

Nancy Shore, Kristina Clement, and Katherine Rose Adams

# Librarians and Degree Seeking

The “Paper Ceiling” and Advancement in Academic Libraries

**A**cademic Library Workers in Conversation is a *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the watercooler has long been heralded, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional publishing with an accessible format. Each of the topics in the series were proposed by the authors and they were given space to explore. This issue’s conversation focuses on the “paper ceiling” and why some library workers continue their educational journey after an MLS/MLIS. The experience of these authors highlights one path that might serve many other academic library professionals.—*Dustin Fife, series editor*

**Nancy Shore:** My career path to librarianship has not been linear, but everything I’ve done up to this point has prepared me for what came next. And so, when I took an academic librarian job at Columbus State University (CSU) in 2022, I did not expect to pursue another degree, much less an EdD, but thanks to the University System of Georgia’s Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), I will graduate debt-free. And when I investigated my options, the EdD program at the University of North Georgia (UNG) was the best fit for me, both in its asynchronous delivery and its cohort model. I knew graduate school at this level would be a lot of work, but I didn’t want doctoral studies to take up all my time. My theory is that if you’re going to get a “free” degree, it might as well be a big one!

**Kristina Clement:** I agree, Nancy, there’s nothing quite like a free degree! Ever since I became a professional librarian, I’ve wanted to pursue a doctorate. When I came to Kennesaw State University, I learned that several librarians here had either just finished or were in the process of going through the EdD in Higher Education Leadership and Practice at UNG using TAP. Like you, Nancy, the cohort model appealed to me, as did the asynchronous learning, and I really liked that I could complete the EdD in just three years. My colleagues had great things to say about the program, so I applied and started with the fall 2023 cohort.

**Katherine Rose Adams:** Well, I can jump on this wagon too! I earned three degrees through the TAP program, including a Masters in Human Resources/Occupational Development and a PhD in Adult Education, all of which I earned at the University of Georgia (UGA) while working in graduate advising roles at UGA. I joined UNG in 2018 as the only faculty member of the Higher Education Leadership and Practice EdD program, and with it being a new program, I was fortunate enough to get to shape and develop a great experience to meet the needs of the adult learners and higher education professionals. I consider the work

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of myself and my two fellow faculty members, Drs. Lanford and Long, to be some of the proudest accomplishments of my life.

**Kristina:** Since joining this EdD program, I've been reflecting on why librarians, including myself, are increasingly pursuing doctorates. My goal is to climb the academic library ranks, ideally to a deanship or beyond, and I've noticed many higher-level job listings now require or strongly recommend a doctorate. Starting my doctorate seemed like a proactive move to overcome future hurdles. I think this trend highlights a broader issue: the "paper ceiling," where the ability to obtain a doctoral degree creates a barrier between middle management and upper administration. I think we see a similar phenomenon in librarianship where the terminal degree for our field acts as a gatekeeper and sidelines those without the means or desire for specific education. Despite learning valuable leadership skills in my program, I do question the growing need for a doctoral title to qualify for top positions, especially when many essential skills are learned on the job. But I will say, the desire to be "Dr. Clement" is quite strong!

**Nancy:** I recently read a paper that discussed the "paper ceiling" created in some professions, and it hit home, personally and professionally. When I was in library school, one of my professors explained that the library degree isn't one where you build new skills, but where you hone and expand on ones you already have. Like you, Kristina, I'm pursuing an EdD so that I have a "piece of paper" from an institution that will certify I "know stuff" about leadership. I am learning a great deal about the institution of higher education as a whole, as well as the many moving parts involved in advancing the institutional mission.

**Katherine:** I started noticing a fairly significant number of academic librarians in the program during the 2020 cohort. In the Higher Education Law course during the ethics module, students are asked to share their field's code of ethics, and I realized that half of the cohort were academic librarians, so I was able to incorporate more library science material in modules. In one module, we ended up having an extensive discussion thread about "the why" behind their attendance in the program. The first was personal leadership advancement outside of the library science field, so those looking into higher education institution (HEI)-wide leadership positions or at the system level. But the second reason was the one that has remained with me, and I'm using my language now to express the idea that the terminal nature of the MLIS degree conflicts with how higher education navigates academic titles and status, such as assuming a doctoral degree is needed to lead an academic program.

I was hearing that HEIs are wanting their academic library deans to have doctoral degrees, which in my opinion is directly related to how higher education can be shortsighted in making generalizations related to academic titles. If I understand correctly, one important aspect of note is that I think there are less than 15 PhD programs in library or information science in the country, which also may be telling of the terminal nature of the MLIS, but then academic librarians need other pathways to their doctorate. The continuation of what is next for a librarian after the MLIS does not appear to have a clear seriation to the next step. Now Kristina and Nancy, just to also be absolutely clear, I'm thrilled that you all are here! I just find that part of why I wanted to engage in our discussion was around what skills could we be complementing into our program that are not repetitive to the MLIS terminal degree, and if we are continuing to see such a population growth, how can we best serve our academic librarian students?

**Kristina:** One enjoyable aspect of this program is the emphasis on leadership within higher education, which is enhanced by learning from classmates with diverse experiences across different university sectors. A recurring sentiment is the feeling of being isolated within our specific departments, a challenge not unfamiliar to academic libraries. We, in libraries, often discuss our internal divisions, yet seldom address how we're perceived as an odd unit in the university structure. Academic libraries often straddle the line between an academic affairs unit and a student affairs or student success unit. With a foot in each space, our existence is liminal and murky, so it's no wonder that academic libraries often have a difficult time communicating our value and purpose to the rest of our institutions. I really hope that what I am learning in my EdD program, both through course content, my dissertation, and from my peers, will help me be an academic library leader that can see both the forest and the trees.

**Katherine:** I hope a benefit of a program like ours is that students gain direct insight that sets one up for success in leadership positions within higher education. In our program, you'll learn how to draft a budget by doing one, to conduct research by completing a dissertation, and to direct a program assessment by doing one. And Kristina, following along what you mentioned as feeling siloed in academic spaces, we bring in a tremendous number of guest speakers, which is more than just hearing from experts but in realizing the value of connecting with other leaders on campus. For example, can we demystify reaching out to general counsel or HR directors so that we are moving forward abiding by policies we may not be fully aware of, which then saves everyone time if we mistakenly move forward without them!

**Nancy:** I think the liminal space that academic libraries and librarians occupy is a blessing and a curse at the same time. We can operate as faculty while not experiencing the full pressure of a traditional teaching load, but sometimes we get left out of important conversations because we're not viewed as "real" faculty. Librarians are very good at reinventing themselves and adapting to the needs of our users, and I feel like a doctoral degree will help me be better positioned for the next evolution of library services.

**Kristina:** Librarians are incredibly adaptable. I'm thrilled to see more librarians pursuing doctorates, aiming beyond roles like library dean or director to higher roles such as university provost or president. Like you said, Nancy, our ability to adapt could make us excellent—but overlooked—candidates for these positions. Librarians have a unique view of the university, and if we start seeing librarians ascend to top university roles, it could give a stronger voice to a traditionally under-voiced unit. Despite the library being a very important part of the university, we still endeavor to properly articulate our value and worth to our communities. Perhaps EdD programs will help librarians not only become more skilled leaders, but also better advocates for our libraries with a more nuanced vocabulary about the complexities of higher education. Advocacy isn't about yelling louder than the next person; it's about finding better words to express our importance and resonate with our communities.

**Nancy:** I like that you're talking about advocacy, and I agree with you, Kristina, that librarians are not always assertive advocates for ourselves or our departments. Because of our generalist background, librarian skills are easily transferable to many departments, but it's not always easy to communicate how they transfer depending on the audience. One reason I accept placement on so many different university and departmental committees is to be a voice for the library in a variety of spaces. I look forward to using my EdD as an admission ticket to discussions above the paper ceiling and being able to use my place in those discussions to advocate for my less-degreed peers and colleagues.

**Katherine:** Nancy, when you speak of being a voice, I very much appreciate how academic librarians in our program are advocating for our program. While we have not made any designated efforts to recruit librarians into the program, we have had an academic librarian in every cohort. So, big thank you to the librarians for promoting our program! I wonder if someone within library science is not seeing this huge flux of a population of potential students, as I also have librarian friends that are attending other EDD programs around the country and realizing that there is an opportunity here to re-envision the library and information science doctoral degree and take advantage of the unique higher education librarian population. Wait . . . maybe we should end our discussion here as I do not want to create any more competition! 