

# The Future of Librarianship in Colorado: An Overview

Nicolle Steffen and Zeth Lietzau

For well over a decade, the “graying” of the profession has been the subject of much discussion among librarians. Who is retiring? When will they retire? Where will library administrators, schools, and businesses find replacements for these retirees? What attracts new librarians into the profession? What discourages potential recruits from pursuing librarianship as a career?

To explore these issues, the Library Research Service (LRS) conducted the study, *Retirement, Retention, and Recruitment: The Future of Librarianship in Colorado*.<sup>1</sup> In the fall of 2003, workers from all types of libraries were asked to complete an online survey about their careers, their workplaces, and their attitudes about librarianship. Over 1,200 librarians, paraprofessionals, information science (LIS) students, and independent information professionals from all over Colorado participated in the study. This article will report on highlights from this research.

## GEOGRAPHY

The geographic distribution of respondents more or less reflects Colorado’s population. A high percentage of respondents work in the metropolitan areas of the state and along the Front Range. Eighty percent of those who responded to the survey live in metropolitan areas—four times more than those who do not. In addition, respondents from the Eastern Plains only represented 3 percent of total responses. The Front Range accounted for over 75 percent and the Western Slope 20 percent.

**Table 1**  
**Coloradans and Responding Colorado Library Workers by Age**

Age	Percent of Responding Colorado Library Workers	Percent of Coloradans
55-64	23%	12%
45-54	42%	22%
30-44	28%	39%
18-30	8%	27%

Sources: 2000 United States Census, <http://www.census.gov> and *Retirement, Retention, and Recruitment: The Future of Librarianship in Colorado*, <http://www.lrs.org>

## AGE

On the other hand, respondents to the survey suggest a potential problem for Colorado’s libraries – younger generations are under-represented in the state’s library workforce. When comparing working-age respondents—those between the ages of eighteen and sixty-four—with Coloradans of the same age range, survey respondents are much more likely to be older than the general population. Only 8 percent of survey respondents were between the ages of 18 and 30. More than three times that ratio of Coloradans in general are represented by this age group. It is even more striking to compare library respondents under the age of 45 with the general population. Thirty-six percent of responding Colorado library employees are between the ages of 18 and 44, compared with 66 percent of Coloradans. (See

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Table 1) This data suggests that Colorado's libraries have a dearth of younger people to replace retiring workers.

## RACE/ETHNICITY

Colorado's libraries are far from being racially diverse—of the respondents to the survey, 88 percent identified themselves as non-Hispanic and white. By contrast, only 74 percent of the state's population falls into this category. Those most underrepresented in the state's libraries appear to be black employees (2 percent of respondents versus 4 percent of the state's population) and Hispanics (5 percent of respondents versus 17 percent of the state). In this study and the United States Census,<sup>2</sup> respondents could choose more than one racial or ethnic group.

For most racial and ethnic groups there were not enough responses to the survey to come to statistically significant conclusions, but there are some trends that suggest that diversity among Colorado's library staff members is on the rise. For one, non-white respondents to the survey tended to be younger than white respondents. The median age of white respondents to the survey was 50 years old, whereas the median for non-white respondents was 46. Fifteen percent of non-white respondents were under the age of 30, whereas only 7 percent of white respondents were that young. Also, a higher percentage of white than non-white library employees planned on retiring in the next five years (19 percent versus 13 percent). Table 2 shows the breakdown by age and racial/ethnic group of respondents that answered both of those questions.

**Table 2**  
**Coloradans' Racial/Ethnic Group by Age**

<b>Racial/Ethnic Group</b>	<b>Under 30</b>	<b>30 to 44</b>	<b>45 to 54</b>	<b>55 &amp; Over</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Native American</b>	5%	37%	32%	26%	100%
<b>Asian</b>	26%	21%	26%	26%	100%
<b>Black</b>	15%	30%	30%	25%	100%
<b>Hispanic</b>	19%	27%	48%	7%	100%
<b>White</b>	7%	27%	41%	25%	100%
<b>Other</b>	11%	47%	26%	16%	100%

Source: 2000 United States Census, <http://www.census.gov>

If the respondents to this survey are any indication, the racial and ethnic makeup of Colorado library staff members could approach that of the state sometime in the near future. It appears that there may be a pool of applicants waiting to assume professional positions. Not only were non-white respondents to the survey younger than their white counterparts, they were more likely to be working in a paraprofessional capacity (42 percent compared with 31 percent)—a prime jumping-off point for professional positions, as will be discussed later in this article.

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## **GENDER**

The data from the survey verifies a long-standing belief about the profession—over 90 percent of the respondents were women. Combined with the disproportionately high percentage of respondents who were over 45 years of age and the lack of diversity among respondents, it is difficult to refute the stereotype that the library profession is predominately populated by “middle-aged, white women.”

There are also significant differences between the responses given by men and women, many of which tend to perpetuate the stereotypes. One of these differences likely influences some of the others—men are over twice as likely as women to work in academic libraries (28 percent of male respondents work in a college or university setting, compared with 13 percent of female respondents). This difference shows itself in professional leadership activities that respondents were involved in—men were over twice as likely to have served as officers of a national, regional, or state association; they were significantly more likely to be members or chairs of a library association committee; and they were much more likely to author materials for publication. These types of professional leadership opportunities are generally more encouraged, if not required, at academic institutions than at public, school, or special libraries. Additionally, when asked how the downturn in the economy had affected them in the last 12 months, men reported being much more likely than women to have lost salary or benefits. A 2004 LRS report found that since July 1, 2002, the academic library sector had been affected more by budget cuts than any other sector (see <<http://www.lrs.org>> for more information).

Further significant differences between the genders that were suggested by the survey include that men are more likely than women to work in metro areas, whereas women are more likely to work in a school (K-12) setting. As well, men were more likely to cite low prestige of the profession as a factor that would most discourage someone from entering the field of librarianship. When asked what makes librarianship an attractive profession, women were significantly more likely to cite a variety of work experience, and men were more likely to mention the ethic or culture of the profession.

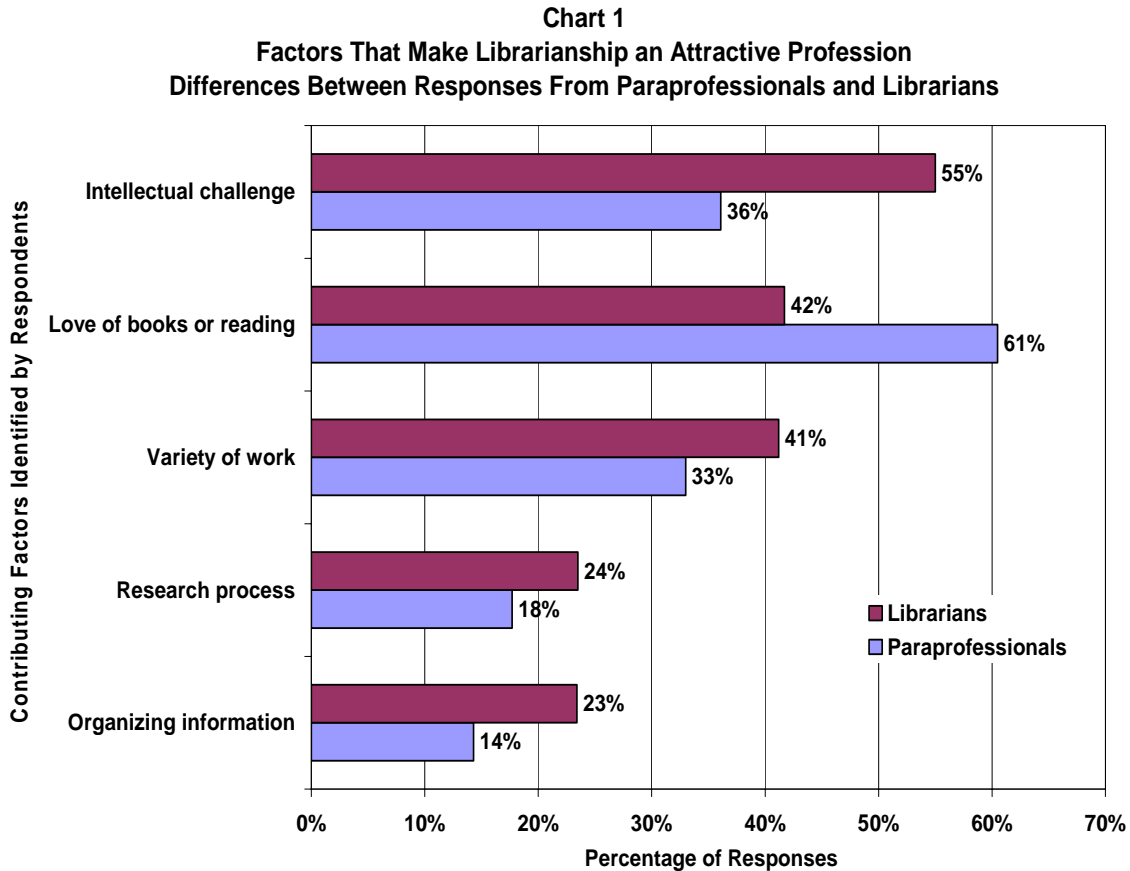
## **WHO'S RETIRING?**

Of the 1,241 respondents to the survey, 216—17 percent—indicated that they plan to retire in the next five years. For the purposes of this study, respondents were divided into two groups: librarians and paraprofessionals. Librarians were defined as those individuals with an advanced degree in library science or related credentials. Paraprofessionals were those without such credentials. Of the 571 credentialed librarians, 122—or 21 percent—indicated they had plans to retire in the next five years.

Within library types, almost half of school librarians responding to the survey indicated they plan to retire in the near future (47 percent). That is more than twice the percentage of retirements reported by special librarians (21 percent), more than three times the percentage reported by public librarians (15 percent), and almost five times the rate for academic librarians (10 percent).

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These retiring librarians will take with them decades of experience. Nearly nine out of ten likely retirees (87 percent) have more than 10 years of library work experience. Consequently, when they retire they will take with them professional and institutional memory that will be missed by library boards, directors, and patrons.

## WHY LIBRARIANSHIP?

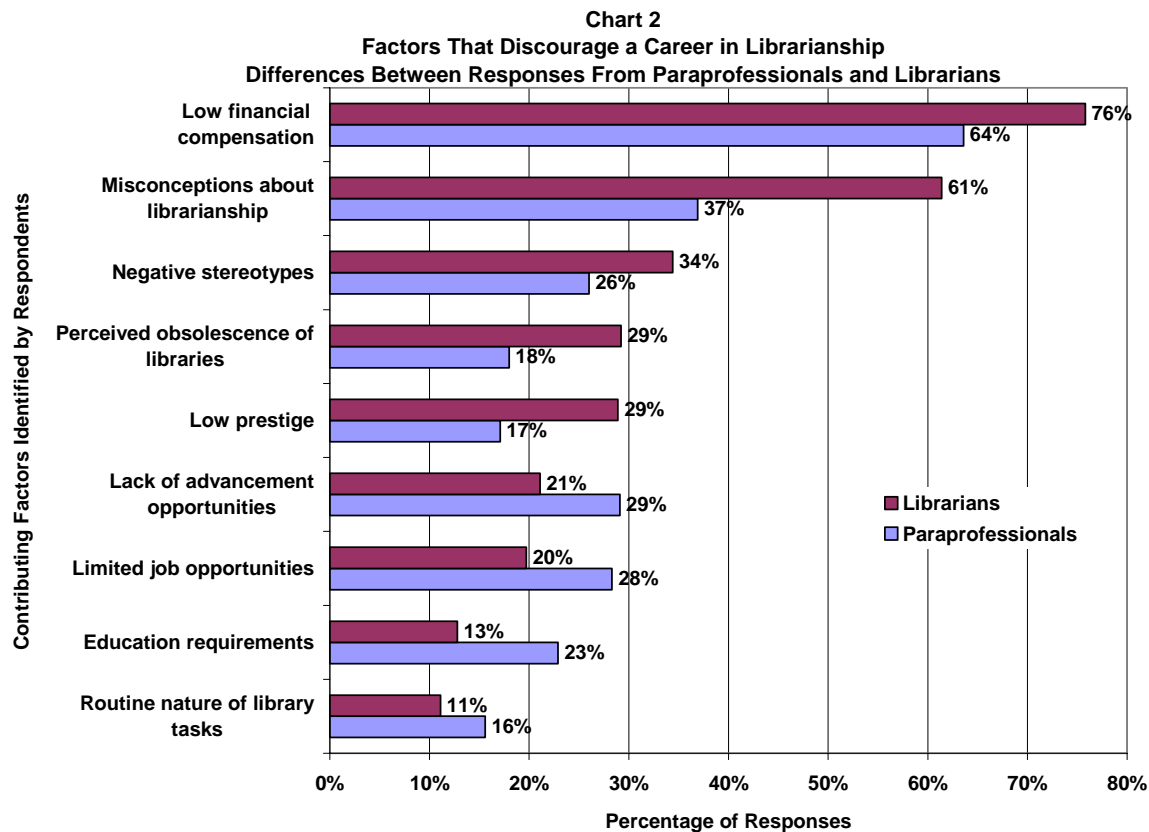
When asked what factors make librarianship an attractive profession, more than half of all respondents said service to others (53 percent) and/or a love of books or reading (51 percent). In addition, more than 2 out of 5 indicated that the intellectual challenge of the work was attractive (45 percent) and more than a third thought the variety of work was appealing.

Interestingly, responding paraprofessionals (61 percent) were considerably more likely than credentialed librarians (42 percent) to indicate a love of books and reading as a factor that makes librarianship an attractive career choice. Conversely librarians (55 percent) were significantly more apt to cite intellectual challenge as attractive than paraprofessional (36 percent). Other statistically significant differences between librarians and paraprofessionals were directly related to the type of work librarians do. Librarians chose the variety of work (41 percent), the research process (24 percent), and the organization of

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information (23 percent) more often as positive attributes of librarianship than paraprofessionals. Obviously, these two groups of respondents have significantly different perspectives of librarianship and why it is a desirable career choice. (See Chart 1.)



## WHY NOT LIBRARIANSHIP?

When asked what discouraged a career in librarianship, more than two-thirds of respondents indicated low financial compensation dissuades potential librarians (69 percent). The perception of libraries and librarianship also served as a deterrent. Almost half of respondents identified misconceptions about librarianship (48 percent) and almost a third negative stereotypes (30 percent) as discouraging factors to entering the profession. One in four respondents indicated lack of advancement opportunities (25 percent) or limited job opportunities (24 percent). These two factors coupled with the low financial compensation indicate respondents feel this is a career with limited opportunities.

Paraprofessionals and librarians expressed a multitude of statistically significant differences when they identified discouraging factors. Simply put, for librarians it's about money and image, whereas for paraprofessionals it's more about the lack of career opportunities and the job requirements. For example, low financial compensation and misconceptions about librarianship were identified in larger numbers by both groups as discouraging factors. However, librarians chose these factors much more frequently than

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their paraprofessional colleagues. On the other hand, lack of advancement opportunities, limited job opportunities, educational requirements, and the routine nature of library tasks were deterrents to librarianship for a larger proportion of paraprofessionals than librarians. (See Chart 2)

## **RECRUITING THE FUTURE OF LIBRARIANSHIP**

Where are the future librarians? Many may already be working in libraries and schools. Most librarians participating in the study had worked or volunteered in a library or school before pursuing an advanced degree or credential in librarianship. In fact, 3 out of 4 responding librarians (76 percent) said they had previous experience working in a library or school. Therefore, it would seem logical to recruit librarians from current paraprofessional and volunteer staff. However, not all paraprofessionals are interested in pursuing an advanced library degree.

Why not? Over half of responding paraprofessionals (non-LIS students) said that a library credential wasn't necessary in their current position (52 percent) and over a third said they were satisfied with their current position (36 percent). Furthermore, 2 out of 5 cited financial constraints (44 percent) and 1 out of 3 said that an advanced degree would not improve their compensation (33 percent). A third also said there were time constraints (34 percent) to consider.

What would sway these potential recruits to pursue a degree in library science? Three out of four paraprofessionals responding to the survey said the availability of financial aid (76 percent) was an encouraging factor. In addition, accessibility of online classes (58 percent), convenient location of classes (52 percent), and convenient class schedules (50 percent) were identified by at least half of respondents. Clearly, finances, and to a lesser degree convenience, are the factors that would most encourage these respondents to pursue further library education.

Taken all together, it seems obvious that financial considerations are a huge issue for recruiters into librarianship. Respondents indicated that not only do they need financial aid for school, but librarianship needs to pay more in order to make getting an advanced degree worthwhile. Ironically, the dilemma for libraries is that they need knowledgeable, experienced paraprofessionals to do many of the jobs in their organization, but these same folks may be their best source for new professional staff.

## **WHERE DO LIBRARIES GO FROM HERE?**

There is no doubt that there will be a considerable number of retirements of Colorado library professionals in the coming years, especially in the K-12 sector. Data suggests that there may not be enough qualified people to assume the professional roles that are being vacated. Where will these people come from?

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A good starting point would be to step up efforts to make librarianship an attractive profession to potential librarians. Additionally, it could be argued that an effort should be made to increase the diversity of staff so that Colorado's libraries better reflect the populations they serve. Specifically, library leaders need to appeal to members of all racial and ethnic groups, as well as to young people.

The next generation of librarians can come from a number of places. Culling new librarians from the paraprofessional ranks is a great place to begin, but libraries will need to look beyond their walls as well. Armed with an understanding of the perceived positives and negatives of the profession, today's library leaders can better find the leaders of tomorrow.

### **NOTES:**

<sup>1</sup>Steffen, 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.

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Census Bureau, *American Fact Finder*. Washington DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000. <<http://factfinder.census.gov>>.

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