had empathy towards the student workers I managed, but I also needed to learn to have hard conversations about continued employment if it was best for the library.

During this time, I had a student worker who was very nice and positive but regularly called off shifts at the last minute. This was hard on me because I needed to scramble to find coverage, and it was bad for the library because if I couldn't find a replacement, I had to close the library unexpectedly early. It was very beneficial to be able to talk this through in professional coaching before I decided to release the employee. Over the course of the cohort, I improved my ability to make hiring and retention choices that were best for the library, even if I had to disappoint a candidate or employee. Additionally, I've become more proactive in handling issues with student workers rather than waiting until there is a glaring problem. Through the Wabash cohort, I learned to put knowledge into action and became a more proactive and effective leader.

For me, the most important takeaway from the program was learning that leadership is intentional. Leadership can look different from person to person, and anyone can learn to harness their strengths to become a leader, or a better one. Learning with and from my cohort members about leadership has been invaluable. As part of the professional development plans we created at the end of the program, my three cohort members and I decided to continue meeting bimonthly to discuss our progress. In the year since our program ended, we've continued to discuss our roles and challenges, and I've continued to reap the rewards of intentional leadership growth and planning with my peers.

This leadership development program, geared specifically toward theological librarians, filled a need for me, and such programs are more important than ever. In the shifting landscape of small seminaries, like the Catholic Theological Union, declining student enrollment often leads to staff reduction. The result is that a librarian may be unexpectedly thrust into a leadership role when a previous leader moves on and is not replaced. Programs like this one address the need for leadership development in theological libraries. My hope is that these programs will trend upward, even as staff sizes and the number of experienced leaders in those spaces trend downward.

DAVID KIGER

I fell into librarianship. It was never a path I imagined would become my career. Throughout my collegiate education I was intent on learning about the bible and theology. I went to Bible college, I then pursued an MDiv at seminary, which led me to work on a PhD in Historical Theology. On a quite personal note, I appreciated how throughout my theological education I was allowed and even encouraged to love God by using my mind. I was allowed to look under the hood and see what truly drove the engine of the faith. Perhaps this is why throughout seminary and into my doctoral work, I worked at the library. This work was at first because of convenience; the library was a great place to study, and I, like most graduate students, needed to study and needed money. While the job began out of convenience, it quickly became a place I loved to work.

These two academic library clerk-level positions introduced me to most of the work of a library. I assisted with ILL, circulation, inventory, archival work, and reference instruction. I'm grateful to my supervisors, who allowed me so many diverse learning opportunities as a graduate student employee. All these experiences came together in my first full-time library position as the Assistant Director of Libraries and Theological Librarian for Emmanuel Christian Seminary at Milligan. This rather verbose title meant that I was to direct the seminary library as part of our larger library system.

In the fall of 2022, our departing Director of Libraries, Gary Daught, encouraged me to apply for the vacancy his retirement would create. I applied and was appointed Director of Libraries and continued as the Theological Librarian.

When I began this dual role in 2023, I realized I had had very little leadership training. I had gone from supervising student employees at the seminary to overseeing the library budget, supervising colleagues, and participating in the university's academic committee. In short, to much more institutional responsibility. During the beginning stages of my time as director, I saw the opportunity to apply for the leadership development cohort.

It became quite clear to me early on that directing and leading an academic library is about fostering partnerships across the university and professional networks. In joining the cohort, I saw

a great opportunity to partner with professional networks. More specifically related to leadership, I saw a great need for personal integration of my personal and professional self. I needed to find ways to experience joy in the work, not feel overwhelmed by my own disorientation to management, and find resources for courage when advocating for the library and myself.

The cohort program was itself a joy to experience. We met on Zoom and noted that we each experienced similar situations. We all were able to bond over similar situations and challenges that we each faced. We worked on finding our strengths and our approach to conflict.

At the start, coaching with Myka was something I looked forward to with some trepidation. I had heard of “coaches” in a variety of non-sports fields and was curious to see how interactions like this went. From the outset, Myka was professional and helpful, empathetic and wise. Our sessions helped me articulate the leadership struggles I was facing, and once articulated, I was able to address them with clarity. Leadership is often about a vision of the future, but it also entails an honest and hopefully accurate view of the self. While I would consider myself modestly self-aware and believe I know myself well, having conversations about my leadership skills and how I fit within my organization benefited me. Sometimes it is hearing something true about yourself but within a different context that makes the situation open up; sometimes it is just getting clarity.

My conversation with Myka about the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument was particularly important. Through that conversation, I was able to feel at peace with how I had been approaching different conflicts at my job. There will always be conflict, and until there is a great amount of institutional trust, full collaboration is elusive. In addition, because conflict is constant, not all conflicts require an urgent response. This conversation helped me determine how best to approach conflicts related to library space, librarian benefits, and how best to advocate for the work of the library.

One of the best parts of my experience was the end-of-year retreat when we all gathered in person. This retreat helped to bond us as a group and helped to solidify the value of the whole program. Spending time together sharing our struggles and aspirations helped form us as a community. We had spent the year knowing each other through

screens but then were able to meet face-to-face. This experience helped remind us all that we are not alone, that our experiences are important, and that the work we do in the library matters.

About a month ago I submitted my leadership plan. Creating this was a bit of a challenge: what to focus on and how best to achieve these goals? As it is, my goals may be too ambitious, but the simple act of taking time to plan how best to approach my own personal leadership growth can only have positive ramifications.

Recently in the Atla Blog, John Kutsko has articulated the interoperability of theological librarians, describing the many diverse layers and roles of a theological librarian (Kutsko 2025). Our work is vast, the challenges are immense, and against the current landscape of theological education, what we do is essential. This means that we need to develop in the area of leadership to cast a clear vision of how our work partners with the work of the university. We need leaders who show, at every level of library work, the value of collecting and connecting. Who we are and what we do matters.

CHRISTA STRICKLER

Years ago, when my college application form asked me to write about my leadership experience, I wrote that the world would not have leaders if it weren't for dedicated followers like myself. As a quiet, introverted person, I believed leadership was only for the outgoing and charismatic, which I would never be.

I'm still quiet and introverted. And yet, I am a leader. This is because of the many people who have encouraged me to develop leadership talents and skills that I couldn't see in myself. Because of others, I am learning to see my quiet thoughtfulness as a leadership strength and am learning to leverage it in ways that align with my values while being mindful of my limitations.

I began my library career as a technical services student worker providing acquisitions and cataloging support at a small Christian liberal arts college. I wasn't leading anything; I simply showed up to work on time and did my job well.

Over time, I moved to a staff-level cataloging position, then to department head, and eventually to a faculty librarian role. Throughout these transitions, I never once thought of myself as a leader, even when I proposed and led a project to reclassify the library's collections from Dewey Decimal to Library of Congress Classification. Later, when I moved to a library faculty cataloging position at Wheaton College, a mid-size Christian liberal arts college, I co-led an even larger reclassification project, still not seeing myself as a leader.

It took the encouragement of others for me to begin seeing myself in a leadership light. I recall a moment when my co-leader for that second reclassification project encouraged me to apply for a library leadership role that had opened. She told me she saw leadership skills in me. Her words stuck with me and started to shift my perspective.

Not long after, I began serving as section editor for Atla's Theology Cataloging Bulletin, and a year later the editor-in-chief role became available. Atla staff invited me to take on the position and informed me that my strong leadership skills would have secured my place in the role the previous time it had been open, had I only applied. I see this now as another pivotal moment in which someone pointed out what I could not see for myself: I was a leader.

This growing self-awareness coincided with several struggles I experienced with my library co-workers in group meetings, which led me to read about group communication and leadership. My self-directed learning highlighted the importance of these skills in the professional world. I began noticing when leaders applied them effectively—and when they did not. Realizing these were skills I could develop, I actively sought out learning opportunities whenever I could. But I could only develop so far on my own.

In early 2023, I received an invitation from Kelly Campbell to participate in a new grant-funded leadership development cohort for theological librarians. I jumped at the chance, my first opportunity for intentional leadership development in a structured setting in community with others.

The program's design, tailored for theological librarians from varying backgrounds and roles, cultivated an individualized journey of leadership development through assessments like the CliftonStrengths

and the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, as well as executive coaching and group mentoring sessions. My understanding of leadership gradually deepened through the cumulative effect of these activities.

Reflecting on the assessments helped me define what it meant to lead as me, rather than as someone else or a perfect version of myself. Group discussions revealed leadership challenges common across institutions, from small seminaries to large research universities, helping me realize I wasn't alone. Conversations with Myka as my coach revealed pathways through challenging circumstances in my work context.

These experiences helped me think more holistically about leadership, which allowed me to align my leadership approach with my values while also maintaining awareness of my own limitations. Since starting the program, self-care and balance have become major themes for me. I realized that some of the activities I was doing were draining my energy and affecting my health, as they were driven more by external validation and expediency than by my values and strengths. This recognition led me to step down from them to make space for focusing on my health and finding activities that were a better fit.

The program required us to write a leadership development plan at the end of the year. After some discernment with Myka during the end-of-year retreat, I committed to developing a list of guiding questions to help me decide when to take on a new task or project and when to decline. While a small component of my overall plan, these questions have proven valuable.

I now keep them in mind when new opportunities arise, and I've learned to say no to some even when they sound interesting. It's been hard to give things up, but it's helped me be more flexible as I move through life. I've learned that I need to start fewer things, and I don't need to finish everything I start, because I often set too many goals for myself. Ultimately, the one key takeaway about leadership that I've gained through the program is this: keep my values at the center of everything I do and decide.

This focus on authentic, values-driven leadership has been especially critical given my current professional context. I now lead

electronic resources metadata at the University of Notre Dame as an individual contributor. I no longer supervise anyone, so I'm learning how to lead effectively as someone with little formal authority in a complex organization.

In the past year, the library at Notre Dame has navigated a period of major disruption. We have a new interim dean, a new president, and a new university strategic framework. There's also been an organizational realignment that has put me in a brand-new department with new colleagues and a new boss. And on top of all that, we're moving to FOLIO from Aleph—which we've been using since Bill Clinton was president of the United States. These internal changes are compounded by broader disruptions facing academic librarianship, such as volatile government policies and the rapid increase in AI adoption.

The leadership development program has been especially critical at this time of personal and professional change. It has equipped me to navigate these challenges by enabling me to lead as myself, identify what truly matters to me, and make concrete changes to align my daily work with those values. This helps me to stay grounded even when it feels like my world is being turned upside down every single day.

CONCLUSION

The narratives we have shared in this presentation speak to the need for and impact of intentional leadership across all areas and levels of theological librarianship. While we come from diverse backgrounds and institutions, our collective experiences clearly illustrate this need within theological librarianship, a landscape marked by significant challenges, including declining enrollment, budget cuts, and staff reductions.

Many of us find ourselves stepping into leadership roles to fill institutional needs, often without formal preparation. Many of us find ourselves working in isolation, whether we're overloaded with responsibilities at a small, understaffed institution or struggling to navigate the complexities of getting things done at a large organization. This reality underscores a need not just for intentional development, but for intentional development in community with others.

This period of disruption in our field presents an opportunity. While we need time and space to mourn what we have lost, and are still losing, we have the chance to be creative in our leadership. We have the opportunity to cultivate new kinds of leadership and to discover innovative ways to collaborate that can navigate the realities of reduced funding and staffing.

For us to adapt and find new paths forward, it's essential that we foster an environment where more people can recognize their leadership potential and find ways to contribute, even in small ways.

And fortunately, we're already seeing promising signs of intentional leadership development across Atla. The program described here represents a major effort to that effect. Kelly Campbell and Myka Kennedy Stephens collaborated to fill a need that they saw in our profession. The program they designed created a learning community that allowed us to explore our individual leadership styles in a shared space that enabled us to benefit from the wisdom and support of others, equipping us to lead in our specific contexts. But for theological librarianship to thrive amidst these challenges, we need to see even more of this collective leadership emerging.

So, how do we collectively help individuals in theological librarianship recognize their leadership potential, regardless of their formal role or personality type? A great place to start is by pointing it out when we see it. When we see fresh perspectives and creative thinking, let's not assume that the person offering it knows it. Call it out when you see it.

And if you struggle with seeing yourself as a leader, ask yourselves: what do I see that others don't? How does my unique perspective add something to the conversation? How might I lead as the person that I am, with the talents and limitations that I have?

We hope that our stories have inspired you to think about leadership in your own contexts and how you might intentionally build leadership in yourself and across the profession.

REFERENCES

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