Humanizing the Doctorate for Librarians: Benefits, Challenges, and Support Systems

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In this qualitative case study, we conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 16 Pennsylvania State University librarians who hold, or are considering pursuing, a doctoral degree. Through a thematic analysis using NVivo, we found that the benefits of earning a doctorate included gaining credibility, building relationships with teaching faculty, enhancing research skills, and obtaining a sense of accomplishment. Challenges were primarily related to time management and financial constraints. Supportive advisors and a synergy between library work and doctoral research are important. Libraries benefit from increased knowledge of librarians and can support their doctoral aspirations through financial assistance and flexible work arrangements.

Introduction

The doctorate for librarians is a controversial topic. Some library leaders argue that new hires are more likely to be PhDs (Bell, 2011; Furlough, 2011; Mandeville-Gamble, 2011) while others condemn the idea that new hires would be unlikely to be traditional librarians (Anonymous, 2011). Either way, it is common for librarian job posts to say "MLS or equivalent" for the required credential and list additional preferred credentials (Li & Li, 2021). Additionally, there are many different pathways to become a librarian. For example, the Council on Library and Information Resources provides a fellowship program for recent PhD graduates so that they can explore career opportunities in librarianship without an MLS (CLIR, n.d.). Technological advancement, higher education trends, and the influx of PhDs from other fields might increase competition within the occupation.

Academic libraries are at a pivotal crossroads. Learning from the COVID-19 pandemic experience, higher education institutions have increased their efforts to support trends such as digital transformation, the need for data security, normalization of hybrid and remote work and learning environments, significant turnover, rising costs and declining perceived value of higher education, efforts to address discrimination and inequity, and need for improved data literacy (Caron & Muscanell, 2022). Academic libraries, likewise, are gradually shifting their efforts to address higher education trends as well as academic library trends such as open scholarship, transition to digital collections, shared print collections, use of artificial intelligence,

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and increased demand for research data management (2021-22 ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, 2022; ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, 2023).

These trends will likely impact academic library workforce planning and staffing, although the master's in library science (MLS) is still generally considered to be the terminal professional degree for academic librarians (ACRL, 2018). An increasing number of academic library positions might require credentials beyond MLS in the future because these emerging needs require librarians to interact more with researchers and hold specialized skills. Libraries will need to develop these capabilities to stay relevant, while maintaining traditional services both onsite and remotely. Some library employees might seek additional credentials while working full time. Others might already hold a PhD or other advanced credentials, either with or without an MLS, before becoming a librarian.

The purpose of this article is to explore the benefits of doctorates for librarians, library users, and the organization as well as the challenges that librarians face through their doctoral endeavor. Another objective is to support librarians who pursued, or are interested in pursuing, a doctoral degree and to create a sense of community by sharing stories from relevant individuals. The study will also guide library administrators who might develop or recruit librarians.

We used data from 16 in-depth interviews with librarians at The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) to answer the following questions: What benefits do librarians gain (or anticipate) from getting a doctoral degree for themselves, library users, and the library? What challenges do (or did) they face in pursuing a doctoral degree? What environment or support systems are needed for librarians to successfully pursue a doctoral degree?

Literature Review

Library and Information Science Literature

Although librarians with doctorates are still a minority (Michalak et al., 2019; Ridley, 2018), some suggest that second master's, JD or PhD degrees are required or desired, in addition to or in lieu of an MLS, for certain roles (e.g., leadership positions, subject librarians, scholarly communications, archives, and research and data services) (Ferguson, 2016; Li & Li, 2021; Michalak et al., 2019). Some studies discuss a PhD as an important credential for librarians with faculty status (Huisman, 2011; Kennedy & Brancolini, 2018; Mayer & Terrill, 2005; Ridley, 2018) while others maintain that a doctoral degree increases the credibility of librarians and improves relationships with teaching faculty (Ferrari, 2007; Gilman & Lindquist, 2010; Mayer & Terrill, 2005).

Reasons for seeking a doctorate vary. Mayer and Terrill (2005) surveyed 1,213 librarians and found that the most popular reason for wanting to get an advanced degree was personal fulfillment (85.91%), followed by greater marketability (62.89%), career advancement (50.86%), job performance enhancement (37.46%), higher salary (34.02%), and job requirement (3.09%). Furthermore, Lindquist and Gilman (2008) compared two groups of librarians through a large-scale survey: one group with individuals who became a librarian before pursuing a doctorate, and another with individuals who became a librarian during or after pursuing a doctorate. They found that the reasons for seeking a doctorate were different between the two groups. For individuals who became a librarian before pursuing a doctorate, personal interest/fulfillment was the primary reason (45.9%). For individuals who became a librarian during or after pursuing a doctorate, wanting a teaching position at a college/university was the most popular reason (41.3%).

Having a doctorate might not necessarily lead to desired outcomes. Gilman and Lindquist (2010) extended on their earlier study and found that, while subject doctorates allowed librarians to better understand and communicate with teaching faculty and enhanced their library work, having a doctorate also created challenges for these librarians. For example, their study participants mentioned issues such as being perceived as overqualified or underqualified for library work if the individual is lacking the MLS, feeling underappreciated or being perceived as "failed academics" by colleagues both inside the library and on campus, needing to balance library work and academic work, and feeling disappointed about compensation. Much of the existing library and information science literature on this topic uses a survey as the data collection method.

Part-Time Doctoral Students

Some librarians work toward a doctoral degree on a part-time basis while working full time. It is not easy for part-time students to develop and maintain relationships, due to lack of communities, limited access to faculty, and changing cohorts (Zahl, 2015). Challenges with socialization may lead to perceptions that faculty primarily cater to full-time students and prefer to teach and conduct research with them rather than part-time students (Mawson & Abbott, 2017; Zahl, 2015). Faculty might assume that the student is enrolled full-time to receive the benefits of a full doctoral socialization experience (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). Existing research also substantiates the stereotypical view of doctoral students as young, full-time, and with few work or other commitments (Pearson et al., 2011). Moreover, stereotyping disproportionately impacts doctoral socialization of students of color (Maton et al., 2011; Taylor & Soto Antony, 2000).

Another recurring theme associated with part-time doctoral students is invisibility or being forgotten (Bates & Goff, 2012; Evans, 2002; Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) and being peripheral (Mawson & Abbott, 2017; Teeuwsen et al., 2014). Being invisible or peripheral may result in doctoral programs and support systems that do not consider part-time doctoral students' needs. Part-time doctoral students often need to balance their roles as student and professional, as well as personal roles such as caregiver, parent, and community member (Baker & Pifer, 2015; Bates & Goff, 2012; Boncori & Smith, 2020; Teeuwsen et al., 2014). At the same time, part-time students are less likely to receive fellowships and assistantships (Nettles & Millett, 2006), as financial support for doctoral students is often earmarked for full-time students (Bates & Goff, 2012; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). Given these challenges, part-time doctoral students are found to be less satisfied with their doctoral experiences, although the ones who complete the program tend to progress faster in the program than full-time peers (Nettles & Millett, 2006; Neumann & Rodwell, 2009).

Doctoral socialization is important because knowledge acquisition occurs as part of engaging in a disciplinary community through interaction with faculty and peers (Weidman et al., 2001). Communities that serve as the academic and social crossroads also foster a sense of belonging and help enhance persistence (Tinto, 1997). Identification with the academic community is an important first step to being successful in doctoral studies and is often complicated by part-time status (Mawson & Abbott, 2017; Teeuwsen et al., 2014). If an individual's main identity is far from the dominant group identity, the person can become marginalized (Boncori & Smith, 2020). This contrasts to the experience of full-time students who do not have a 'professional identity' that must be negotiated when they enter doctoral study (Baker & Lattuca, 2010).

Part-time doctoral students bring unique experiences and skills that might benefit other students, the doctoral program, and the organization. For example, part-time doctorates are found to result in innovation and positive organizational changes (Bates & Goff, 2012; Costley & Lester, 2012). Additionally, sharing knowledge based on professional experience is beneficial for all students and the faculty (Dunn & Kniess, 2019).

In order for part-time doctoral students to succeed, ongoing mentoring and close relationships with faculty and peers is essential (Kember et al., 2001; Zahl, 2015; Zhang et al., 2021). Additionally, they need to be supported by their family members, co-workers, and their managers (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Lindsay et al., 2018) given their multiple roles and identities. Thanks to technological advances and increased remote learning, some of the part-time doctoral students' challenges can be mitigated by various forms of asynchronous and interactive communication technologies (Zhang et al., 2021).

Analytical Framework

Human capital theory (Becker, 1993) argues that educational credentials certify acquisition of job-related skills that make individual workers more valuable to employers. This perspective suggests, when viewed in light of the current study, that librarians would pursue a doctoral degree to increase their skills and deliver better services in the library workplace. Additionally, formal educational credentialing restricts the labor supply, signals quality of service, creates social and occupational closure, and generally leads to higher status and salaries (Weeden, 2002). When applied in the current study, this perspective suggests that librarians would obtain higher status and/or salaries based on the doctorate. Furthermore, scholars have argued that organizations contribute to workplace inequality and the analytical focus should shift from individuals to organizations (Ray, 2019a; Wooten, 2019; Wooten & Couloute, 2017). Higher education relies heavily on academic credentials in choosing personnel and hires employees with similar backgrounds and credentials (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Ray, 2019b, 2019a), possibly leading to inequality. We will analyze the ways in which organizational practices create or alleviate inequity as librarians seek a doctoral degree.

Positionality

We are cisgender women with different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds—one Asian, one Black/Latinx, and one white. At the time of this study, we were at the same academic library, working in different functions, interested in growing professionally and improving the experiences of students and faculty of different backgrounds. One of us is getting a PhD in Spring 2025, another will be starting a doctoral program in Fall 2025, and another is considering seeking a doctorate. We acknowledge that our backgrounds influence the ways in which we see the world (Milner, 2007).

Methods

In this qualitative case study, we conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 16 Penn State library faculty members who hold or are considering pursuing a doctoral degree. All interviews were conducted in February and March 2023 over Zoom. All Penn State library faculty regardless of the geographical location, tenure-status, and rank, were qualified to participate. Approximately 120 people currently work as library faculty at Penn State. We did not know how many people already had or were considering pursuing a doctoral degree but

knew that at least several individuals met the criteria. We decided to work with Penn State library faculty because we wanted to follow up on the findings to support them and create a sense of community among individuals with shared interest in the workplace.

We recruited the initial group of participants (n = 8) on a first-come first-serve basis using the library faculty organization's (LFO) mailing list. We also used snowball sampling to recruit more participants (n = 8) via existing study participants, resulting in a total of 16 participants. We attempted to recruit participants with varied backgrounds, including individuals who had obtained a doctoral degree before they became Penn State library faculty as well as those who obtained a doctoral degree after they became Penn State library faculty. The invitation email clarified the study objectives, necessary qualifications, required commitment, and confidentiality terms.

The principal investigator (PI) sent the recruitment email and listed the research team members' names and titles. Some library faculty members are aware that one of us is pursuing a PhD degree on a part-time basis. Our recruitment email emphasized that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would be kept confidential. No monetary rewards were provided for participation. In the end, a total of 16 qualified library faculty expressed interest. We decided to interview these 16 individuals first, with the intention of interviewing more people if additional perspectives were needed and if additional qualified library faculty are found. Penn State's institutional review board (IRB) determined this study to be exempt from human subject research regulations.

Fortunately, our sample was diverse enough to answer our research questions, including both library faculty who already hold a doctorate (n = 10) and library faculty who are considering pursuing a doctorate (n = 6). Several participants (n = 5) mentioned that they started working toward their doctoral degree before becoming library faculty, while the majority (n = 11) started or are considering starting after they became library faculty. The completed doctoral degrees varied in terms of the field: STEM (n = 4), humanities (n = 2), social sciences (n = 2), and education (n = 2). Interestingly, all the participants who are considering pursuing a doctoral degree in the future (n = 6) said that they were still uncertain about the field of study, except for one person who expressed interest in a PhD in library science and in part-time and online or hybrid learning. Out of the ten participants who already completed a doctoral degree, four completed their degree as full-time students, five completed their degree on a part-time basis while working full-time, and one had a mixed experience with mostly part-time study. The tenure status of our sample varied; eight participants were already tenured, seven were tenure-line library faculty, and one participant was a non-tenure-line faculty member. They worked in different roles; the most common types of work were user/reference services (n = 5) and subject librarianship (n = 5). Others primarily worked in management (n = 3), research services (n = 2), and other roles (n = 1).

Seven participants identified as women, while nine identified as men. Our sample thus included a smaller percentage of women (43.8%), compared with librarianship as a whole, which is dominated by women with 82.25% of all librarians in 2022 (Department for Professional Employees, 2023). We chose not to ask our participants about their racial and ethnic identities because Penn State Libraries is a predominantly white organization, and we had confidentiality concerns for participants with marginalized identities. Even if we grouped all librarians of color together, we worried that analyzing our data based on the participants' aggregated racial/ethnic identities might still create harm for the participants because the number of librarians of color at Penn State is very small and some of their backgrounds are

already known by many, thus making it difficult to keep the data confidential.

We chose to interview via Zoom because Penn State library faculty work across 24 campuses in Pennsylvania and we wanted to provide flexibility. We anticipated a small population for this topic, wanted to encourage broader participation, and indicated in our invitation email that the interview will take up to 45 minutes, considering the workplace norms to avoid lengthy Zoom meetings. In reality, some participants spent more than 45 minutes answering questions although the interviewer was mindful of the time. We avoided extending interviews beyond one hour and offered to set up another interview; however, no participants took this option. Therefore, all interviews were completed within one hour.

The PI scheduled interviews with each participant who expressed interest and assigned participant to one of the three researchers who were listed in alphabetical order by their first name on the interview planning Excel workbook. The PI assigned participants as their expressions of interest came in and did not attempt demographic matching with the researchers. Each researcher found a time that worked with both the researcher and the participant for the interview. At the agreed-upon interview date and time, the researcher met with the participant online, sought their consent, and conducted the interview. The interview was audio and video recorded via Zoom. We used the auto transcription feature of Zoom and cleaned the transcripts by correcting technical errors and reviewing the recordings. We de-identified the participants, coded, analyzed the transcripts via NVivo, and will destroy the recordings once the project is complete.

The interview consisted of background and interview questions (see Appendix A). We asked questions about their motivation, benefits of a doctoral degree for the individual, library users, and the organization, as well as challenges and support needed for library faculty to succeed in their doctoral endeavor. In-depth interviewing allowed us to clarify what library faculty thought in private; the contradictions between their beliefs and actual behavior; and their fear, concerns, or ambitions (Gerson & Damaske, 2020). We started with simple questions to build a rapport with the interviewee and conducted in-depth interviews by avoiding yes/no questions and asking open-ended questions to illuminate the participants' deepest motivation, fear, and desires. We pre-tested questions and adjusted them. During the interview, we clarified and sought their responses by saying "Will you say more about…?" or "What do you mean by…?" instead of guiding their answers. We skipped questions if they were answered via earlier questions. We asked them to imagine that they were talking to a close friend if they seemed to be hesitating, or if we encountered homogeneous patterns. Additionally, we asked the same questions in different ways as needed and paid attention to not just the responses but also how interviewees responded. We asked complicated or heavy questions later in the interview. Furthermore, we made a note of both physical observations and any surprises.

Each of the researchers conducted five or six interviews. During the interview phase, we met twice to discuss emergent findings from the interviews. We also discussed surprising observations. After the last round of interviews, we determined that data saturation had been reached because no new findings had emerged and decided not to seek additional participants. We also thought that the chances of finding other qualified Penn State library faculty in a timely manner were small. Each interviewer transcribed her own interviews, and other researchers cross-checked for accuracy.

We randomly selected two of the 16 transcripts for initial coding to establish a shared coding scheme. Each researcher initially independently open coded the two transcripts using

NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Open coding involves inductively developing codes from the data without advancing the researchers' interpretations (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We also used a conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to derive the coding scheme directly from the text of the recordings because existing theory and literature is limited, and our aim is to allow new insights to emerge through open-ended questions. Coding proceeded iteratively in several rounds. At the same time, we expected certain themes to emerge based on the existing literature and the coding was also done deductively and abductively (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). In other words, we were open to finding new themes through an inferential process by relying on our positionalities and theoretical lenses, while piecing together information that is known.

After ordering and categorizing codes independently using two transcripts, we met again, discussed, and reached interpretive convergence (Saldaña, 2021), or an agreed, shared interpretation. Guided by the research questions and memos taken during interviews, we collectively developed themes primarily under the three areas of investigation: benefits of obtaining/holding a doctorate, challenges seeking/holding a doctorate, and necessary environmental factors and support systems to successfully obtain a doctorate. From this collaborative process, we developed a common coding scheme to be used across all transcripts. Each researcher then focused on one specific area of investigation (i.e., motivations and benefits, challenges, or necessary support systems) and coded and analyzed all 16 transcripts using this common coding scheme. To ensure trustworthiness, we reviewed each other's work for accuracy. Appendix B shows the coding scheme.

Findings

Motivations and Benefits

Motivations

Interviewees shared various motivations in considering a doctoral degree. Librarians who pursued a doctorate before entering the field ($n = 5$) were initially motivated by aspirations of becoming researchers or teaching faculty. They all had clear rationale for choosing a subject or a program. On the other hand, those who obtained or are considering a doctorate while working as librarians ($n = 11$) aimed to gain credibility, improve research skills, and build relationships with teaching faculty without necessarily pursuing a teaching position.

All participants except two discussed personal fulfillment ($n = 14$) as a motivating factor. Many shared that they are lifelong learners. Personal fulfillment frequently overlapped with discussion surrounding career advancement, credibility, and research skill enhancement. Common phrases associated with career advancement included, "moving up," "open[ing] doors," and "career aspirations." Credibility and research skills were mentioned relating to interactions with students and faculty. The Penn State Libraries offer faculty status to librarians, which requires research and might influence participants' motivations in seeking a doctoral degree. Some viewed a doctoral degree as a way to strengthen their research skills, for example, methods, scholarly writing, and publishing. Three participants mentioned that a doctoral degree was required for employment at the time. No participants discussed salary as a motivating factor.

Benefits

Participants discussed benefits relating to self and to others. Regarding benefits to oneself, all

but one participant (n = 15) focused on credibility in relation to external perceptions of their abilities, skills, and equality as faculty. As the doctoral credential enables them to elevate their status and differentiate themselves from others, it could potentially make it more difficult for others to enter the field. This supports the occupational closure theory (Weeden, 2002). As one participant explained:

> …it's not that we can't get respect by not having a PhD. We certainly do, but I think they see you as more part of the group as the faculty group…people may respect you more…see you as an ally in the educational mission (Participant 6).

Similarly, another participant said:

> When [I'm] conducting a lot of consultations with research faculty and when they find out that I also have a doctorate degree, there's somewhat of that automatic respect level that just is, is set … they trust what I'm saying potentially a little bit more because of that degree (Participant 15).

Most participants addressed doing their current job better (n = 14), learning more about research (n = 14), and building relationships (n = 10) as benefits to oneself. In doing their current job better, participants who completed a doctoral degree felt that they became more knowledgeable about the subject and the curriculum, gained time and project management skills, became more innovative, and improved their overall performance as a librarian. This finding supports the human capital theory (Becker, 1993). In learning more about research, participants who obtained a doctoral degree indicated that they enhanced research skills, became familiar with different methodologies, and learned about a variety of software programs such as NVivo or SPSS. Individuals who are considering a doctoral degree and have not yet started the program believed that doctoral education would provide them with a deeper understanding of the research that graduate students and faculty conduct within their respective liaison areas. Additionally, participants said they would develop, or have developed, collaborative opportunities with teaching faculty through doctoral socialization and would grow, or grew, instruction programs through those relationships. Participant 14 stated that earning a doctoral degree, "allow[ed] a connection, where there's too often a disconnect."

These individual benefits overlapped with benefits to students, faculty, and the institution. For example, several individuals mentioned that being a full-time librarian and a part-time doctoral student helped their doctoral program peers in that they served as unofficial library ambassadors because the library faculty knew more about research resources. Additionally, individuals who already earned a doctoral degree found opportunities to apply their knowledge and were able to better aid students and faculty. Their enhanced performance, in turn, bolstered the library's stature within the University.

Challenges

When discussing the challenges in obtaining a doctoral degree, nearly all mentioned time management and financial issues. The ones who obtained a doctorate before becoming a librarian (n = 5) talked mostly about faculty advisor related issues and the motivation needed to keep

up with their doctoral work. The ones who are considering a doctorate while working as a librarian ($n = 11$), on the other hand, talked mainly about balancing family, work, and education. Women talked more about prioritizing family matters in deciding their career choices and when to pursue a doctoral degree.

Managing time and fulfilling responsibilities across different areas, including work, family, and education, proved to be a major hurdle, especially for those with a full-time job and/or a bustling family. Many participants mentioned the constant struggle of juggling pressing concerns, such as completing papers within tight deadlines while dealing with the complexities of everyday life. Participant 2 drove over an hour each way to attend classes after work and returned home late at night. This grueling routine occurred twice a week for around two and a half years. Similarly, Participant 9 drove one hour each way once a week to take a course in the evening for almost three years. Others shared similar stories, such as the participant who said: "It's a long road. So just make sure that you're prepared for that. You don't want to get halfway through and then give up. That happens a lot. So just kind of know what you're getting into"(Participant 2), and another who commented: "So, you really have to have, I think, a commitment that is so strong that you're willing to sacrifice a lot of things in order to do this … this is going to take up, you know, most of the free space of your life for years … It's a lot of work, a lot of stress" (Participant 5).

Financial challenges were brought up by nearly every participant. One individual discussed how graduate stipends are often insufficient, leading to reliance on student loans for non-tuition expenses. Financial constraints often required difficult choices and sacrifices for individuals who were pursuing a doctoral degree, such as seeking help from family members, delaying other personal decisions, or limiting options to nearby programs. All library faculty who are considering pursuing a doctorate and hesitating ($n = 6$) discussed financial concerns.

For those who have already earned a doctoral degree, the issues went beyond financial and time-related and focused more on endurance and relationship with their advisor. The struggle to remain motivated and make progress throughout a doctoral program was mentioned numerous times in the interviews. Research-focused programs require a level of independence that necessitates perseverance and persistence. Low self-esteem and self-doubt were recurring challenges, causing fear and uncertainty about one's capabilities. Additionally, working with an advisor can be challenging, as it often involves listening to criticism and being patient while waiting for feedback and revisions. One participant shared that cultural factors led to missed opportunities for challenging norms, seeking help, and asserting individual goals. A lack of supportive advisors can hinder doctoral students' success and negatively impact their motivation, as participants' comments show. One stated: "Many of the students who pursued a doctoral [degree]…didn't finish it. One of the reasons is that they don't really have good advisors and they don't know how to focus on what they need to do" (Participant 9). Another participant shared: "I naively thought … if I don't get any support from my advisor in getting this degree, I can still do it. What I hadn't considered is that, you know, your advisor and or people in this environment might work against you" (Participant 14).

Doctoral education also triggered an identity crisis, leading in some cases to a sense of separation from the library profession. Some shared that they now identify more as educators or researchers than librarians. Additionally, some participants mentioned the challenges they faced from their library colleagues. The fear of not being accepted back into the library profession after obtaining a non-library doctorate degree was a significant concern for some. They

felt there was a perception of arrogance or elitism associated with the degree, resulting in the need to downplay its significance. There were also challenges in embracing the title of "doctor." Some colleagues' expectation was to prioritize the MLS qualification. Participant 8 said:

> There have been several instances … where it was, that's nice that you have it, but you need to take a step back like you're not special. Like you know when you're too proud about it, you seem rankist and you know if you use that a lot, the other librarians are going to think that you think you're better than them and they're not going to want to work with you.

Necessary Support Systems

For the necessary environment to successfully complete a doctorate, the most salient theme was the availability of financial support (n = 13), such as stipends, scholarship, fellowship, and employee tuition benefits. Three participants who obtained a doctorate while working full-time shared that they utilized the University's tuition benefits. Participant 14 commented that doctoral education "is largely a pursuit of the privileged" given the extensive amount of time and financial resources needed. Participant 12 admitted, "I never would have obtained the degree if I had to pay full tuition." These comments indicate that organizational support, such as tuition benefits, can alleviate inequity by allocating resources effectively (Ray, 2019a).

The importance of family support was the second most salient theme related to the necessary support systems (n = 12). The participants' family members helped them with childcare and household chores, as well as provided emotional and financial support. Their doctoral endeavors were balancing acts, particularly for participants who completed degrees while working full-time because they sometimes needed to take evening courses and commute to different universities or catch up with work in the evening or over the weekend. Two faculty mentioned that they had family members who held or were working on a doctoral degree, which suggests that they had family support in terms of doctoral socialization.

The geographic location or online options of doctoral programs was the third most salient theme (n = 10). All participants who successfully completed their doctoral degrees (n = 10) did so in person, suggesting that it is difficult to obtain a doctoral degree fully online. This implies that the candidate needs to live close to the program to be productive. Participant 6 shared: "Many universities have sort of opened up the online learning to an undergraduate degree in history. But they still hold those cards very tightly to their chest with the PhD. I think it's a quality control issue … They want you to do residency work in those fields."

Most (eight out of ten) of the participants who completed their doctorates stressed the importance of having a supportive faculty advisor. Additionally, some commented also on the importance of having supportive classmates. These themes were absent among participants who have not started a doctoral program and might be blind spots for those individuals. One participant commented:

> [Advisors] are the person who kind of helps you guide you through and mentors you through your projects, as well as kind of the various steps you have to take to kind of pass your comprehensive exams, and then your defense ultimately, and they decide when that happens with you, obviously. But one of the biggest

> pieces of advice I give folks if they're looking into a program that has that kind of relationship is that that person is really important, even more so than the research topic (Participant 15).

Similarly, another participant commented: "I found probably more help in the people that had similar setups to me where there was a couple of people that were part-time and working full-time. Particularly if they were ahead of me. I got a lot of help" (Participant 7).

Furthermore, the library faculty who worked on or are considering a doctorate on a part-time basis discussed the importance of having flexible work schedule, supportive supervisors, as well as synergy between the doctoral education and the library work. Two participants who completed their doctorates while working full-time indicated that they used their sabbatical to gather data for their dissertations. Some connected their doctoral work with their library work, for example, by building on and publishing their doctoral work in a library and information science journal or using their library work as a lab to produce doctoral research.

Discussion

Some of the findings are new, compared with previous studies on this topic, and seem important for any librarians who are considering pursuing a doctoral degree. For example, to be successful in the doctoral endeavor, it is important to find a supportive advisor and proactively seek help. Additionally, those who plan on obtaining a doctoral degree while working full-time should find a synergy between library work and doctoral research so that they can stay productive in both.

Those who have completed a doctoral degree were generally satisfied with the benefits they obtained, such as a sense of accomplishment, improved credibility and relationships with teaching faculty, and increased research skills. These benefits seem particularly relevant to librarians with faculty status and show that doctoral education led to increased job performance, as the human capital theory (Becker, 1993) suggests, and higher status (Weeden, 2002) in terms of increased credibility.

At the same time, those who are interested and hesitating to pursue a doctoral degree discussed financial challenges, time constraints, and the lack of online or part-time options. All participants who successfully completed their doctoral degrees ($n = 10$) did so in person, although some commuted a long distance and needed family support. Libraries and institutions might consider providing job flexibility, resources, and funding to facilitate the pursuit of advanced degrees by librarians to reduce or prevent inequality/inequity, given that there are benefits to the organization as well as to individuals.

After obtaining a doctoral degree, some experienced backlash or felt challenged by colleagues without a doctorate. Librarians with a doctorate will need to negotiate their identities while being effective in their roles because they are likely to be evaluated by others who are mostly MLS holders without a doctorate. Likewise, librarians without a doctorate should reflect on their own perceptions of people with a doctoral degree, but no MLS, and consider the benefits these individuals bring to the organization.

The overarching theme among the participants who successfully completed a doctoral degree was determination or perseverance. Several participants commuted to another location to take courses while working full-time. Two participants attended multiple universities to acquire necessary credits. A few had difficulties with their advisors and needed to navigate

challenging relationships. Some talked about overcoming qualifying and comprehensive exams and successfully defending dissertations. Participant 5 commented, "I don't diminish the second master's or an MBA … But it is a different kind of experience."

Future research might interview librarians more broadly across different academic libraries so that racial/ethnic, gender, and class-related nuances can be better understood related to this research topic. As discussed earlier, we chose not to ask our participants about their racial and ethnic identities because we had confidentiality concerns for participants with marginalized identities, given the site-specific nature of this study. At the same time, some of the comments in this study signaled the importance of these dimensions. For example, one participant mentioned that white library faculty could get promoted without a doctoral degree and that librarians of color would need a doctoral degree in the competitive academic environment. A few shared that their parents or grandparents had a PhD, showing that they were privileged in a way in obtaining the degree. Women talked more about their families and wanting to balance work-family life. These topics seem important in advancing equity within the profession.

Conclusion

The benefits of earning a doctoral degree included gaining credibility and respect from teaching faculty, building relationships, enhancing research skills, and obtaining a sense of accomplishment in their library faculty roles. Challenges faced by librarians pursuing a doctoral degree were primarily related to time management and financial constraints. Financial support, including stipends, scholarships, fellowships, and employee tuition benefits, plays a pivotal role in alleviating the financial burdens associated with pursuing a doctorate. Additionally, creating supportive and responsive advising systems is essential, as advisors greatly impact students' progress and motivation. Librarians can find a synergy between library work and doctoral research, to stay productive in both. By recognizing and addressing the challenges and seeking necessary support, librarians can successfully navigate the doctoral journey and contribute to the advancement of knowledge and research within the field. Libraries and institutions can play a crucial role in supporting librarians' doctoral aspirations through financial assistance, promoting flexible work, and cultivating a supportive culture.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank Dr. Sarah Damaske for her guidance and helpful feedback.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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Appendix A. Interview Questions

1. Background Questions:
    a. How do you pronounce your name?
    b. How would you like to be addressed?
    c. What are your pronouns?
    d. What kind of work do you do at the library?
    e. What doctoral degree did you obtain, are you pursuing, or are you considering?
    f. When did you (or are you going to) pursue a doctoral degree?
        i. IF THE TIMING IS UNCLEAR: Was it before you became a library faculty, or after you became a library faculty?
    g. How did you (or are you going to) pursue a doctoral degree?
        i. Full-time or part-time? Why?
        ii. In-person or online? Why?
2. Benefits / Goals (achieved or expected):
    a. What motivated you to pursue a doctoral degree?
    b. What benefits did you gain and/or goals did you achieve (or do you anticipate gaining and/or achieving) from getting a doctoral degree?
        i. IF UNCLEAR, ASK: Will you say more about…? What do you mean by…?
    c. What about benefits for others, by your obtaining a doctoral degree?
        i. For other students?
        ii. For faculty?
        iii. For the library?
3. Challenges:
    a. What challenges did you encounter (or anticipate) in pursuing a doctoral degree?
        i. IF UNCLEAR, ASK: Will you say more about…? What do you mean by…? What makes you think…?
        ii. IF NEEDED, SAY: Imagine you are talking to your best friend. What would you say?
4. Environment / Support Systems:
    a. What allowed you to pursue (or consider pursuing) a doctoral degree?
        i. IF UNCLEAR, ASK: Will you say more about…? What do you mean by…? What makes you think…?
        ii. IF NEEDED, SAY: Imagine you are talking to your best friend. What would you say?
5. What other thoughts do you have for a doctorate for library faculty, if any?

Appendix B. Coding Scheme

1. Background:
    a. Pronouns
        i. She/her
        ii. He/his
        iii. Other
    b. Tenure status
        i. Tenure-line
        ii. Tenured
        iii. Non-tenure-line
    c. Types of work
        i. User services
        ii. Management
        iii. Subject librarian
        iv. Research services
        v. Special Collections
        vi. Other
    d. Doctoral degree (either obtained or being pursued)
        i. D.Ed.
        ii. PhD in humanities
        iii. PhD in social sciences
        iv. PhD in STEM
        v. PhD in library science
        vi. Other
        vii. Unsure
    e. Degree status
        i. Completed
        ii. Future / planning
    f. Degree start timing
        i. Before becoming a library faculty
        ii. After becoming a library faculty
    g. Full-time or part-time doctorate
        i. Full-time
        ii. Part-time
        iii. Mixed
        iv. Unsure
    h. Instruction mode (actual or desired)
        i. In-person
        ii. Online
        iii. Hybrid
        iv. Unsure
2. Benefits / Goals (achieved or expected):
    a. Motivation
        i. Personal fulfillment

        ii. Career advancement
        iii. Job performance enhancement
        iv. Higher salary
        v. Job requirement
        vi. Other
    b. Benefits for self
        i. Gaining credibility
        ii. Learning more about research process and methods
        iii. Broadening career opportunities
        iv. Doing the current job better
        v. Building relationships & connections
        vi. Gaining a sense of accomplishment
        vii. Getting a promotion
        viii. Other benefits
    c. Benefits for students
    d. Benefits for teaching faculty
    e. Benefits for the organization/library
3. Challenges:
    a. Work-life balance
    b. Time management
    c. Financial issues
    d. Motivation (lasting)
    e. Academic advisor related issues
    f. Identity related issues (race, ethnicity, rank, etc.)
    g. Overqualification/Lack of recognition in the library
    h. Other
4. Environment / Support Systems:
    a. Convenient location
    b. Financial support
    c. Flexible doctoral programs
    d. Flexible work schedule
    e. Interesting programs and courses
    f. Supportive advisor
    g. Supportive classmates
    h. Supportive colleagues
    i. Supportive family
    j. Supportive supervisor
    k. Synergy with work
    l. Other
5. What other thoughts do you have for a doctorate for library faculty, if any?