

# Working in the Liminal Space of Interim Leadership

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## INTRODUCTION

Interim leadership is common in academic libraries, where the time frame for filling open positions can be lengthy and sometimes even indeterminate. Interim leadership positions provide challenges and opportunities, both for the interim leaders themselves and for the library workers they are suddenly supervising. While new interim leaders are provided with leadership experience through their new roles and often are eager to make a positive impact on their library and institution, they can also often feel hamstrung by the liminal space they find themselves in as they negotiate the demands of their new position, the needs of their new supervisees, and the uncertainty of their future position within the institution.

In academic libraries, interim leaders are often thrust into leadership roles without training or preparation for taking on massive new responsibilities. While in these roles, interim leaders are often simultaneously learning how to effectively supervise former colleagues and how to successfully advocate upward for their areas, while potentially navigating through their own uncertain professional futures (interim leaders in academic libraries must typically participate in a national search if they hope to retain their new roles permanently). At the same time, interim leaders often retain the job responsibilities of their permanent role, meaning that they are attempting to do multiple jobs simultaneously. In addition to these challenges, interim leaders can often feel somewhat isolated, as former



peers become supervisees and others in library leadership, who are in more permanent roles, don't yet quite fully feel like peers. This liminal space is often compounded for interim leaders with minoritized identities, who, as in other areas of librarianship, are hugely underrepresented in academic library leadership roles (Bladek, 2019; Le, 2021; Olin & Millet, 2015).

The two authors of this chapter were in interim leadership roles at the same academic library, overlapping in their interim roles for much of the 2021–2022 academic year. Both at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, an institution that was itself going through major changes at the time, Stephanie was the interim associate director of academic and research engagement from June 2021 through May 2022, and Jason was the interim head of information technology and digital services from October 2021 to June 2022. In this chapter, we attempt to help interim leaders in academic libraries as they navigate through the liminal space of unplanned and unforeseen interim leadership roles with positive outcomes for ourselves as leaders, for our departments, and for the library as a whole. We will address strategies for self- and departmental advocacy, for gaining on-the-job leadership and management experience, for adapting to new relationships with former colleagues and former supervisors, and for negotiating the possible uncertainty of your future role in the library.

## GOALS AND OUTCOMES

As an interim leader, you will generally not be expected to make large-scale changes. The main goal for interim leaders is often simply to keep things going: to maintain department, unit, or team processes during the interim period without undue interruption of library operations or disruption for the library workers on the team. This doesn't mean that you can avoid big disruptive changes coming from external sources during your entire term, and you should prepare for the unexpected by allowing for its possibility.

An additional goal for interim leaders should be to help maintain employee morale. Interim leadership roles can occur for any number of reasons, but they inevitably happen at a time of change for the workers who are part of the department or team. While it can be challenging, it is important for interim leaders to be proactive in monitoring their team's morale and take the lead on guiding their team through the change process.

## PLANNING AND PROCESS

### *Entering an Interim Leadership Role*

Interim leadership positions in academic libraries become available for a variety of reasons and may take different forms. You might have time to prepare—for instance, if the previous incumbent gives advance notice about leaving the institution—or it might be sudden. Interim roles can be of indeterminate length, or you may know in advance that a role will be time-limited. You might also know that you will be returning to your previous role, or you might be planning to apply for the permanent leadership position. These different factors will play into how the position takes shape and the choices you might make while in the leadership role. For example, is it your goal to maintain the status quo? Do you feel

like this is an opportunity to start any new initiatives? How might you interact with your new direct reports?

To qualify for an interim leadership role, one must demonstrate an ability to supervise employees and manage day-to-day tasks of the person previously filling the role. In both of our situations, it was fairly clear that we would be the employees who would need to step up to take these interim positions, as we were the two employees in our respective departments who had current supervisory roles. However, this may not always be the case, and there can be additional challenges both for an organization and for an interim leader if there is not an obvious candidate for an interim leadership role. If there are multiple candidates, an organization may need to initiate an application process; if there are no obvious candidates, a current leader may need to take on an additional leadership role or provide someone with extensive support and training to take on new supervisory responsibilities. No matter the circumstance, frequent check-ins with the immediate supervisor of the interim role are vital to stay on track with ongoing initiatives and to keep an open dialogue concerning any issues that may present themselves along the way. These concerns may take the form of former peers who are not comfortable reporting to you or preexisting issues with supervisees that are ongoing.

In addition to support from your new immediate supervisor, it is extremely helpful to find a trusted colleague or peer group—whether within or outside your library—with whom you can talk through issues you are facing as you navigate your new role. It is difficult to anticipate all of the challenges that you might encounter during this time, and it is best to take a long-term perspective to guide your choices. A trusted colleague or external peer can help you anticipate unforeseen problems or deal with issues as they arise.

Finally, you would do well to remember that at the end of the interim period it is very possible that you may return to the role you were in as a peer of your interim supervisees, and maintaining a trusted and collegial relationship will be paramount. In Stephanie's situation, the department was dealing with a sudden traumatic loss of the previous associate director, and she focused on listening, being supportive, concentrating on maintaining the status quo as much as possible to provide stability, and being an advocate for the needs of her unit with upper administration. For Jason, returning to their previous role involved maintaining communications with colleagues and supervisees and ensuring a successful transition of responsibilities and ongoing projects. Two new staff members in Jason's department were hired during this period, and making sure they were onboarded successfully and felt like a part of the transitional team was exceptionally important. Additionally, for both Stephanie and Jason there was a departmental merger that had to be navigated delicately, as external decisions necessitated organizational reconfigurations that affected additional staff.

### *As an Interim Leader*

Interim appointments are different across institutions and departments. They may involve elevating within a department with multiple units, or simply rising to be the leader of a flat organizational unit. If you have already been supervising some of the employees in your new temporary area but have added some additional direct reports, you would be

well advised to do your best to maintain similar working relationships with both groups despite greater familiarity and comfort with the individuals and areas you have been working with longer.

Working with your peers in other leadership units can take different forms: for instance, you may suddenly need to learn how to negotiate budget allocations, update organizational procedures, or improve cross-departmental workflows. These types of opportunities may allow you to demonstrate your ability to be a leader to those you may want to work alongside in the future, but they can also require quickly gaining some expertise on topics with which you may have had little interaction in your previous role. Being a team player can be helpful and it can go a long way toward demonstrating your ability to work with others at this level.

It is important that you make the effort to get up to speed on the history of how this level of leadership functions and what might guide their different decision-making strategies. Ultimately you will want to make choices and proposals that benefit the entire organization you are working in, but it is important to note that you are now the voice of the unit you supervise, and it is your responsibility to understand the needs of those you supervise and advocate for them at this level. This can be a hard line to walk as you determine the best way to advocate for your department and negotiate with others on behalf of your institution. Transparent communication, keeping your supervisees informed about the decisions you are making on their behalf, and giving them opportunities for feedback into processes will go a long way toward creating a more inclusive environment to work in and demonstrating your ability to be a leader.

While you can go into any interim position with a clear head and a determination to do what is best for all involved, it can be a challenge to retain that mentality when you also may have your own career objectives to consider. It is easy to fall into the trap of second-guessing how you will be perceived throughout your interim role if you are planning to apply for the permanent position and it comes time for everyone you work with to decide if you should continue in the role as this level of leader within your institution. A supportive supervisor and peer network can help you work through these affective considerations, but it is important to remember and understand that as much as you might plan, not everything is within your control. While we were not always successful at maintaining this attitude, we found that a focus on the needs of our unit and our staff generally served both ends: maintaining this focus was best for the people in our areas, our department, and our library, and it helped us demonstrate our capacity as advocates and our capability as managers and leaders. Keeping a professional attitude and understanding that your decisions and attitudes carry forward throughout your career can help you maintain a positive outlook no matter the circumstances you find yourself in at the end of the term.

### *After Your Interim Leadership Role*

After your interim leadership role has concluded, you will find yourself either returning to your previous position or remaining in the role as a permanent leader. If you do remain in the leadership role, you might still find that you need to actively find your way out of

your liminal space, as your transition time will be minimal and it may not feel immediately different from the interim role. In such cases, it is important to remember to give yourself time to feel comfortable in your new, permanent leadership role and not make too many changes all at once—both for your own sake and for that of your department or direct reports. Know that you were hired for a reason and that during your interim leadership you proved that you could do the job well.

If you have returned to your previous position, there may be different emotions to work through. Even if you went into the role knowing that it wouldn't be permanent, you may see the new leader making different decisions or doing things differently than you did while you were in the role. It is okay to allow yourself to have feelings of frustration or disappointment, but you might also want to approach the situation as an opportunity to reexamine your own processes and try to figure out together the best path forward. Offer your expertise from experience, but do not try to impose the model of how it has always been done on a new leader who comes in with ideas for how things could be different and potentially better. Help them avoid pitfalls, but do not try to force them to walk in the same path you or the previous leader guided your unit through. You may have also unsuccessfully applied for the permanent position, in which case your emotions will be different yet. Give yourself time to work through the feelings and make decisions about your future that are best for you and not guided by feelings of regret and loss.

## APPLICATION FOR OTHERS EXPERIENCING SIMILAR ISSUES

For anyone temporarily taking on leadership duties on an interim basis, here are some things to consider:

*Term of the interim appointment:* Is this a month or two, or will the appointment approach the one-year mark? This will affect how many changes—if any—you make to how the unit operates or how much you want to alter the relationship you have with your colleagues.

*Do you want to try to turn this into a permanent position?* If so, you should make your intentions clear to your supervisor so they can help guide you in how you might best position yourself for the permanent role. If not, then you should do everything in your power to make sure the best person is hired into this position as quickly as possible to ensure the gap between permanent leaders is as short as it can be.

*What will your expectations be in fulfilling the responsibilities of your permanent role?* Will your supervisor expect that you will be able to succeed as fully in your permanent role while also taking on leadership responsibilities, or should you negotiate for some of your current responsibilities to be put on the plate of a team member (or to be put on hold entirely for the duration of the appointment)? Make sure you are clear from the outset about what your expectations will be and what support you might have. For Stephanie, this was a challenge, as due to a quick succession of vacancies for various reasons she was having to take on the responsibilities of four different positions. Luckily, her immediate supervisor and the dean of the library were extremely understanding of the situation she

was in and understood that some services and processes would remain minimal for the duration of her interim appointment. Due to this situation, she was also able to work with library administration to prioritize filling several of the vacancies in her department. For Jason this was a little more difficult because their workload had been increasing steadily since the time of their initial hire, because they were very involved in initiatives related to a new and very visible service point, and because they had just joined a new cross-departmental team that was simultaneously working on getting off the ground. Rearranging committee appointments and successfully reassigning large projects made Jason's interim appointment initially possible, but challenges related to individual, team, and departmental identity created obstacles that sometimes made it difficult to fulfill the responsibilities of both their interim and permanent positions. Ultimately, you will have the most chance of success if you make sure at the outset that your interim role and expectations (yours, those of your direct reports, and those of your supervisor) are as clear from the outset as they can be.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

Kniewel, J. E., & Reynolds, L. J. (2022). *Interim leadership in libraries: Building relationships, making decisions, and moving on*. American Library Association.

## REFERENCES

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- Le, B. P. (2021). Academic library leadership: Race and gender. *International Journal of Librarianship*, 6(1), 13–26. <https://doi.org/10.23974/ijol.2021.vol6.1.184>
- Olin, J., & Millet, M. (2015, November 4). Gendered expectations for leadership in libraries. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/libleadgender/>