

## **Identifying Critical "Soft Skills" for an Academic Career: An Exploratory Study**

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### ***Introduction***

Faculty members in programs that prepare school librarians/teacher-librarians spend time considering the knowledge, skills, and attitudes students need to have when they graduate. Some of these come from competencies set out in documents such as the [ALA/AASL/CAEP School Librarian Preparation Standards](#) (2019), the [IFLA School Library Guidelines](#), and [Leading Learning: Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada](#). Faculty members carefully consider both the hard skills (e.g., “discipline-specific knowledge” and technical skills) and soft skills (e.g. “people or behavioural skills” such as interpersonal, conflict management, stress management, collaboration, networking, negotiations, power structure, etc.) needed for the role of being a school librarian/teacher-librarian. Researchers (Ahmad et al., 2016; Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Cobb et al., 2015; Callier & Vanderford, 2014; Decker, 2020; Deng et al., 2014; Maelah et al., 2014; Pedersen & Hahn, 2020; Pfeifer, 2004; Sheth, 2018; Tsirkas et al., 2020; Weber et al., 2009) have also examined soft skills in the context of undergraduate and graduate education, job readiness, and LIS education. In preparation for future employment, faculty members encourage students to examine job

advertisements to learn more about the hard and soft skills they need to develop. Researchers have examined these job advertisements (e.g., Creel & Welsh, 2021; Hansen, 2011; Maccaferri & Harhai, 2019) to find out more about soft skills that are needed for today's workforce. White (2013), for example, found that employers wanted "candidates who are team players, problem solvers and can plan, organize and prioritize their work" (para. 5).

What do we know, however, about the soft skills required for work as a faculty member, doctoral supervisor, and department, faculty, and/or university administrator? Doctoral degree programs contribute to preparing students to be researchers and teachers (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Gaff et al., 2003). Both hard and soft skills should be considered important in the context of this faculty work (Matteson et al., 2016; Deepa & Seth, 2013).

### ***Review of the Literature***

There have been attempts by researchers to define soft skills. Pandey and Pandey (2015) describe soft skills as a "cluster of personality traits, social graces, facility with language, personal habits, friendliness and optimism" (p. 74). Robles (2012) listed ten soft skills based on level of importance: integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, interpersonal skills, professionalism, positive attitude, teamwork skills, flexibility, and work ethic (p. 456).

A number of studies have examined current graduate students' perspectives and experiences about their programs (e.g., Golde & Dore, 2001) and identity development (e.g., Hall & Burns, 2009). Nerad and Cerny (1999) conducted a survey with participants who graduated with PhD degrees 10-14 year ago and the focus of the study was on employment, job search, and evaluation of their program. Nyquist et al. (2001) conducted a longitudinal study to record changes experienced and training received by PhD students over a period of four years.

There are a limited number of studies that focus on investigating the full spectrum of "soft" skills including managerial and leadership skills required of faculty members during different stages of their career, and the role of doctoral programs in developing "soft" skills. Campbell et al. (2005), for example, noted that "the research component of doctoral education is often emphasized at the expense of broader training and skill development" (p. 153).

### ***Research Objectives***

This research project seeks to:

- understand the “soft skills” that are important for work in the Academy,
- examine if and how doctoral programs are providing such “soft” skills
- identify gaps in acquisition of “soft” skills due to limited opportunities in doctoral programs and new faculty orientation.

The aim is to identify gaps and ways to improve the doctoral degree programs, particularly from a “soft” skills perspective, while also understanding the soft skill needs of faculty members as they move through their academic careers.

### ***Methodology***

This generic qualitative study is interested in the experiences of faculty members in programs that prepare school librarians and teacher-librarians. Qualitative research examines the world of lived experience by looking at how “social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 14). According to Merriam (2009), generic qualitative research, also called basic or interpretive qualitative research, “attempts to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (p. 23). In a generic qualitative study, the researcher is attentive to the alignment of the research question, the methodological choices, and the research methods (Kahlke, 2014). A call for participants was shared across multiple universities using email based on lists of faculty members available from association websites. We conducted semi-structured interviews with eight current and former faculty members.

Interviews are ongoing but will be transcribed and analyzed by looking for common themes and trends that emerged across questions and throughout the comments (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1998). The findings will be presented using representative quotes from the interview responses to support the patterns and themes. This will be compared and contrasted with information found in the research literature on the topic.

### ***Preliminary Findings***

Participants shared many soft skills that they felt were important in their roles as faculty members and administrators. These included advocacy skills, active listening, advising skills, understanding of equity, diversity and inclusion, leadership skills, time management skills,

social justice stance, work-life balance, building and maintaining relationships with colleagues, networking skills, and presentation skills. The participants noted that their doctoral programs prepared them for some of their work in the Academy with graduate research and teaching experiences, mentoring, networking support, and formal coursework. Participants developed some of these soft skills from work as teachers and school librarians/teacher-librarians. Association work (local, regional, national and international) was also seen as essential for developing soft skills (i.e., presentation skills, networking, conference organizing skills, building relationships) and several participants mentioned the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) as one organization that provided opportunities for doctoral students to develop soft skills.

### ***Discussion, Conclusion and Implications***

The research paper will include a discussion of the findings in the context of the related research literature on soft skills. The authors will also provide recommendations for soft skill training and development for doctoral students, faculty members on tenure track, faculty members moving through the ranks, and new administrators. Implications for further research on this topic will also be included.

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## ***Biographies***

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