

# “I needed to learn this in my first year as a faculty member”: Soft Skills for School Library Faculty Members

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*Organizations expect professionals to have excellent hard skills and soft skills. Researchers have examined different facets of soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, interpersonal, collaboration, and networking, among others, in different workplace contexts, including academia. In this ongoing qualitative study, researchers conducted eight semi-structured interviews with school library faculty members to learn more about the “soft skills” required in academia. Some of the key soft skills identified include time management, collaboration and teamwork, communication and conversations, leadership skills, understanding power structures, and managing people.*

## Introduction

Faculty members in programs, schools, and departments that prepare 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](#). Professionals graduating from a school library education program must have both the hard skills, the technical skills and occupation-specific knowledge that people need to complete their job (Kumar & Hsiao, 2004; Robles, 2012), and soft skills, “the interpersonal, human, people or behavioral skills” (Weber et al., 2009, p. 354) as these are considered important in the context of work (Matteson et al., 2008; Sheth, 2008). Soft skills are “personal, learnable attributes, such as emotional intelligence, communication aptitude, persuasion facility, storytelling ability, collegiality” (Decker, 2020 p. 17), time management, leadership, and teamwork (Clarke, 2016; Ngang et al., 2015).

Researchers have examined soft skills in various contexts such as undergraduate and graduate education, job readiness, teaching professional training, and Library and Information Studies (LIS) education (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2016; Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Callier & Vanderford, 2014; Cobb et al., 2015; Decker, 2020; Deng et al., 2014; Maelah et al., 2014; Ngang et al., 2015; Pedersen & Hahn, 2020; Pfeifer, 2004; Sheth, 2018; Tsirkas et al., 2020; Weber et al., 2009). 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, K. 2011; Maccaferri & Harhai, 2019) to find out more about soft skills that are needed for today's workforce. White (2013) found that employers wanted "candidates who are team players, problem solvers and can plan, organize and prioritize their work" (para. 5). LIS faculty members pay particular attention to these soft skills for their students but how closely do they consider their own soft skills in the context of work in the academy? What do we know about the soft skills required for work as a faculty member, doctoral supervisor, and department, faculty, or university administrator? And what do we know about school library faculty members and the soft skills they need for their work as teachers, researchers, administrators, and leaders on campus and in the school library community?

Doctoral degree programs contribute to preparing students to be researchers and teachers (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Gaff et al., 2003) but Campbell et al. (2005) noted that "the research component of doctoral education is often emphasized at the expense of broader training and skill development" (p. 153). Both hard and soft skills should be considered important in the context of faculty work (Deepa & Seth, 2013; Matteson et al., 2016). Faculty members use soft skills regularly in their academic career whether they are on the tenure track, tenured, or in a leadership or administrative position, and yet, there are a limited number of studies that investigate the full spectrum of soft skills, including managerial and leadership skills, required of faculty members during different stages of their career. This study seeks to examine the soft skills domain in the context of academia, particularly to understand the soft skills that are important for school library faculty members as they move through their academic careers. This is an ongoing study and presents key emerging findings from a pilot qualitative study conducted with school library faculty members who are at different stages in their academic careers.

## Review of Literature

The term 'soft skills' is "catchy but ambiguous, and authors use it extensively with little agreement on meaning" (Matteson et al., 2016 p. 75). Different terminologies such as "generic skills", "employability skills", and "workplace know-how" are used to refer to soft skills (e.g., Marin-Zapata et al., 2022, p. 970). 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). Weston (2020) defines soft skills as "interpersonal and intrapersonal transferable skills such as effective collaboration and communication as opposed to the hard skills related to the technical requirements of a specific task" (p. 528). Researchers and practitioners have identified a long list of soft skills. Robles (2012) lists 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). El-Fakahany (2022) notes that soft skills such as conflict resolution, time management, leadership skills, work-life balance, and networking are essential for a successful career in the academic context.

Researchers have also examined specific soft skills in academia. Mentoring is an important part of a faculty member's work and findings indicate that mentoring in doctoral programs was associated with increased "confidence in [graduate students'] ability to pursue an academic career" (Curtin et al., 2016, p. 739). Strawser et al. (2022) examine mentoring using a generational approach

(i.e., Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials) and suggest “that the multigenerational academic workforce may be more similar than different” and that “organizational identification is strongly correlated with job satisfaction across generations” (Strawser et al., 2022, p. 44). The authors further noted that mentoring is especially important to Millennials and “institutions should allow mentoring relationships to form naturally rather than forcefully” (Straswer et al., 2022, p. 45).

Other research has attempted to understand “the relationship of soft skills gained to the amount of leadership education completed by graduates” (Brungardt, 2011, p. 3). Orsini & Coer (2022) describe “how mentoring behaviors impact the development of doctoral student leadership self-efficacy (LSE) through their interaction with the leadership environment and faculty mentoring behaviors” (p. 115). While the research is clear that mentoring is an important part of the supervisor-student relationship, there is no research on school library faculty and their mentorship of graduate students. Other research by Eddy and Garza Mitchell (2012) highlights that building communities and collaboration is essential in academic work. As most school library faculty members are highly engaged in service to the school library community (Branch-Müller, 2017) and with a focus on interdisciplinary and team research (i.e., the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grants), school library faculty members are likely to need these same soft skills.

One of the soft skills that is identified and discussed in studies both in the context of academic and non-academic jobs is the importance of work-life balance. Dorenkamp and Ruhle (2019) examine work-life conflict and job satisfaction among academics and find that when compared to other occupations “work-to-life conflict was particularly high among academics” (p. 72). Work-to-life conflict can be defined as when “the work role interferes with the private role” (Dorenkamp & Ruhle, 2019, p. 59). Dorenkamp & Suß (2017) note that a lack of mentor support, in combination with high workloads and career insecurity can also increase an academic’s work-life conflict. Kinman & Jones (2008), in their study of UK academics, report that “one respondent in four (25 percent) maintained that the demands of their job resulted in their being irritable at home, and a slightly higher proportion (29 percent) indicated that work demands made them withdraw from family and friends” (p. 49). School library faculty members may also find this work-life conflict to be a part of their academic lives.

Research about the soft skills required for academic leadership positions indicates that conflict management is an essential skill. Gmelch & Carroll (1991) present a conflict management model for Chairs when working with their faculty members. They report that there are “three Rs of long-term conflict management: 1. *Recognize* the nature and causes of conflict; 2. Identify and explore effective *response* options; and 3. Practice the art of principled conflict *resolution*” (Gmelch & Carroll, 1991, p. 110). At the core of this model are soft skills including building relationships with people, collaborating to solve problems, communication, avoiding premature judgments, and taking care to consider context and interests.

Sullivan (2019) highlights that conflict management “is a necessary but laborious and complex task, given that interpersonal conflicts are difficult” (p. 33). Sullivan finds that there needs to be “emphasis on communication skills, the chair’s awareness of their conflict management style, and the significance of conflict culture in the department” (p. 119). Rowley and Sherman (2003) highlight that academic “leaders and managers earn trust by being thoroughly honest in every respect, by distributing resources fairly and openly, and by maintaining a positive relationship with peers” (p.1061). As school library faculty members take on leadership roles such as Chair,

Department Head, Director, and Dean, it is important to learn more about the soft skills they feel they need. It is clear from this review of the literature that soft skills are an essential part of being a successful faculty member in the academy. This study seeks to understand the soft skills that school library faculty members feel are most important for their teaching, research, service, administrative, and leadership roles.

## Methodology

This research uses a generic qualitative research paradigm, also known as basic or interpretive qualitative research. It aims to “understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (Merriam, 2009 p. 23), particularly the lived experience of school library faculty members, by looking at how “social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 14). The research team conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with eight current and former school library faculty members. Emails were sent inviting faculty members to participate in this study. All the participants were women and they primarily spoke English. The study participants were at different stages of their academic careers, ranging from newly appointed to retired faculty members, and they work (or worked) in Canadian, US, and Australian universities. The interviews were conducted and recorded using a video conferencing software application. The interviews were (machine) transcribed using the audio transcription feature of the video conferencing software, and the transcribed data was reviewed and edited by a human editor, as required.

The three researchers read each transcript independently and the interview data was analyzed question by question. Representative quotes from the participants, emerging themes from each question, lists of soft skills mentioned by the participants, and overall themes were recorded in an excel spreadsheet. The researchers then met together to compare their analysis of the transcripts. Common themes and trends that emerged across the researchers’ analyses were gathered (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1998). Many soft skills were mentioned by the participants in the interviews. The ones that are highlighted in the findings are those that were mentioned by two or more participants. Because participants were at different points in their academic careers, the soft skills deemed essential were sometimes mentioned by one participant but highlighted, detailed, and expanded upon by another participant. Soft skills were organized into broader categories with multiple examples from the transcripts of the participants.

## Findings and Discussion

Participants in this study identified several soft skills they considered relevant and important for their work as school library faculty members. While many soft skills were mentioned, this paper will highlight six that were seen as very important or essential by participants. These include time management, collaboration and teamwork, communication and conversations, leadership skills, understanding power structures, and managing people. The findings will be highlighted using representative quotes from the participants and discussed in the following subsections in no particular order. The emerging themes from this research study are in line with previous research literature on soft skills.

## ***Time Management***

Several participants talked about time management and its importance in their life as a school library faculty member. One participant recommended that you “take advantage of what is really your passion” and “make time for that.” That might include “being able to focus attention in one area” and “spinning plates in another.” The participants commented on various facets related to time management. This included the need to **reflect and review** work in the past. One of the participants stated that “you know, what did you find most useful in the first couple of years and what would you do again and what would you do differently and how did you manage it all, and how did you plan your time and what worked for you?” Participants talked about **time allocation, planning, and setting hours**, and one of them shared, “knowing now that I’ve got the time to be able to create things, instead of having to make it in a day. I can take a week so then pacing myself and actually working within the hours that I’m supposed to work, not working outside of those.”

Other participants emphasized that faculty members must be **self-directed and accountable**, and this is especially true when people are working remotely from home. One participant shared that “when you’re working from home being self-directed and making the deadlines and managing my own time is super important. I’m not going into the office every day and talking to people and kind of being held accountable, I have to really do that myself.” Participants also shared their frustrations with respect to time management in relation to other people. For example, a participant observed that a PhD student is “often canceling meetings, showing up late to meetings if she’s not managing her time really well.”

Researchers (e.g., Badiozaman et al., 2022; Brent et al., 2001; Conway & Burton, 2011; Culpepper et al., 2020; Hansen, C. K., 2011; Houston et al., 2004; Varkey et al., 2009) discuss the importance of time management in work life including for faculty members in a variety of contexts. In a study conducted with faculty physicians, administrative leaders, and student leaders, Varkey et al. (2009) identify time management as one of “four groups of essential skill sets” (p. 246). Culpepper et al. (2020) note that “faculty members experience a gap between how they would prefer to spend their work time and how they actually do so” (p.165). The authors further state that “enhancing faculty members’ ability to manage their time and say yes and no strategically to work requests is important for several reasons” (Culpepper et al., 2020, p. 165). Faculty members who are dissatisfied with their workloads or feel their workloads are unfair may experience poor job satisfaction (Dorenkamp & Ruhle, 2019; Dorenkamp and Suß, 2017). Brent et al. (2001) state that “college teaching may be the only skilled profession that neither presumes experience nor routinely provides training to its novice practitioners” (p. 1). Balancing teaching, research, and service and the demands of each is perhaps the most important skill of all. “Some new faculty members eventually learn [how to do this], others never do and either fail to earn tenure or spend their careers as unproductive researchers and/or ineffective teachers” (Brent et al., 2001, p. 1). All school library faculty members in this study mentioned time management as an important soft skill.

## ***Collaboration and Teamwork***

Collaboration and teamwork were critical soft skills that school library faculty members highlighted. Participants talked about how essential it is to be able to **build teams, collaborate** and “be an active listener.” One participant mentioned that this is something you learn in “your first year” as a faculty member. Another participant shared that “it’s been interesting. We’re doing these interviews [for

faculty positions] and I would say, this is something that people are not being taught because they are coming in and they don't know to be able to talk about who they could collaborate with."

For one participant it was in the context of mentoring doctoral students that she noted the importance of **negotiation, communication, and expectation setting**. She stated, "I try to explain to them [doctoral students] the importance of settling things ahead of time, you know, like making negotiations ahead of time. These are the expectations, and this is the author order, or this is who's going to be doing what, and this is our timeline." Another participant highlighted **interdisciplinary collaboration** as essential in academia and the need "to be able to work with people who are looking through a lens that's very different from your own." This can be true particularly when one is exploring opportunities to collaborate to apply for grants and undertake large scale research projects that require intellectual contributions from multiple disciplines.

However, participants felt that collaboration opportunities sometimes **create challenges** due to uncertainty or lack of clarity. One participant explained that "somebody is offering you an opportunity to collaborate" and "you are not sure if it is the right fit for you." Another participant described her own challenging experiences at a new university:

I did have a hard time finding people to collaborate with. I have a hard time with what that actually looks like in practice and how you make a connection with someone. Yeah, I'm interested in that too. Cool, we should work together. But then, how does that actually come to fruition, you know, and it takes a lot of time to get to a point where you then are actually starting a project together. For example, we've had these research groups in our faculty, and I specifically joined one outside of my specific discipline, one called environmental and social justice. It wasn't until about a year and a half after interacting with those people that we finally kind of figured out a project we could do together. So yeah, I think that's definitely something that's been challenging for me.

Several participants mentioned the importance of being a **team player** and making others "feel like they're an equal part of the team." So, then faculty members need **team building skills** including how to "build each other up" and "how to support your remote workers and how to build teams remotely." The pandemic has added new soft skills to be learned and practiced by school library faculty members for effective collaboration and teamwork.

These collaboration and teamwork soft skills were identified as important in past research studies as well. Varkey et al. (2009) identify teamwork as a necessary soft skill, Robles (2012) identifies teamwork as one of the ten important soft skills, and Johnston et al. (2020) note that "collaborative teams are integral to research and allow more faculty members to contribute and benefit from professional academic development through scholarship" (p. 62). Universities encourage collaboration as faculty undertake both disciplinary studies as well as interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary studies. Bronstein et al. (2010) note that "[t]he call for interdisciplinary collaboration has become commonplace" (p. 458). Faculty members are encouraged to collaborate with students to conduct research and to have joint publications "as a strategy for creating a mentoring relationship and providing students with a valuable opportunity to gain experience in working with a proven researcher" (Austin & Baldwin, 1991, p.148). Eddy and Garza Mitchell (2012) note that "collaborating with other faculty members is one option for easing workload demands and

reinvigorating faculty members in the conduct of their teaching and research” (p. 283). All the school library faculty members in this study mentioned collaboration and/or teamwork as being essential for work in the academy.

### ***Communication and Conversations***

Participants noted the importance of **communication**, in general, and **critical conversations** as soft skills for their academic work. For example, a participant noted, “I have been thinking about how to have conversations in difficult situations with students.” Faculty members, including administrators, are expected to communicate with other faculty colleagues, staff, and students on sensitive matters, and they should be able to **communicate deftly** and must be able to **convey sensitive information**. One participant described this as “being able to make difficult decisions and communicate them in a way that is acceptable, but in a way that says...you know I get where you’re coming from.” Faculty members and administrators have multiple roles and different roles may require **different communication strategies**. One of the participants shared that “you have something that you want to advocate for. How do you connect your advocacy for something that your colleague or administrator also considers important, so that you can have them buy in?”

It is equally important for faculty members and administrators to be able to have conversations with different personalities (e.g., colleagues not willing to have conversations on challenging subject matters). Such conversations must be **mutually respectful** and should not contribute to a potential conflict. One of the participants, reflecting on their experience, noted, “I have learned different ways of having difficult conversations with people who maybe don’t prefer to have difficult conversations.” The participants in this study reflected on the overall importance of communication and conversation in context of their academic work. Similarly, Badiozaman et al. (2022) report that the life of a faculty member is full of work that requires “communication competence... including designing learning activities, sending emails, and reminders, and responding to student questions promptly” (p. 550). Farmer et al. (1998) highlight the importance of communication in the context of change management. Armstrong and Wolshyn (2017) reflecting on the department chair’s role state that:

Becoming a chair required frequent and ongoing interaction with a wider range of individuals and groups. Although communication was identified as a primary function of the department chair’s role, participants often felt challenged by the unaccustomed volume and variety of information they received from multiple sources (e.g., students, colleagues, other department chairs, deans, senior administrators) (p. 104).

Barge (2014) further highlights that academic leaders are “always in conversation with others... and these conversations occur in multiple languages - the language of resources, the language of space allocation, budget language, bureaucratic language, the language of emotion and feelings, assessment and accountability language, and many more” (p. 60). Staller (2014) reflects on difficult conversations that leaders will have to undertake in different spaces and diverse areas (e.g., financial management and governance). The authors share that:

These conversations are difficult because they involve competing priorities and preferences over very real and increasingly limited resources. Indignant outrage at

any proposed change offers a safe public stance. However, in my view, any attempt to avoid or delay these hard discussions is irresponsible. (Staller, 2014, p.168)

Barge (2014) also notes that there needs to be a consideration of how “communication may be structured to develop new forms of individual and collective meaning making,” how it is important to pick “up on existing context and connecting to that context, and how leaders must consider “the pacing of conversations, going at a speed that others can manage [while] trying to keep moving in a coherent way that makes sense to people” (p. 59). The participants in this study highlighted that in their day-to-day teaching, research, and service work, and as they move through the ranks and into leadership positions, they need to learn how to have critical conversations, share sensitive information, use different communication strategies in different situations, and be respectful.

## **Leadership**

Several participants made mention of leadership in the context of academia, and it was identified as one of the significant soft skills. One participant stated that “aside from all the administrative stuff that you have to do...I could really move our department forward and make it more visible within the university ecosystem and that's a big piece of I think leadership.” School library faculty members in this study further noted that one of the characteristics of a good leader is that one should be **knowledgeable** and **well-informed**. Participants reflected on their personal experiential learning including during their previous educational and work experiences, and how they came to have, or how they continue to develop, leadership skills. People gained and/or honed leadership skills using different approaches such as learning by **self-teaching**, **reading books** on leadership theory, and **engaging in conversations** about women in leadership.

However, participants experienced **challenges in the acquisition of leadership skills** including missed opportunities. A participant noted that “we had a course in organizational theory but that's not the same as leadership, and I would have liked to have had that. I feel a little bit at a disadvantage and having to, you know, self-teach.” Another participant described the missed opportunity for students to **develop leadership skills during their program of study**. She noted that “in my library program both the masters and the PhD we were taught that librarians are leaders, but I didn't learn leadership theory and I would have liked to have had that. I feel like that's a disconnect right there.”

Participants made an important observation that there is a systemic issue related to leadership in academia. Often in universities, faculty members who are strong researchers are “rewarded” with administrative and leadership positions in academia, but such individuals may not have the leadership and/or managerial skills for this role. Academic leaders need to identify ways to move things forward, giving due consideration to both **academic performance** and **leadership skills**. A participant highlighted that “we tend to reward faculty members with promotions, and with directorships and with deanships, based on their academic performance - which has nothing to do with their managerial skills.” The soft skills required of academic leaders were highlighted by school library faculty members. Four of the participants were in academic leadership positions but all the participants mentioned leadership soft skills in the interviews.

Researchers have also found that leadership soft skills are important. Rowley and Sherman (2003) note that “leadership is an essential ingredient of positions with supervisory responsibilities



in any organization” (p.1058). Authors such as Cormer et al. (2002) and Bilimoria et al. (2006) highlight the importance of leaders in an academic setting. Comer et al. (2002) state that “the department chair and program director are the links between faculty and administration, between one department or program and another, and between the discipline and the institution” (p. 514). Armstrong and Wolshyn (2017) suggest that “the transition from faculty member to department chair is overwhelmingly different and difficult due to the protean and ambiguous nature of their role and the lack of preparation for managerial tasks” (p.102). Bilimoria et al. (2006) explain:

As leaders of their faculty groups, department chairs and school/college deans can serve as mentors and role models, provide vocational and psychological support, and professional network connections to their faculty. They can facilitate workplace environments that are supportive, collegial, respectful, and inclusive of all faculty members. The combination of resources and relational supports from the department chair or dean facilitate both increased job competency and the building of networks (p. 358).

Participants in this study talked about how they learned and honed their leadership skills. Sternberg (2013) notes that “styles of leadership are extremely important in the success or failure of academic administrators” (p. 24). The author identified four leadership categories and stated that “the key to exercising leadership, in short, is to know thyself but be prepared to adopt another leadership persona if the situation demands it. That is how effective leaders get things done” (Sternberg, 2013, p. 27). Middlebrooks and Haberkorn (2009) reflect on “the role of mentor as a possible avenue of individual leader development” (p. 7). The participants in this study suggested that people in leadership roles should be selected based on both academic performance and leadership skills.

However, participants expressed challenges in developing leadership skills. Boggs (2003) found that “leadership and faculty development programs and institutes must do a better job of preparing people to meet the challenges of leadership” (p. 19). Leaders “will need opportunities to learn, to develop, and to practice these skills through simulations, internships, and mentorships. Leadership programs should be structured to provide these opportunities for skill development” (Boggs, 2003, p. 20). Armstrong and Wolshyn (2017) suggest that “senior management review recruitment and hiring policies, articulate the required leadership skills, and invest money in relevant professional development and training” (p. 108). School library faculty members take on leadership roles on campus and in the school library community. These leadership roles can move forward the work of the department, school, faculty, college, university, as well as local, state, provincial, national, and international school library organizations and associations.

### ***Understanding Power Structures***

Universities are complex organizations and understanding how to work within them is important for faculty members and academic leaders. Faculty members, including academic leaders, need to figure out how to move things forward and build consensus. They should have an in-depth knowledge of both **formal and informal** (*hierarchies*) **power structures** as well as an excellent awareness of institutional culture. As noted by one of the participants, such knowledge can be acquired by “what we call the institutional ethnography like learning to examine the way that things are done.” It is believed that such understanding may help in finding “a way to work within the

power structures.” The participants also suggested that school library faculty members should be aware of informal power structures. One should be able to identify **influencers** and **(informal) leaders** (i.e., individuals who have (soft) power without having formal designation). As one participant explained, it is important to know “who has the unwritten power” and “who the influencers are.” It is also recommended that newly hired faculty members should learn about the **organizational structures and culture**, and they should particularly try to learn more about individuals in leadership roles including their leadership traits. One participant suggested that new faculty members should:

Observe. Take the first few months, go to every meeting that you can to observe and identify the people that are considered positive, powerful leaders. Because there are the people that are the bullies, there are the people that are the snakes, there are the people that are the underhanded, you know manipulators, but you can usually tell who is generally very well liked, who has an opinion that people really hold at high esteem.

Understanding how universities work, how governance is managed, and who the influencers are can help school library faculty members move forward in their academic careers. The participants in the study recommended that faculty members, including people in leadership positions (e.g., chairs, directors, and deans), develop a better understanding of their organization. According to the International Peacebuilding Advisory Team (2015), “anyone interested in ‘change’ has an interest in understanding ‘power’, because ‘power’ is both one of the constraining factors to change and one of its enablers (para. 1). The Institute of Development Studies (2022) explains that “a widely used typology for analysing power in political decision-making and democratic participation identifies three faces or dimensions of power: the visible, the hidden, and the invisible” (para. 9).

Cross and Ravekes (1990) consider the role of the college president who “would not deny that there is an ‘invisible’ power structure that operates outside the recognized hierarchy and that has significant influence over the activities and the atmosphere of the campus” (p. 11). Neumann (1979) explains that “power is one of the most studied areas in organizations, particularly in higher education” (p. 283). There is a power differential among employees in organizations, including academia. Drake et al. (2019) share research about full-time, non-tenure track faculty working in a public research university. The findings of their study suggest “overarching power structures—administration, tenured faculty, formal and informal policies—may contribute to experiences of constrained agency and invisibility for key members of the organization” (Drake et al., 2019, p.1635-1636).

Understanding of power structure is important for new tenure-track faculty members as well as for those moving through the ranks and participating in, or leading more senior committees. For example, Evans (2015) notes that “the structures of power and work in academia can create dilemmas for new faculty members who may be faced with a choice: whether to risk one’s career by engaging in transdisciplinary teaching, research, and service, or pursue traditional discipline-based recognition and advancement” (p. 80). Universities are complex organizations and collegial governance structures continue to evolve. School library faculty members need to understand the formal and informal power structures in their organizations.

## ***Managing People***

Participants discussed the importance of people management skills. Faculty members, in leadership roles or not, **manage and support** students (e.g., in courses, as research assistants, as teaching assistants including markers/ graders), colleagues including staff members, team members and collaborators (within their workplace/university), and others, including external partners, in everyday work life. However, this facet of academic life is not often discussed in doctoral programs. A participant noted, “I don’t think we talked at all about managing people in terms of graduate students and research assistants and teaching assistants”.

People management is multi-faceted in the context of academia. Faculty members are “managing people and managing people’s emotions and feelings when you’re working with them.” Faculty members are participating in **recruiting and hiring people** when they participate in selection committees constituted to hire and recruit staff members, faculty members, dean and directors, and others. Faculty members are involved in hiring and recruitment of research and teaching assistants. People management, particularly in the hiring context, becomes very challenging because it is difficult to “even hire a research assistant.” Faculty members are closely involved in **establishing and nurturing relationships with collaborators** and **building and managing a team**. One participant talked about the responsibility to “manage those teams of casual staff...” and coordinating teamwork including having to “hire people outside of my department and then coordinate with them for moderation and calibration.” This may be difficult when you are **managing diverse personalities** and their work, and during the pandemic, school library faculty members had to learn how to do all of this remotely.

Faculty members and academic leaders should have soft skills to deftly handle people management related issues such as conflict management. A participant noted “if you ever want to learn soft skills, chair a ... curriculum committee where you literally have three departments at war, constantly trying to get courses approved or not approved or taken away.” It was noted that faculty members must sometimes **train** as well as manage the work of other people. One of the participants explained “something I find hard is with a research assistant, for example, managing their work ... Probably because I was a research assistant for so long that I was used to doing the work myself, so I sometimes find it hard to manage how they do things, and you know, asking them to do it better.” Interpersonal soft skills are essential for school library faculty members and their work in the academy.

Other researchers have noted the soft skill of managing people as being important in an academic context. Baruch (2013) states that “effective leadership and people management are essential ingredients for the success of universities in both the short and long-term” (p. 197). Managing people is multifaceted and is complex both in academic and non-academic settings. According to Armstrong and Wolshyn (2017), the department chair in academia has a wide range of responsibilities including “managing interpersonal conflicts as well as resource acquisition and allocation” (p. 102), “liaising with and supporting others, including students, staff, colleagues, and senior administrators” (p. 103), working “closely with other department chairs, deans, and senior management” (p. 105). Thornton et al. (2018) reflect on a wide range of responsibilities for head of school and in the context of people management these include “hiring and managing staff (including performance and career development); balancing staff workloads; ... health and safety” (p. 216). Baruch (2013) notes that “a different set of people management related issues in academe exists and

it varies with the meaning of careers that accompanies each career stage” (p. 203). School library faculty members are responsible for managing people in their teaching, research, service, and administrative/leadership roles. Learning soft skills to work with diverse people is essential for success in the academy and when engaging with the school library community.

## Implications and Conclusions

The paper presents findings related to soft skills from a pilot study conducted with eight school library faculty members (early career, mid-career, academic leaders, and retired) working at a university in Canada, US, or Australia. The results of this study reaffirm that soft skills are important in academia. Faculty members interviewed identified several soft skills that they considered as relevant for work in academia including time management, collaboration and teamwork, communication and conversations, leadership skills, understanding power structures, and managing people. This is an ongoing research project and additional findings are expected to emerge with further analysis, and inclusion of new data (e.g., additional interview data, survey data). There are several limitations of this study including, but not limited to, a relatively small sample size, potential researchers’ bias as they are also academics, participants’ diversity (e.g., women faculty members in school library programs in English-speaking countries), and software generated speech-to-text translation.

This pilot study provided us with a large amount of information and confirmed connections to the research literature, while also giving us the opportunity to think more deeply about the next steps in this project. This was a pilot study, and the success of the project has energized researchers to expand this study in a few specific areas. While many of the soft skills are essential for work in the academy, some soft skills may be more important during different stages of an academic career. The need for specific soft skills might vary depending on the work requirements, especially for those who take on academic leadership roles. For example, critical conversations, in general, might be required by both faculty members and administrators but due to the difference in complexity of their work, the soft skills subsumed under critical conversations may need to be more clearly defined.

School library faculty members are an interesting subgroup of the larger context of faculty members in a university. While they are equally qualified with doctoral degrees and research experience, school library faculty members may bring classroom and/or school library teaching experience to their work at universities. Do these teaching experiences develop soft skills that might be easily transferable to teaching responsibilities as faculty members? Are other faculty members without teaching experience more likely to need to develop soft skills associated with teaching during their doctoral programs and early years as faculty members? Does experience in K-12 schools and school libraries better prepare school library faculty members for work in the academy compared to faculty members who have work experience as engineers, biologists, computer scientists, nurses, or pharmacists? Are the soft skills required by faculty members in other departments different from those of school library faculty members? If so, why? If not, can we develop a list of soft skills that faculty members require and then plan ways for doctoral students to begin to develop these skills? In a world where academics must fully engage in teaching, research, and service, it is more important than ever to understand the soft skills necessary to be successful faculty members and leaders on campus and in the broader community.

## Future Research

One of the directions for future study will be to identify soft skills that faculty members require at different stages of their academic careers (e.g., early, mid, late career, as well as for academic leadership positions such as chair, director, and/or dean). Determining which soft skills are critical or “good to have” during the different stages of an academic career will also be useful for consideration when designing faculty and leadership development programs. Future work also aims to examine the different ways (e.g., books, life experiences, education, training and development, previous careers) that people develop soft skills. We also plan to conduct more interviews with diverse faculty members across different disciplines to determine if the soft skills identified in this study with school library faculty members map to other disciplines such as arts, medicine and nursing, engineering, business, law, and science. While it is interesting to ask faculty members to reflect on the soft skills needed to be a faculty member, it will also be informative to hear from those currently in doctoral programs. Is there a match or a disconnect between the soft skills doctoral students believe they will need, and the soft skills faculty members highlight as essential for academic work? Our future work will build on the findings from this pilot study to learn more about soft skills for academic work.

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