

Recruitment and Retention in Colorado's Libraries: A State Library Perspective

Eugene Hainer

Libraries can't function without people to run them. This statement will probably elicit a "Duh!" from most readers, given that it is so obvious. However, in a few years, Colorado could find many libraries struggling to fill open positions with competent, skilled staff able and willing to stay for a significant number of years.

In late 2004, *Retirement, Retention, and Recruitment: The Future of Librarianship in Colorado* was published by the Library Research Service (LRS).¹ This study raised many interesting and thought-provoking questions regarding the direction of library staffing in the state. Although some elements bear further discussion in the context of this article, it is not the intent of this article to reiterate the results of that report in great detail.

THREE R'S: APPRAISING THE CONCLUSIONS

The LRS's *Future of Librarianship*, or 3Rs study, as it is known colloquially, dissects the three issues of retirement, retention, and recruitment in order and includes a literature review highlighting several related studies. One of the more significant conclusions it draws from those surveyed is that the number of retirements in the coming years will approach 22 percent overall, with nearly 47 percent of school librarians reporting they will be leaving in the next five years.² This projected turnover in the profession also will lead to a loss of leadership, since the majority of those retiring are taking with them an irreplaceable supply of skills, know-how, and institutional memory. Library boards, directors, and civic leaders who haven't yet begun doing so must come to terms with this and begin planning now to replace these losses. This won't be easy. Libraries around the state already report that it is sometimes difficult to find adequate internal personnel or external job-seekers to fill needed positions. If the *Future of Librarianship* report is an accurate predictor of statewide trends, this difficulty will only increase over time. Evidence that the LRS study does accurately portray the present and future of library staffing comes in a similar report about Canadian libraries, prepared about the same time as the Colorado study. It also predicts retirement over the next ten years will be over 20 percent on average in public, academic, and special libraries (schools were not part of the Canadian study). This means one in five of those now working in a library will be leaving, roughly the same as in Colorado.³

While the Canadian preliminary report does not state outright that a crisis is pending in provincial libraries, it does conclude that recruitment practices are already being affected. Among those libraries that are recruiting, most librarians cited budget constraints as the main reason they are not engaged in more active recruiting efforts. One in three respondents in the survey indicated that low pay, hiring freezes, and a lack of qualified candidates were the reasons they weren't doing more recruiting over the past two years.

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The library field should be a choice position for many people. A recent report from the Occupational Outlook Quarterly (OOQ) stated that projected job growth for librarians between now and 2008 is about 10 percent. It indicated that "rising enrollments should increase the demand for school and university librarians; however, job growth is expected to be offset somewhat by computer systems that simplify cataloging, a task increasingly handled by library technicians. Very good opportunities should arise from the need to replace retirees."⁴ It also projects that library technicians would see an average growth of about 17 percent and library assistants/clerical would expect faster than average growth of 21 percent over the same time frame. The OOQ reported that "efforts to contain costs in local governments and academic institutions are expected to create a preference for hiring library support staff instead of librarians."⁵ In a retrospective look at previous forecasts for library-related jobs, the OOQ indicated that earlier projections had actually been too conservative; growth had been far greater than had been predicted for library-related jobs. While 1988-2000 predictions indicated slow growth for library assistants, it turned out to be almost 27 percent. Although professional positions did not achieve this level of growth, the number of professionals who are now retiring should change that.

QUESTIONING THE FUTURE

The Colorado Future of Librarianship report seems to lend credence to the conclusions these national data indicate: there are going to be openings in many areas. Several questions remain unanswered, however. Will there be enough qualified people stepping forward to fill these openings? Will the profession be able to make the assistant- and clerical-level positions attractive enough in salary and job challenge to attract and keep employees longer? Will professional programs continue graduating professionals into a marketplace challenged by jobs in the private sector? Will technology firms continue to attract people with an information science background for data mining, competitive intelligence, or similar positions, usually at a higher salary than librarians can earn now? Will K-12 schools continue the trend of replacing retirees with staff who have little or no training in education and library science, despite what research says about the value a credentialed person brings to student achievement scores? The answers to many of these questions require a larger crystal ball than the State Library can requisition.

Another unknown factor is the changing nature of libraries and whether people who utilize them for information and resources now will expect the same levels of service and types of materials in the future. Public libraries are already introducing many new approaches to the "traditional" library services and collections. Internet stations, streaming audio books, shared music downloads, expanded audio and video collections, improved interlibrary loan procedures, patron-initiated borrowing, and facilities with innovative shelving arrangements and patron areas are increasingly common in many

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libraries. School libraries are making strides toward better involvement in instructional, curriculum-related practices to escape the stand-alone nature of the school library. However, this change isn't always universally embraced by practitioners or their administrations, which may be one factor contributing to the high retirement and unfortunate non-replacement of school librarians. Special and academic librarians are making efforts to improve their connection and importance to their parent organizations and service community, but budget constraints, especially in academic libraries, are taking a toll on staff, which also reduces the available options when it comes to recruitment and retention.

STATEWIDE RESPONSE: LIMITLESS—OR LIMITED— OPTIONS?

There is ample evidence indicating that libraries in Colorado will undergo many changes in staffing over the next few years. This raises some obvious, but difficult questions for several agencies. The State Library, the Colorado Library Consortium (CLiC), and the Colorado Association of Libraries (CAL) all deal in some form or another with continuing education for staff; how should such efforts change, if at all? The University of Denver, University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center, University of Northern Colorado, Emporia State University and other programs, such as Pueblo Community College, focus on professional-level education training for their students. Will the future continue to bring candidates to these programs, or will the job market and competition mean fewer students wanting post-graduate education? Do the numbers indicate a pending crisis for Colorado libraries in staffing and hiring of replacements? If so, what can—or should—be done about it? Is this an issue that must be addressed locally, or is it a statewide concern calling for statewide resolutions? If a statewide solution is warranted, on what should it focus? Possible options include getting more people interested in and joining the ranks of the library profession, adopting different entry-level educational standards for candidates, improving salaries to encourage retention of current and future staff, and adjusting current staffing to combine duties and streamline workflow.

In time, all of these will likely need to be implemented in some form as the library, its services, and the information needs of people evolve. A key barrier to realizing any or all of these statewide efforts to benefit the library community is a lack of funding.

Strategic plans tend to drive much of what happens on a statewide basis in the State Library, CLiC, and CAL. The last such plan to establish goals, focus resources, and generate programmatic activities for the State Library was *The Future is Now*, which ended its 4-year life cycle in 2004.⁶ It had specific recommendations for retention and recruitment, with an overarching goal that stated "a diverse and well qualified pool of candidates for professional and support positions [would be] recruited for Colorado libraries. Salaries, benefits, and the working environment are desirable, resulting in retention of high quality library staff at all levels."⁷ Five key activities and a variety of

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outcomes accompanied these goals that were intended to focus on recruiting and retention efforts. While this goal raised awareness—and helped spur the aforementioned LRS study—few of the outcomes succeeded in producing significant results. It would be fair to assume that things might have been different had the state's fiscal crisis not impacted state funding between 2002 and the present. These cuts meant federal funding had to be redirected to bolster critical infrastructure for libraries, which derailed active pursuit of all Future is Now goals.

Preparation for the next strategic plan is already underway. In 2004, the Colorado Library Advisory Board (CoLAB) appointed a task force to develop a new statewide plan for library development. In late March, a select committee of librarians and citizen representatives met to develop and prioritize objectives under goal areas that had been created with the input of librarians and decision makers across the state. One of the goal areas that evolved from this summit meeting was "development of the profession." Within this broad topic was a more specific objective calling for development of a continuing education plan, the details of which were still being finalized as this is written. By the time this article is published, the plan should be completed, adopted by CoLAB, and widely distributed. There are some specific activities surrounding recruitment and retention that could—and probably will—be included as a statewide plan for continuing education is developed in the coming months.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUES

Along with background on the many challenges in dealing with recruitment and retention, several questions have been posed in this article. The Future of Librarianship report included some specific recommendations for state, local, and library decision makers to consider in addressing this topic. Following are other possible strategies that will need to be examined by local libraries, the State Library, CLiC, CAL, universities, and other players in library development before solid steps can be undertaken toward effective solutions. How this all plays out depends on funding, cooperation, and whether this continues to develop as a statewide concern garnering statewide attention or is better resolved through local efforts.

1. Coordinate recruitment and retention activities, identify best practices, and develop a central knowledge base for what works. Right now, there is no way to identify successful recruitment and retention strategies now in use that can be shared with all libraries across the state. Proven plans may already exist that result in successfully helping libraries find and keep staff. Others may have found ways to alter professional duties or internal structures to make positions more attractive to potential candidates. If one person or group could be designated to identify and coordinate this knowledge, it would save a great deal of time and effort on the part of other library directors or school personnel. Such information could be made available centrally through the web, an ongoing recruitment newsletter, or some other means that permits wide dissemination. Right now the statewide Library Jobline⁸ is the closest thing to coordination of effort for job seekers, but it offers only

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job postings. Not every library takes advantage of this, even though it has proven to be a successful tool for filling vacancies.

2. Develop a comprehensive education campaign to promote the library as the place to be.

To be successful, such a campaign would need to start with middle and high schools and continue into colleges and universities throughout the state. This is costly in both staff time and money. One major barrier will be replacing the stereotypical picture of the "librarian" and "library" that permeates public memory. It is necessary to link the library to technology and 21st century information ideals and portray it as a center of the Constitutional freedoms of speech and expression. The librarian needs to be viewed not as a servant who simply offers information when requested but as a knowledge worker who deals in all of this and more. Service must be a key ingredient as well. Librarians must add value to every patron interaction. There is too much competition from the internet and bookstores for librarians to be mere pointers. Many librarians embody good service standards now; sadly, many do not. This means coupling an external campaign to market the library profession widely to the public with a coordinated and comprehensive internal training program to promote and encourage quality service at every level. This two-pronged approach is an expensive and far-reaching task, given that such training is now handled by only the largest libraries in the state and by very few school or academic libraries. But this is essential, especially if a significant number of new staff don't come equipped with some background experience, training or a post-graduate library education.

3. Make it financially worthwhile to work in a library. This is one of the most critical strategies if the above items are to be effective. The current overall average salary for all professional library positions is just over \$37,000. This includes an average low of \$29,884 for interlibrary loan staff to a high of \$57,567 for "information consultant."⁹ While respectable, the average is about \$51,000 less than that reported for staff employed by library vendors. Since these figures are based on results reported by graduates from library programs, one can assume that the salary for entry level positions for non-degreed staff is less.

Most library positions pay better than food service or other so-called non-skilled jobs, but higher salaries are available in teaching, various types of office work, or computer-related occupations with comparable training.¹⁰ Focusing on improving salaries, along with meaningful and extensive scholarships for post-graduate education, could help address the retention concerns raised by the *Future of Librarianship* report. Unfortunately, compensation is the one area that is most volatile for libraries in today's fiscal climate and the one least influenced through any statewide efforts. Scholarships would require a cooperative effort within the library community using funding that is in short supply, barring an endowment or similar windfall.

The library profession anticipates more than 22 percent of its workforce will disappear, and it took many years to get to this point. The situation won't be resolved quickly, either. While challenging, this

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does not signal the end of libraries as we know them. It simply provides one more opportunity to rework, revamp, and revisit how libraries do business. It will take time, effort, funding, and innovative strategies such as those outlined above to come to terms with what the future holds for libraries, staffing, and employment trends. The State Library will continue to monitor these concerns as the statewide strategic plan is implemented, and will seek workable, equitable, and cost-effective solutions through cooperative efforts with library decision-makers throughout the state. As solutions are developed or presented, the results should benefit everyone.

NOTES:

¹Steffen, Nicolle, Keith Curry Lance, Becky Russell and Zeth Lietzau. *Retirement, Retention, and Recruitment: the Future of Librarianship in Colorado, a Closer Look*. Denver: CO, Library Research Service, September 2004. <www.lrs.org/documents/closer_look/RRR_web.pdf>.

²Ibid, 123.

³8Rs Research Team, Canadian Library Association. *The Future of Heritage Work in Canada: A Joint CCA-CLA-ASTED-CMA Project*. Canada: Feliciter, 2004. <www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/events/8RsFutureofHeritageWorkDRAFT.pdf>.

⁴Occupational Outlook Quarterly Online. *Management, business, and financial operations*. Winter 2004-05 Vol. 48, Number 4. Washington DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. <www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2004/spring/table.pdf>.

⁵Ibid

⁶Colorado State Library. *The Future is Now: Quality Library Service in Colorado*. <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/futurenow_textversion.htm>.

⁷Colorado Council for Library Development, Colorado State Library. *The Future is Now: Quality Library Service in Colorado, 2001-2004*. Denver: Colorado State Library, 2001.

⁸Colorado State Library. *Library Jobline_* <www.jobline.aclin.org>.

⁹Maatta, Stephanie. *Placements and Salaries 2002: Salaries Stalled, Jobs Tight in The Bowker Annual Library & Book Trade Almanac 2004*, 49th edition, ed. Dave Bogart, 349-363. (New York: Bowker, 2005).

¹⁰U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics: Occupational Employment Statistics. *November 2003 National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates, All Occupations*. Washington DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004. <www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_00al.htm>.

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