The Academic Library Workforce: Past, Present, and Future

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the evolution of the academic
library workforce in the United States based on an examination of
a selected number of studies of academic librarians. The overview
illustrates the ongoing unmet needs that exist for comprehensive
workforce data. The overview is followed by a discussion of the find-
ings of a recent study entitled, "Workforce Issues in Library and
Information Science" (WILIS) that gathered in-depth data about
the careers of librarians who graduated over a forty year period from
1964 and 2007. Basic results of WILIS study for the academic library
respondents are provided as an example of the type of detailed career
data, including data related to recruitment and retention, that are
needed to give educators, employers, and other stakeholders the in-
formation needed to plan effectively in a time of major demographic
and workforce transition.

Introduction

Academic libraries are among the oldest types of libraries, and there has
long been interest in studying the individuals who constitute the academic
library workforce. What types of people are attracted to work in academic
libraries? What are their backgrounds and what are their motivations for
continuing in an academic library career? As Morrison (1969), who pro-
vided a comprehensive overview of the academic library workforce of fifty
years ago, wrote, "The yearning for self-knowledge is endemic in man-
kind. One manifestation of this is a hunger on the part of the individual
for information about the characteristics of the group of which he is a
part and about the place of that group in society" (p. 1).

This desire for self-knowledge continues into the present for a variety of reasons. Not only is there a desire to find out more about the demographics of the profession of academic librarianship but with the imminent retirement of a large number of academic librarians looming, there is also a need to gauge whether the size and characteristics of the academic library workforce of the present will meet the demands of academic libraries in the future. Academic librarians existed long before any type of formal assessment was performed on them. However, since the 1930s, there have been numerous studies on various aspects of the academic library workforce. This article will discuss a number of representative studies that have focused on the academic library profession in the United States, and then will take a more in-depth look at those studies that have tried to predict supply and demand in the academic library workforce. Finally, the article will provide an overview of the findings of WILIS 1, a recent comprehensive study funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) that provides a systematic examination of the career patterns of a large number of librarians, including those who work in academic libraries.

DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSION OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIANSHIP

The American profession of librarianship originated as a result of the increase in the number of libraries being created at the end of the century (Abbott, 1988). Like many other professions librarianship is generally recognized as having been formalized as a professional occupation in the late nineteenth century (Abbott, 1988). The first professional organization, the American Library Association, was established in 1876 among other things in response to the need for trained librarians and professional standards. In 1887, the first library school opened at Columbia University and by the first decade of the twentieth century, a number of new schools responded to the growing demand for librarians by turning out a steady stream of graduates (Adkins, 1981).

As the need for more librarians increased, the demographics of the workforce were transformed; more women began to work in academic libraries as assistants under the direction of male librarians. In 1858, Harvard College Library became the first academic library to hire a woman (Hamlin, 1981). In 1870, 20 percent of all U.S. librarians were women (Phenix, 1987). By the time the School of Library Economy opened at Columbia University in 1887, seventeen out of the twenty students in the first class were female. By 1900, women comprised 75 percent of the profession. Thus, in less than half a century, librarianship was transformed from an exclusively male profession to one in which women were the majority (Phenix, 1987).

Since "librarian" is one of the occupational groups included in the U.S. Census, it is possible to track the increasing number of all librarians on a decade by decade basis from 1860 on. This number increased steadily,

the number doubling each decade between 1900 and 1930. The rate of increase was slower between 1930 and 1950, but, since 1960, the numbers have increased at a more rapid pace (Historical Statistics of the United States Millennial Edition, n.d.). While the census provides an indication of the total number of individuals working as librarians, there is no way to distinguish how many of them worked in an academic library.

It was not until the 1920s that the library profession began systematically to gather data about its workforce. The American Library Association (ALA) started to issue reports about the salaries of librarians in the early 1920s. The 1928 founding of the Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago, with its emphasis on research and quantitative approaches, undoubtedly gave an impetus to the new interest within the profession of gathering statistics about library personnel among other topics. *The Bulletin of the American Library Association* in 1929 reported the results of one of the first studies that looked specifically at library personnel. In this article, the chair of the ALA Committee on Salaries, Insurance and Annuities examined the education, professional training, and salaries of 685 librarians from ninety-eight public and academic libraries. In addition to the data presented in the article, the author argued strongly that the American Library Association (ALA) should establish a "research or statistical department in the ALA, such a department to give first or early attention to administrative and personnel questions" (Compton, 1929, p. 275). Such an office was not founded at ALA until many years later, but nonetheless, from the 1930s on there have been numerous studies examining the library workforce as a whole and many that have looked specifically at the academic library workforce.

Literature Concerning the Academic Library Workforce

A review of this literature provides an interesting indication of the topics related to the academic library workforce that have been considered to have been the most important over the years. These include salaries, appropriate education, and age distribution. Some of the studies examined very narrow topics while others have been much broader. One of the broadest was Perry Morrison's in-depth examination of academic librarians' education, personality characteristics, and social origins (1969). Morrison assumed that knowing about these matters would be of interest to the profession and would also aid in the recruitment of new academic librarians to the field.

Many of the early studies were inevitably a reflection of the time in which they were written and provide an interesting historical perspective. "Library Personnel in the Depression," for example, examined the conditions of the workforce in large public and academic libraries where the average overall budget had been cut 31.8 percent and the average salary

of workers had been cut from 10 to 20 percent (Howard, 1939). "Wartime Personnel Problems in Libraries" described the "extensive dislocations, maladjustments, and deficiencies" that resulted from the loss of civilian employees into the armed forces during World War II (Nourse, 1943, p. 460). The article noted an acute shortage of personnel in all types of libraries and described some of the emergency practices that libraries found helpful in replacing these lost employees (Nourse, 1943).

Some topics, such as the status of women in academic librarianship, have been written about extensively and then have faded from the literature. Although the percentage of women in academic libraries has always been lower than that in other types of libraries, since the turn of the twentieth century the academic library workforce has been predominately female. Until recently however, the majority of higher administrative positions were held by males. As Hamlin stated, the "blunt truth is that strong prejudice against women as administrators existed until the 1970s" (1981, p. 117). Beginning in the 1960s, a number of studies documented the status of women in academic librarianship. In recent decades, as women have increasingly moved into higher administrative positions, there have been far fewer of these studies. The academic library workforce has continued to have an underrepresentation of ethnic minorities; however, diversity issues continue to be an issue for research as demonstrated in the recent Workforce Issues in Library and Information Science (WILIS) study (Morgan, Farrar, & Owens, 2009).

Supply and Demand Studies

One topic that has appeared consistently in the literature for almost one hundred years has been the size and characteristics of the workforce needed for college and university libraries. The studies involved have examined the balance between job seekers and jobs available in the academic library workplace. Almost from the inception of academic librarianship as a career there has been concern about attracting enough well-qualified individuals to the field. Joeckel (1932) was one of the first to attempt to assess the relationship of the supply of librarians to the demand for them. He wrote that "it has always seemed to me little less than astounding that no organization in any way responsible for the solution of the important problems of supply and demand in our profession has ever made a really thorough survey of the numerical requirements of American libraries for trained personnel" (p. 104). He stated that beginning with World War I and escalating sharply thereafter, there was "almost a desperate shortage in the number of trained librarians" (p. 105). However, at the time he wrote there was an oversupply of librarians and Joeckel recommended limiting enrollment in library schools.

Writing in 1958, Reagan provided a helpful synthesis of much of the previous research on the topic of supply and demand. By this time the

situation had changed once again and there was "an undeniable shortage of personnel" (p. 1). Reagan reported several estimates of the future need for more librarians ranging from 10,000 to over 60,000 by 1960 (p. 4).

The demand for new librarians grew more acute in the early 1960s with the entry of the Baby Boom generation into higher education. As new universities were built and existing ones expanded, academic libraries faced a severe shortage of librarians. *Library Journal* featured a twelve-part series on recruitment in 1962. The title of the first article in the series, succinctly summarized the problem: "Personnel Shortages: The Library Profession's Number One Problem" (Strout, 1962). The U.S. Office of Education's *National Inventory of Library Needs* (1965) also identified a shortage of librarians as the profession's most pressing problem. In the late 1960s, many states began to conduct surveys to establish needs. At about the same time, a broader examination of supply and demand in the library workforce was provided by the Maryland Manpower Studies, funded by the U.S. Office of Education, the National Science Foundation, and the National Library of Medicine (Stueart, 1975). A study published in 1967 reported that the number of librarians employed in academic institutions grew from 9,700 in 1961 to 12,000 in 1965 and to 14,100 in 1966 (Ginzberg & Brown, 1967, p. 39). With an increase of over 45 percent in the academic library workforce within five years, it appeared that the studies predicting an increased need for academic librarians during the 1960s were on target.

These earlier studies used many of the same methods and techniques for measuring the supply and demand for librarians that are used in contemporary studies, yet the language they employ now seems dated. Almost without exception, these studies examined the "manpower" needs of librarianship. Although that was the term most commonly used at the time, from the perspective of 2010, it appears to be an odd one to use in studying a profession that was so overwhelmingly female.

From the 1960s to the 1970s, the pendulum swung again and once more there appeared to be too many librarians for the positions available. The extensive hiring during the period of Baby Boomer growth in higher education had brought a large cohort of new master's graduates into libraries, the majority of who stayed in the field for the long term. When positions were advertised, employers had their pick of experienced candidates and it was difficult for new graduates to compete. There was also a considerable amount of career plateauing since the number of senior administrative positions available to the librarians who were hired in the 1960s and 1970s was limited. During this period, as fewer new graduates were hired, the average age of those in the profession began to climb.

Because of concerns of an oversupply of librarians, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (1975) conducted a survey that found that, over the long term, supply and demand would be in fairly good balance but that new

entrants to the profession and non-degreed librarians would have a difficult time in finding positions. Employment in libraries of all types was expected to grow more slowly over the 1970–85 period than during the 1960s (p. xi). For academic librarians specifically, the projected rise was from 19,000 to 27,000 between 1970 and 1985, with most of the growth occurring in the 1970s because of an anticipated drop in enrollments in higher education beginning in the late 1970s (p. xi).

The King Research Study (1983), the most comprehensive study during the decade of the 1980s, was prepared for the National Center of Educational Statistics and the Office for Library and Learning Technologies. Its aim was to assess the supply of and demand for professional librarians through 1990. This study projected a small overall increase in vacant positions throughout the 1980s with more vacancies in special and public libraries and fewer in academic and school libraries. However, the King Study also documented a decline of 35 percent in the number of master's degree graduates, from a high of 6,323 in 1974. Despite the reassurance of the King Report that there would only be a small increase in vacant positions, shortages began to develop in many types of libraries by the late 1980s. Berry (1988), in "The Shortage Is Back," scolded LIS educators for not planning better.

In the 1980s, the profession also began to realize that a large number of librarians would be retiring soon. Matarazzo (1989) was one of the first to raise this concern. He examined census data and predicted that between 60,000 to 70,000 librarians would retire by the year 2000. He urged the Office of Education to "influence the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) to again attempt a study similar to its fine 1975 effort. Any new BLS study, however, will have to be completed and published much faster than the 1972 effort with its three-year publication delay" (p. 134).

Supply and Demand Projections from 1990 to the Present

If the amount of literature written about supply and demand is an indication, the 1990s was a stable decade with an appropriate balance between job openings and job seekers. However, concern about the impending retirement of large numbers of librarians and the dearth of mid-career librarians available to fill leadership positions continued to grow. In mid-decade, in *The Age Demographics of Academic Librarians: A Profession Apart*, Wilder (1995) published an analysis of the annual statistics of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). His study showed that, as a profession, librarians, particularly academic librarians, were significantly older than most other professionals. Relative to comparable professions, librarianship contained one-third the number of individuals aged thirty-five and under and almost 75 percent more individuals aged forty-five and older (Wilder, 1995). This age distribution was the result of many factors, but

principally, as Wilder points out, the large number of academic librarians who were hired to provide services to the Baby Boomers in the 1960s or who were Baby Boomers themselves. It also reflected the fact that librarianship was a second profession for many, so that even "new" librarians were older than most new professionals in other fields. In addition, with the opening of other career avenues, many women who might have traditionally entered "women's" professions such as librarianship were choosing other options. Thus, at the time of Wilder's study, the academic library field was confronted not only with a shortage of librarians, but also with a potentially more serious shortage when the Baby Boomers began to retire.

Concern about upcoming retirements in academic libraries grew as the new millennium began. In 2002, a task force charged with identifying the top issues facing academic libraries in the future reported that problems of recruitment, education, and retention of librarians was a "core issue for the future" (Hisle, 2002, p. 714). This report reiterated what was becoming a common theme that "even as retirements seem to increase, fewer librarians are entering the profession as a whole, and fewer librarians are entering the academic library field in particular" (p. 714).

In 2002 the Association of College and Research Libraries Ad Hoc Task Force on Recruitment and Retention Issues published a report summarizing the labor gap facing academic libraries and discussed strategies for dealing with recruitment and retention (Ad Hoc Task Force, 2002). This so-called "white paper" provided a useful overview of the topic and an extensive bibliography but did not offer any original data relating to retirements and availability of entry level librarians.

In 2003 Wilder updated his previous ARL study in a short monograph, *Demographic Change in Academic Librarianship.* He examined specifically the relationship between the aging of the profession and new entrants to the field. He also expanded his view to include the life cycle of employment planning, focusing less on retirements than on how to attract entrants who had the expertise needed in the changing world of academic libraries. Wilder's analysis of ARL library hiring trends focused on the different types of expertise and job categories that were in demand. He also pointed out that the demographics of ARL directors and upper level managers mirrored the general demographic trends in academic librarianship as a whole. For instance, in just the ARL director ranks alone, the younger age cohorts had almost disappeared. In 1986, 43 percent of ARL directors were under fifty years of age; in 2000, only 5 percent were under fifty. The aging of academic library directors was also the focus of several studies by Hernon, Powell, and Young (2001, 2002, and 2003).

These studies, plus other reports in the popular press about the growing need for librarians, served as an impetus for the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to create in 2002 the Laura Bush 21st

Century Librarian program to recruit and train the next generation of librarians. The IMLS director, Robert Martin, stated, "Our nation faces a quiet crisis: a critical—and burgeoning—shortage of librarians. As many as 58% of our nation's librarians will reach retirement age between 2005 and 2019" (Flagg, 2002, p. 14). The ALA Office of Research and Statistics provided additional data that showed over 20 percent of librarians would reach age sixty-five between 2010 and 2014 (Lynch, 2002).

So all indications in the early part of this century were that there was an impending shortage of librarians and the profession needed to begin an aggressive recruiting effort. There were still questions, however, that could not be answered on the basis of the available data. How many librarians actually do retire at sixty-five? How many retire earlier or later? How many people leave librarianship for reasons other than retirement? With changes in the field, will more staff or fewer be needed? Will libraries continue to hire mostly library science graduates or will they recruit a more diversified professional staff with degrees from other fields such as management, human resources, communications, and information technology? There were no data available to give reliable answers to these questions. In fact, it appeared that the profession was still failing to collect the basic information that Joeckel had demanded eighty years ago as necessary for workforce planning. As James Neal wrote in the preface to Wilder's book on academic library demographics, "Workforce planning has never been a strength of the American library profession in general, or higher education for librarianship in particular. The field has rarely secured a dependable assessment of supply and demand for professional positions. As a result, national, professional, and institutional strategies have not been developed to guide the preparation, advancement, and replacement of librarians" (Wilder, 2003, p. ix).

ONGOING RESEARCH: THE WORKFORCE ISSUES IN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE STUDY

One of the major studies funded in 2005 under the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian program was entitled "Workforce Issues in Library and Information Science" (WILIS). The investigation was conducted by an interdisciplinary team consisting of library science researchers at the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and sociologists who specialized in workforce issues at the University of North Carolina Institute on Aging.

The WILIS project used a comprehensive, retrospective Web-based career survey to systematically track the long-term career patterns of those who had graduated between 1964 and 2005 from one of the six LIS programs in North Carolina (Marshall et al., 2009). Data for graduates up to 2007 were also collected for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In addition to asking questions relating to recruitment, education,

job satisfaction, retention, and retirement, the study gathered detailed work histories based on: (1) the job before entering their LIS program; (2) the job after graduating from the LIS program; (3) the longest job; (4) the highest achieving job; and (5) the current job. Those who had graduated in the previous five years received a supplementary section of the survey that asked them to evaluate their LIS degree program and the extent to which it had prepared them to enter the workforce.

The response rate for the full WILIS survey was 35 percent ($n = 2,653$) yielding a large data set with 1,700 variables. Since librarianship is not a licensed profession that regularly tracks the status of its workforce, the results of the WILIS study provide a rare insight into the careers of LIS graduates who had worked in the field for up to four decades in a variety of settings, including academic librarianship. While the respondents had all graduated from a program in North Carolina, they were working across the country and internationally.

The WILIS study found that of the respondents currently working in libraries, 31 percent ($n = 467$) were employed in academic libraries (for a further discussion of the findings for graduates who were working in academic libraries see Moran et al., 2009). In contrast, 33 percent were working in school libraries, 20 percent in public libraries, and 16 percent in public libraries. The academic librarian respondents were primarily female (73 percent) with a median age of forty-eight. By comparison, the median age of the U.S. labor force in 2000 was 39.3. The LIS graduates earned a mean salary of $53,532 and a median salary of $49,500. The respondents were highly educated. Eighteen of them (4 percent) had a PhD, a JD or some other type of doctorate before entering the MLS program; twenty-nine (6 percent) earned such a degree after receiving the MLS degree. One hundred and sixty-three (35 percent) of the respondents held a second master's degree.

The academic library respondents to the WILIS survey displayed some demographic characteristics that distinguished them from those working in other types of libraries. They were more likely to be male, to be slightly younger, and to be more racially diverse than respondents working in other types of libraries. Their median salary was slightly higher than that of librarians working in public or school libraries, but lagged the median salaries in special libraries or non-library settings.

Ninety-two percent of the respondents worked full time; 72 percent supervised others. The respondents worked in a wide variety of positions within academic libraries. Forty-five percent of them reported that they were administrators. Overall the respondents were a satisfied group: 90 percent were satisfied with their current job and 95 percent were satisfied with librarianship as a career. On the whole, they reported having a great deal of job autonomy. One troubling result involved gender differences in salaries. Many recent surveys of library salaries have also found disparities

in the salaries received by male and female librarians (Association of Research Libraries, 2008; Maata, 2008). The responses to the WILIS survey revealed a similar inequity. Males working full time in academic libraries had a median salary of $57,500 (mean = $64,852) while the females had a median salary of $49,000 (mean = $53,385).

A number of the questions in the WILIS survey related to factors that influenced individuals to choose librarianship as a career. The factors cited by academic librarians were similar to those listed by other types of librarians: the career was a good fit with their interests; they had previously worked as an assistant in a library; the job would allow them to "make a difference"; and they liked working with people.

All respondents to the WILIS survey who graduated in 2000 or later were asked about their job preferences at graduation as well as where they eventually found a job (n = 400). Forty-seven percent of the graduates were interested in working in academic libraries; however, less than half of them were able to secure such work.

The WILIS results illustrated a broadening of the ways in which academic librarians view themselves as professionals. While 57 percent of the 467 academic librarian respondents viewed themselves as librarians only, 36 percent thought of themselves as both a librarian and an information professional. Only 5 percent of those working in academic libraries thought of themselves as information professional only.

There were a number of reasons cited for leaving the field including downsizing, layoffs, seeking further education, or for family reasons. However, by far the most common reasons that respondents left academic librarianship were to seek better opportunities for career development or for more challenging work. Although 42 percent did report leaving to seek better salaries and 33 percent left because of a geographic relocation, many more reported leaving not for more money but for better and more challenging work opportunities. It is notable that the individuals who remained in academic libraries were overwhelmingly satisfied with their jobs and their career. Over half agreed that they had enough time to do their required work and a lot of control in scheduling their work hours. Ninety percent reported having support from coworkers in doing their job. Seventy-three percent agreed that they had opportunities for promotion.

In the WILIS survey, all respondents were asked about their retirement intentions and plans. If the reported intentions hold true, by 2013 almost half of all librarians aged sixty-two or more, or 12 percent of the total library workforce, will have left. By 2018, 63 percent of those aged sixty-two or more, or 23 percent of the library workforce, will have left. Academic librarians accounted for the second largest proportion (27 percent) of all librarian retirements, exceeded only by school librarians (41 percent).

The ongoing demographic shift that is occurring as the Baby Boomers retire is clearly a major workforce challenge for academic libraries and

one that will require creative approaches to recruitment, succession planning, and retention at various career stages. The WILIS study has evolved into a program of workforce research that is currently extending the recent graduates' portion of the first WILIS survey. The new study, known as WILIS 2, aims to create an ongoing LIS program evaluation and career tracking model that educators, employers, and other stakeholders can use to gain a clearer understanding of workforce issues and trends. The results of the WILIS 2 project are reported in this issue in an article by Marshall et al. This ongoing research is working toward the creation of a collaborative model for the collection and use of workforce data that will allow evidence-based educational and workforce planning in all areas of the profession, including academic librarianship.

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