Queering Leadership in Libraries

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LIS 707: Leadership, Marketing, and Communication

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March 29, 2026

When tasked with writing about leadership as part of the author's MLIS program, given the author's identity as a transgender, demisexual, panromantic, queer woman, an exploration of queer library leadership seemed appropriate. However, the literature available documenting the experience of queer library leaders is incredibly sparse and what literature is available solely focuses on the cisgender gay and lesbian experience. This article seeks to rectify this informational gap through a review of the currently available writings on queer leadership in addition to two interviews with queer library leaders and interpreting each through the author's lens.

It is the hope of the author that the findings in this article can be used to offer guidance and inspire current and future queer library leaders, particularly those whose experiences fall outside the already discussed cisgender gay and lesbian groups. Given the over-abundance of informational works regarding defining queer identities for the sake of cisgender heterosexual audiences (Adolpho & Krueger, 2024, para. 2) and the author's desire to write primarily for a queer audience, such definitions were deemed outside the scope of this article and will not be included.

Literature Review

LGBTQ Leadership in Higher Education

A collection of essays written by 15 gay and lesbian presidents of various institutions, *LGBTQ Leadership in Higher Education* (2022), discusses various subjects of interest when examining queer leadership and is the single largest primary source collection found during research. Despite the title, the only queer perspectives available in the collection are those of

cisgender lesbian and gay people, which is noted by the editor in the introduction: “at the time of this writing, we know only of nonbinary and transgender candidates in the process of interviewing for presidency” (Crossman, 2022, p. 4). The editor states in a note (p. 4) that the term LGBTQ was used for the sake of being inclusive, despite knowing that is inaccurate.

The problem with this title is that it perpetuates the misconception that the needs and experiences of cisgender gay and lesbian people are equivalent to those of trans, non-binary, and other gender diverse people, which is already ubiquitous in the literature written about queer people (Adolpho & Krueger, 2024, para. 5; Wagner & Crowley, 2020 pp. 169-170). Additionally, given that there are no bisexual authors in the collection, it engages in bisexual erasure. This context is important to understanding the relative privilege that the authors of *LGBTQ Leadership in Higher Education* (2022) experience when examining the insights therein. Despite the flaws, the author of this article still found valuable insights, and given the lack of any other writing of a similar volume, finds that the collection’s inclusion in this article is appropriate, and it will serve as the focal point of the literature review.

Identifying LGBTQ Leadership

Both Endrijonas (2022a, pp. 7–11) and Whitney (2022 pp. 12-15) offer interesting insights when exploring the fundamental concept of what it means to be a queer leader in their writings. Endrijonas examines how prominent a role her queer identity should play in her leadership. She writes about her identity as a “gay president” (p. 7) in comparison to those she describes as “presidents who ‘happen to be gay’” (p. 8). One of the stories in her writing tells of her rejection of the idea of including closeted leaders in a queer professional organization, an

idea posited by a president who “happens to be gay”, which she likens to rewarding passing privilege. While not directly stated, this invites the comparison between the two identities presented in Endrijonas’ essay and the concept of passing privilege. Is “happening to be queer” just another form of assimilation? Is moving one’s identity to the background in such a way a means to seek passing privilege?

Ultimately, Endrijonas rejects the idea that one can “happen to be gay” stating: “[i]n fact, there is no such thing as a person ‘who happens to be’ anything other than a composite of their various identities because it is impossible to divorce one’s identities from one’s own experiences and one’s own personhood” (p. 10). While Endrijonas presents a rather hard-line approach when discussing being vocally open within this essay, it comes from a place of privilege as a person in a position of power, at a supportive institution, with the financial and legal mechanism to provide a reasonable amount of safety while doing so. This same amount of safety is as easily maintained by other members of the queer community, in particular transgender women, especially transgender women of color, where the threat of physical violence is distinctly real and present (Tgeu, 2025; The Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law, 2021).

Instead, the author would offer a more nuanced interpretation. Whitney (2022, pp. 12–15) defines the queer leadership style as “what every LGBTQ leader does to navigate a patriarchal, gendered, heterosexist culture” (p. 13). While the author of this article would add cisnormative to that definition, it is noteworthy that this definition does not necessitate being open about one’s identity to all people. Two complications arise when considering this: the fact that not being able to talk about one’s queer identity is an exhausting exercise in paranoia (Schneider, 2016 p. 723)

and non-disclosure is not an option for those who are visibly queer (Kitzie & Sweet, 2025, p. 3). This tension, between those who can not disclose due to safety and those who do or otherwise do not have the option of non-disclosure, is nuanced and one that the author of this article desires to acknowledge, without dictating a “correct” choice. In an ideal world, no one would feel they must choose between authenticity and safety. With this nuance in mind, the author’s final interpretation is this: being openly queer is absolutely an important component to queer leadership, but only when it is reasonable and safe to do so. What is more important is embracing the intersecting identities within oneself and allowing them to influence one’s leadership style and decision-making process.

Queering Leadership

The ultimate question is how does one put this into practice? What does allowing one’s identities influence one’s leadership look like? In Stanback Stroud’s contribution to *LGBTQ Leadership in Higher Education* (2022), she highlights her leadership framework, which she calls "Leading to Transgress" (p. 64), that was theorized in her 2009 PhD dissertation. She quotes that its “‘primary purpose is to influence allocation of resources in a way that breaks down or transgresses existing systems of power and privilege in the pursuit of social justice’” (p. 64). This framework points to one potential approach to putting these concepts into practice: by looking at how one’s identities have led them to navigate the world around them, identifying the pain points, and finding the ways that one can lessen or, ideally, completely remove these pain points from the system that one is leading. Put more plainly, a harm-reduction centered approach.

However, the language used by Stanback Stroud also shares similarities to the language used around the idea of queering. Queering, based in the principles of queer theory, is something that by its nature, defies a fixed definition as it is highly contextual. Allison (2022, pp. 113–117), when speaking of queering mentorship says that the "breaking down of binaries is one of the most important tropes" (p. 114) of queering in addition to dissolving hierarchies. Drabinski (Drabinski, 2013, pp. 100–101) discusses the origins of queer theory as being opposed to assimilation and seeking to disrupt the norms of identity. She also points to how queer theory rejects the idea of a singular truth, holding that knowledge is contextual and "always already undergoing revision" (p. 101). Vitry (2020) provides further elucidation by pointing to how queering is not something that is bound to solely to issues of identity (p. 937) but instead seeks to challenge "capitalist/normative spaces" (p. 944) and the structures of power that they are built on.

By drawing inspirations from the quote by Stanback Stroud (2022 p. 64), in combination with the insights offered by the examination of the concept of queering, the author of this article has devised a queer leadership framework called "Queering Leadership". Queering Leadership is a radical approach that seeks to actively oppose to the cis-heteronormative, patriarchal, colonialist, racist, and capitalistic hegemony that oppresses non-normative ideas, identities, bodies, spaces, and peoples, while simultaneously acknowledging one's own positionality within these systems. Queering Leadership rejects hierarchical power structures and acknowledges that leadership is not dependent on one's job title, as each member of an organization can lead and contribute. Although the methods of opposition are contextual, depending on one's position and

the organization they are working within, they share the same goal: to undermine the oppressive hegemonic power structures and ultimately dismantle them.

Navigating Hegemonic Pressures, the Library Environment and Self-Exclusion

A recurring theme across the literature is how hegemonic pressures have served as a deterrent to advocating for the queer community. Endrijonas (2022b, pp. 68–71) discusses a time when she was pressured to support the privilege of the faculty at her institution as opposed to supporting her queer students with regard to single use bathrooms. When she supported the students, she believed that many of the faculty thought that she only did so due to her identity as opposed to being what was best for the institution (p. 71). This is contrasted to an earlier time in her career where she chose not to take action, for fear of reprisal (pp. 68-69). Ciszek (2011) also speaks of hegemonic pressures when deciding on library programming, particularly in regard to "'alienating conservative' staff and patrons" (p. 83). He describes libraries as "fairly homogeneous environments" (p. 86) that can lead to isolation as a queer leader. In his observations this leads to other administrators to be more subdued in their queer identities: "[t]o avoid being the 'odd man out', many GLBT administrators avoid being the 'poster child' for GLBT persons" (p. 86).

These concepts are also very prevalent in the only large-scale analysis of queer library leaders titled *To Be Real: Antecedents and Consequences of Sexual Identity Disclosure by Academic Library Directors* by K.G. Schneider (2016). Speaking directly to the issue of subduing queer identity, Schneider says "to be out but not loud, to be visible and yet eschew 'huge' pink triangles, frames the well-patrolled symbolic space occupied by these leaders'

disclosure" (p. 725). One of the respondents mirrors Endrijonas' perceptional anxiety: "I don't want to be single-minded and have people think [sexual identity is] the only thing I care about, because it's not. I care about so much more" (p. 726). The issue here is not that the respondent is actually "single-minded" but instead that advocating for the queer community could be perceived as such. In *Remixing LIS Leadership: Considering Gender-Variant BIPOC* the authors identify this hegemonic pressure to be tool used to dismiss diverse experiences as a means of undermining their ability to effectuate change (stringer-stanback & Jackson, 2023, pp. 458–459). This phenomenon is not isolated to the library experience and is instead a symptom of larger hegemonic structures that impact the everyday experiences of queer leaders as a whole (Della Torre & Pereira, 2024, p. 3).

Queer leaders in the literature also report participating in self-exclusionary practices, be it though identity disclosure during the interview process (Helldobler, 2022, p. 82; Schneider, 2016, p. 724) or by excluding known non-supportive institutions and regions from the job search all together (Schneider, 2016, p. 724). Given the difficulties of working in non-supportive environments (Kitzie & Sweet, 2025), this tactic is an effective means of protecting oneself from discriminatory practices when one has the privilege to do so. In the experiences explored thus far regarding this subject, the author of this article has found no indication that they took place at overtly hostile organizations. This means that the hegemonic pressures that deter active engagement in advocating for the queer community exist within what would otherwise be described as supportive organizations.

These hegemonic pressures seek to quiet the voices of queer leaders, to make them small, and corner them into conformity. Henking (2022) offers an elegant counter to this pressure: "[c]onformity doesn't protect anyone from anything" (p. 102). It is not the position of the author that one should blindly rail against these mechanisms of oppression. Instead, the author proposes that there is power in naming these structures, and by doing so, it allows one to productively work towards their dissolution.

Interviews

Introduction

During the course of research, the author had the opportunity to interview two LIS professionals regarding their perspectives on queer leadership. To protect the privacy of the individuals interviewed, the author has elected to anonymize any potentially identifiable information such as names and locations. Both interviewees were asked the same set of eight questions (see Appendix A), in addition to follow-up questions when appropriate, which will be noted when discussed. Interviews were held via video conferencing software, and for the sake of data security, no recording or transcription software was used. All responses and quotes come from the author's handwritten notes.

Interviewee A (henceforth referred to as A) is the Director of Teen Services of a metropolitan library system and Interviewee B (henceforth referred to as B) is the Learning Librarian at the satellite campus of a private university. There is an obvious disparity in positional authority when comparing the responses of the interviewees. However, as discussed in the Queering Leadership framework, the author does not believe that one needs hierarchical

recognition in order to be a leader. Both interviewees offer unique perspectives that speak to the experiences of the queer leaders that exist across the hierarchical spectrum and give insights into how one can bring queer leadership into their own practice, regardless of position.

A Note on Pronoun Use:

A uses both she/her and they/them pronouns. It is the authors experience that in cisnormative settings this leads to defaulting to the binary pronoun of she/her. This practice invisibilizes the complexity of individual identities and is a form of queer erasure. As such, the author is not interested in participating in such a practice. Instead, the author will oscillate between she/her and they/them pronouns when referring to A. To avoid potential confusion, the author will always reintroduce the interviewee (i.e. "when talking with A they said…) as is standard in formal writing. B uses they/them pronouns and will be referred to as such.

Responses and Discussion

Demographics - Q1 and Q2, Appendix A

Both interviewees identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. A claimed the identities of being a feminist, queer, and white, while B claimed the identities of being "ace and non-binary slash gender queer slash agender".

Leadership Style – Q3, Appendix A

A spoke at length regarding how their identities have shaped her leadership style. They highlighted that she encounters many youths struggling with their own identities, which A uses as an opportunity to, in their own words "flag queerness". Flagging queerness in this context was implied to mean not only letting the young patrons be seen, but also to lead by example.

Additionally, she also discussed their approach when working with staff. She described their approach as one that was based in radical politics that focused on queering space by not being tied to hierarchy and creating a collaborative, participatory environment that sought to break with tradition.

B offered a different perspective, describing their queer identities as something that was "relatively new" having only come to terms with their identities in the past five to six years. However, they felt that their identities have so far offered insight into being more accepting of others' perspectives. They also felt that their identities have allowed them to embrace the unique perspectives that each person can bring to the table.

A's responses were more grounded in the larger queer theory contexts and were a clear inspiration to some of the insights found by the author in this article. However, B's response speaks more to the heart of what those larger theoretical concepts seek to address. When Whitney (2022, p. 13) talked about the queer leadership style being how queer leaders navigate hegemonic structures, one needs to take into account the constant recontextualization of queer identity knowledge pointed out by Drabinski (2013, pp. 100-101). This means that, as one develops their queer identity over time and has more experience as a queer leader, their conception of what that means for them naturally complicates. However, that natural core presented by B, the idea of broadening one's perspective to the myriad of human experiences and embracing those differences while recognizing their value, is one that should not be lost in the eventual complexity.

Advocacy – Q4, Appendix A

B started by clarifing that they had only been at their position for a few months so opportunities to advocate have been minimal. However, they discussed that, beyond the constant advocacy surrounding issues of misgendering, they have been advocating for a more diverse collection. Given that they are at a satellite location, they described that their physical collection is much smaller and lacks a popular reads section. Due to this, they have noticed a deficiency of queer perspectives in the collection, and have been collecting patron feedback in order to advocate for the addition of a popular reads collection, as a means of diversifying.

A told the story of a long-running queer focused event at their library that faced backlash from anti-queer members of the community. She described this as an anxious time, stating that "these sorts of things can be career enders." A's colleagues offered their support for the program, seeing it as a high quality program. Some allies even offered to be the outward facing lead on the program given the effects that interfacing with anti-queer sentiment would have for A. However, A felt it was important to take the lead and wrote talking points for the members of staff to provide a clear organizational message. When talking about the issue to the public, A described their anxiety around her own identity, stating that they were "quiet about my queerness" because she was "unsure if it was safe to hold". However, they felt affirmed by the community when there was an outpouring of support for the program.

These two responses offer very different issues for consideration. A's response demonstrates the quieting power of hegemonic pressure previously discussed at work, but with the complication of the pressure coming from outside the library. Her anxiety around the situation possibly leading to an end to their career indicates the stakes that are at the heart of why

these pressures are effective. The community's affirmation at the end of the conversation was implied to have opened the door to A feeling comfortable leading more authentically and fully in the future.

B's perspective demonstrates the practical needs of someone advocating from a position that lacks the power to make final decisions, particularly one who is new to an organization. Their approach of identifying a need, then gathering patron feedback to effectively advocate for space and funding to those with power, is ubiquitous at all levels of librarianship. While the outcome of this advocacy is unknown, it is a reminder that, even when new to an organization, one can and should find ways to advocate when possible.

Challenges and Organizational Support – Q5 and Q6, Appendix A

In response to Q5 (see Appendix A) A spoke about a previous role at the same library where she grappled with tension regarding how they were perceived when interfacing with different communities. She mentioned that the city they work in is very segregated as driver of this tension. She reflected: "If I walk around with an undercut in [a prominently white part of A's city] I'm immediately seen as queer. Where in [a prominently black part of A's city] they just think I have a good barber." A identified this as a product of white privilege when comparing it to their queer BIPOC staff members. Given the nuance of the verbal conversation, the author feels this tension is a healthy one. It is an example of engaging with the practice of acknowledging one's own positionality within the hegemonic power structures as laid out in the author's Queering Leadership framework.

When asked about organizational support, A said “they are with me on the big things” in regard to library policies, but stated that there was still day-to-day queerphobia exhibited by both members of staff and the public. They additionally described the tension of trying to empathize with the public, given cases of mental illness that may lead people to behave or speak in a way that is not reflective of deeply held beliefs. In a follow-up question, the author asked how A’s library handled issues of hate speech given that a public library is beholden to the United States’ First Amendment protections. A referenced her library’s use guidelines saying that patrons “can’t request a specific person.” They pointed to this as a tactic used to break up targeted patron interactions with staff in addition to a library culture where others will take over an interaction if needed, and staff are encouraged to do so and go to the back of the library when this happens.

This conversation demonstrates the tension of turning queer theory into praxis when placed in a more complicated and nuanced setting like a public library. The layers of complexity of holding empathy for those that might be mentally ill while they are flinging hate at staff is a difficult one to reconcile, with no clear-cut solutions. A’s library’s approach is one that is practical and can be used at other public libraries, given that hate speech is still protected speech in the United States (Strum, 2025).

B’s challenges were much more personal in nature saying in response to Q5: “Being misgendered. A lot.” They then later said: “I understand that I present very feminine, so I have to accept that. I’ll correct people who misgender others, but for myself it’s a fight I don’t deem worthy.” The author followed up by asking if B’s choice to not correct others when they are

misgendered was based on a fear of reprisal. B responded that it was not, “at least not consciously, I don’t think.”

Some clarity came from discussing organizational support. B said that they generally felt organizational support, pointing to the fact that their supervisor is also non-binary. However, as they were stepping into their current role, there was a fair amount of disconnect between the faculty and the library at the satellite campus. The efforts to repair these relationships were described as “a lot of politicking, [of] needing people to like me.”

It has been the experience of the author, as a transgender woman, that correcting others when they misgender the queer person correcting them can at times be viewed as rude. This more often arises when multiple corrections are needed in quick succession as in B’s case. While not based in fear, per B’s own words, it is the author's opinion that hegemonic pressures are still at work in this example. It is being “out but not loud” (Schneider, 2016, p. 725) due to hegemonic pressures.

Passing the Torch – Q7 and Q8, Appendix A

The author’s intention behind asking Q7 and Q8 are similar, in that they are meant to inspire current and future queer leaders. Either with stories of queer success in the case of Q7 or to offer words of wisdom and perspectives other than those of cisgender gay and lesbian leaders that have been previously discussed in the case of Q8. Given that these stories were not documented in the literature, the author deemed their inclusion was important.

A offered two leadership highlights: being chosen for a citywide leadership building program and successfully handing off a program that coordinated with all the schools in A’s city

to sign up students for library cards. When speaking of the leadership program, they described it as a unique and exclusive opportunity given that it is something one is nominated for. She expressed that it offered a unique opportunity to spend time with leaders from a variety of backgrounds that presented opportunities to get feedback on A's successes and challenges. At the core of why it was so meaningful to A is that it made them feel invested in as a leader.

Part of what A felt led to this recognition is that, in her previous role, they leaded a project that consisted of sharing student data with the public library so that students can be automatically signed up for library cards. Given the historically fraught nature of collaborations between public libraries and schools (Kammer & Moreland, 2021, p. 32), this was a significant undertaking, especially given that the city A's library is in has over 50 schools, all of which collaborated with the program. A described this project as being the only thing that caused her to hesitate, expressing their anxiety about "getting [it] to a place where it can sustain itself." Ultimately, A was successful and has enjoyed watching it grow in new hands.

B shared a story from their previous position, also at a private university, where they advocated for a Social Media Intern position. They described it as starting as a practicum or a position for college credit but without pay for one particular student. However, B saw a lot of promise in this student as well as the hard work the student was putting in. Through B's continuous advocacy, they transitioned the student and the role to a paid position. While the library administration later decided to limit the term of the position to only one year per student, putting it in line with similar internships that the library offered, B still felt it was a success. They talked fondly of watching the student grow, from an undergraduate student who was really

nervous while presenting to library faculty and graduate students, to a confident and effective communicator.

When offering advice to queer librarians who are newly entering the field A said to "find your queer friends at the library" and emphasized that this can be at the current library where one works at or through professional organizations. They stressed the importance of community as a place where one can "celebrate, commiserate, and plot," clarifying that by plotting she meant collaborating to make a more safe and inclusive environment. B offered more general advice relating to being a new librarian: "Just because you are new doesn't mean that you have less to say."

The author feels that the interviewees' parting advice address some of the concerns surrounding hegemonic pressures, each in their own way. In the case of A's advice, one can consider the earlier quote by Cizek (2011) regarding feeling like the "odd man out" (p. 86) which caused queer academic librarians to not lead as their authentic selves. B's advice acts as a counter to the silencing power that these pressures exert.

Conclusion

Through a review of the literature and interviews, the author has explored the many theories, ideas, and concerns of queer leadership. While the research presented cannot be called complete, given the evolving nature of queer information (Drabinski, 2013, pp. 100–101), the author has tried to at least be thorough despite the lack of research on the topic. The author intends this to be a starting point of the continuing conversation amongst queer leaders, or "plot" as Interviewee A would describe it, about how through Queering Leadership they can lead from a place of authenticity, resist hegemonic pressures, and dismantle the structures that give them power.

Appendix A

Q1. Do you identify as a member of the LGBTQIA+ Community?

Q2. If you are comfortable sharing, how would you describe your identity or identities?

Q3. In what way has your queer identity (or any other intersecting identities) influenced your leadership style?

Q4. Have there been times where you have had the opportunity to advocate for the queer community in your role, be it for your collogues or patrons? If so, what did that look like and how did it go?

Q5. In your current or previous roles, have you faced any challenges related to being a part of the queer community? If so, how did you handle them?

Q6. Related question, how supported do you feel by your current library as a member of the queer community on the organizational level at your current library?

Q7. What is a leadership highlight in your career?

Q8. Finally, as a queer person going into librarianship, do you have any advice for me?

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