

Retirement, Retention, and Recruitment: The Future of Librarianship in Colorado

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In Colorado as throughout the nation, librarianship is being—or is about to be—transformed by a generational wave of retirements. These losses raise related issues of retention and recruitment. The majority of the retirees have been in key leadership positions for 20 years or more, so their departures over at least the next five years will create dozens of openings for new library directors, department heads, association officers, and library educators and trainers. Many of these high-profile positions have not been vacant—or, at least, open to up-and-coming librarians—for decades. Who will take the places of these retirees? As library directorships and other senior positions become vacant, staff in the middle echelons are likely to move up, creating vacancies at middle-management levels. (Some vacant positions may, of course, simply be eliminated.) When staff openings exist, replacements may be hard to find. What will persuade individuals to choose librarianship as a career? What can be done to tempt existing librarians to remain in a field whose losses to retirement are only exacerbated by further losses to other fields?

Decision-makers for libraries must examine the patterns that can be discerned in the growing wave of retirements for lessons that will help to inform their efforts to shape the future of the profession through recruiting and retention efforts. It is not just a matter of how to recruit new librarians or how to retain incumbents generally; it is a matter of repopulating the library community's leadership.

A statewide online survey of Colorado library workers was conducted between October 15 and November 30, 2003. A total of 1,241 responses were received from both credentialed and non-credentialed library workers, as well as library and information science (LIS) students, at all types of libraries. Of the estimated 4,520 workers employed in Colorado's academic, public, and school libraries, 1,159 (26 percent) responded to the survey. Credentialed librarians and public library workers were somewhat over-represented relative to their proportions in the known universe of academic, public, and school library workers. (The size of the special library work force in Colorado, as in the nation, is unknown.)

Librarians and paraprofessionals planning to retire within the next five years were asked, among other things, to report that fact and to identify factors influencing their decision to retire. Incumbent paraprofessionals and current LIS students were asked questions relating to recruitment, such as what factors most encourage or discourage them from choosing librarianship as a profession. Incumbent librarians and paraprofessionals were asked questions about what would influence them to remain in the field. Those considering leaving the field were asked what other fields appear attractive and why. While the survey generated a lot of data, it did not capture all of the data one might wish. For instance, data was not captured from librarians who have already retired or about positions that may be vacant and whose fates may not yet be determined. Still, the answers to the questions asked shed considerable light on the status of librarianship in Colorado.

Retirements over the next five years are likely to be numerous, but they will not be restricted to those reaching the traditional retirement age of 65. Neither are retirements likely to be evenly distributed among library types, geographic areas, or specialties. Those who are retiring also tend to be among the state's most active library leaders—people who preside over professional organizations, chair committees, make presentations, and write books and articles. This wave of librarian retirements, which has already begun—and which will continue through at least the next five years—will affect some parts of the profession more than others, and the imbalances apt to result will require thoughtful care and attention.

Thus, the relationship between these three Rs—retirement, recruitment, and retention—is one that calls for a comprehensive statewide strategy to ensure that users of libraries of all types in all parts of the state receive equitable, high-quality services from credentialed librarians. Specific recommendations for action by various key players in the state's library leadership, which are justified by the findings of this study, are offered.

Retirement

As noted, Colorado librarians are retiring at a dramatic rate. To address the high incidence of retirements during the next five years, decision-makers for libraries will need to know which types of librarians are retiring, and why they are retiring, what their loss means for the professional community as well as the positions they are vacating, and where to look for their successors.

How many librarians are retiring? More than 20 percent (22 percent) of responding Colorado librarians expect to retire within the next five years. Of all responding school librarians, almost half (47 percent) indicate plans to retire within five years—more than twice the percentage for special librarians, more than three times the percentage for public librarians, and almost five times the percentage for academic librarians. This is likely explained by the fact that the percentage of school librarian respondents age 55 or over was also dramatically higher than for other types of librarians.

Who are these retirees? Many librarians are not waiting until age 65 to retire. Almost 30 percent of those who expect to retire within the next five years are ages 45 to 54. These retirees will take with them enormous amounts of experience. Nearly 9 out of 10 responding librarians who are retirement candidates have more than 10 years of library experience, and 3 out of 5 have more than 20 years of experience.

How have librarian retirements been affected by the recent economic downturn? The downturn has affected many librarians' retirement plans. Of responding prospective retirees from librarian positions, 1 out of 5 now plans to retire later than originally planned. Another 1 out of 5 now plans to retire earlier.

What human capital is being lost to retirement? Retiring librarians will also take with them substantial administrative skills. Of responding prospective retirees, 3 out of 4 are supervisors, 2 out of 5 are generalists, and 1 out of 5 is an administrator. In addition to losing leadership skills in the workplace, librarianship is also losing such skills in the professional community. Four out of 5 retiring librarians who responded to this survey have served in one or more leadership

roles in the profession, compared with only about half of all responding library workers. Considering what we know about current LIS students, librarian retirements may lead to shortages in the following areas: school librarianship, information technology, cataloging, reference, and digital resources.

What is happening to retirees and their jobs? Retiring librarians who participated in this study are not optimistic about the future of their positions. Many expect their jobs to be downgraded, combined with other jobs, or eliminated. Of responding prospective retirees, almost 1 out of 5 expects his or her job to be combined with another or eliminated. Almost 1 out of 5 expects to be succeeded by someone with less education. Fortunately, these retirees are not abandoning the profession altogether. More than half of them plan to continue working part-time or on-call. More than 2 out of 5 also plan to volunteer in libraries.

Where do we find their replacements? To find some of the likeliest candidates to fill librarian vacancies due to retirement, we do not need to look very far. Four out of 5 retiring librarians said they worked or volunteered in a library or school before becoming librarians. This suggests that current paraprofessionals and volunteers may be good candidates for recruitment into librarianship.

Retention

Because of the high number of librarian retirements, it will not be enough to recruit more people into the profession. Decision-makers must also formulate policies, develop workplace environments, and structure librarians' jobs in ways that encourage those already in the profession not to abandon it, whether to early retirement or to another profession that they perceive to be more lucrative or fulfilling.

What do incumbent librarians identify as factors that make librarianship most attractive or most discourage the choice of a library career? Echoing LIS students and paraprofessionals, incumbent librarians identify low financial compensation (78 percent) and misconceptions about the field (58 percent) as leading factors discouraging recruitment of new librarians. Interestingly, however, they believe that service to others (57 percent) and intellectual challenge (53 percent) outrank love of books or reading (45 percent) as factors that make librarianship an attractive career option.

What are incumbent librarians doing on the job? To what other fields are those leaving librarianship going? The traditional conception of libraries as places to obtain books appears to be most prevalent among public librarians. Academic, school, and special librarians who replied to this survey are more likely to specialize in digital resources than their public librarian counterparts and are, therefore, less book-focused.

Those who are tempted to leave librarianship do not venture far. Academic librarians are most likely to move to other higher education jobs. School librarians reported being most likely to move to other K–12 education jobs. Special librarians say they are likeliest to move to either academia or business. The lone exception is public librarians, who say they are most likely to move to jobs in the business world.

What does the future of librarianship—and of their own careers—look like to incumbent librarians? Librarians, especially beyond the state's major cities

and their suburbs, are not optimistic about the profession's ability to maintain adequate educational requirements for librarian positions. Librarians responding from non-metropolitan areas are almost four times more likely than their metropolitan counterparts to expect that their successors will have less education. This concern is particularly acute in school libraries. Responding school librarians are five times more likely than other librarian types to expect that their successors will have less education.

Worst of all, Eastern Plains librarians feel that the very existence of their positions will be threatened when they leave their jobs. Respondents from this region are most likely to expect that their jobs may be eliminated altogether.

Public, school, and special librarians tend to have stronger professional and/or family ties to Colorado. Responding academic librarians expect that they will have to be more mobile to advance professionally. Most likely, this is because of the limited number of colleges and universities in Colorado and draconian budget cuts to higher education. Responding librarians from this sector are least likely to limit themselves to jobs in Colorado when compared with other librarian types.

Who is staying in librarianship and why? Who is not? Many librarians responding from Colorado's high country find the location of their jobs an incentive to stay at their libraries. Librarians in the Mountains/Western Slope region are more likely than their counterparts from other regions to identify their location as a reason for remaining in their current organization.

Older librarians stay in their jobs not because they are ambitious, but rather because they enjoy their work and rely on the fringe benefits that accompany their salaries. With age, librarian respondents choose to remain in their current organizations less because of perceived advancement opportunities and more because of the variety of work and the adequacy of benefits.

For academic librarian respondents and, to a lesser extent, their special librarian counterparts, collegiality in the workplace was perceived as a very important reason to remain with their current organizations. Collegiality was less important to most participants from public and school libraries—particularly in non-metropolitan areas—possibly because they are much less likely to work with other librarians.

Librarians in their 30s and early 40s are sometimes tempted away from the library profession by the appeal of other fields. Librarian respondents ages 30 to 44 are the most likely of all age groups (16 percent vs. 5 percent to 9 percent) to consider leaving librarianship.

Recruitment

In view of the high number of retiring librarians, decision-makers need to be aware of the foreseeable supply of librarians to meet a growing demand. They also need to be prepared to position librarianship as a profession vis-à-vis other information- and education-related professions with which we compete for the "best and brightest." Achieving that end will depend on the extent to which they understand the factors that encourage and discourage individuals from choosing a career in librarianship. In particular, it will depend on understanding why more of those already working in libraries do not opt to become credentialed librarians.

Who is pursuing library education and where? The ages of LIS students involved in this study suggest that librarianship is often a second career. Of responding students, 4 out of 5 are ages 30 to 54. Only 16 percent are under age 30. LIS students tend to be attracted to the field after gaining some actual work experience in a library setting. Of the students who replied to this survey, 3 out of 4 have at least some library work experience. A quarter have more than five years of library experience.

Prospective librarians are earning graduate degrees via a variety of options. Over half of responding students are enrolled at the University of Denver, attending the only MLIS program based at a Colorado university. In addition, 1 out of 5 participates in the Kansas-based Emporia in the Rockies extension program, 1 out of 7 participates in an out-of-state program online, and 1 out of 12 is enrolled at either the University of Colorado, Denver, or the University of Northern Colorado programs for school librarians. In addition to LIS students in these school-specific programs, some prospective school librarians may be pursuing master's degrees in library and information science from the University of Denver, Emporia in the Rockies, or another program based outside Colorado.

With which fields does library and information science compete? Library and information science competes most frequently for prospective recruits with other professions that connect inquiring minds with information and help them to apply that information in their own lives or the lives of others. Like incumbent librarians, LIS students who returned this survey are most tempted away from librarianship by education (K–12 or higher), computer technology, and business.

What encourages and discourages students and paraprofessionals to choose a career in librarianship? Generally, students and paraprofessionals agree that a love of books and reading is the factor that most encourages choosing a career in librarianship (61 percent and 65 percent, respectively). For students, second and third place go to intellectual challenge (46 percent) and service to others (42 percent). For paraprofessionals, that order is reversed: service to others (56 percent) and intellectual challenge (39 percent). Students and paraprofessionals agree, rather resoundingly, that the factor they believe most discourages choosing a library career is low financial compensation (81 percent and 63 percent, respectively). They also agree on a distant second: misconceptions about librarianship (48 percent and 39 percent, respectively).

Surprisingly, paraprofessionals responding from the Mountains/Western Slope region are more likely to consider pursuing library degrees than their Front Range counterparts. Paraprofessionals responding from the Eastern Plains are least likely to consider pursuing a library degree. These inclinations are probably based on accurate assessments of the library job markets in different regions of the state. For instance, many public libraries in the Mountains/Western Slope region are library districts, whose budgets can or will afford the ability to create more librarian jobs. But many public libraries on the Eastern Plains may not be able to afford credentialed librarian salaries.

Paraprofessional respondents are most encouraged to pursue librarianship if financial aid is available and if several interrelated logistical issues are addressed. These issues include class location and schedule, availability of online classes, and flexible work schedule.

How do student expectations about school librarianship differ from reality?

Those planning to become school librarians may not have realistic expectations about the nature of the work. Only 8 percent of LIS students who said they plan to be school librarians expect to work with digital resources, but 39 percent of incumbent school librarians claim this specialty.

There is a market for graduate library education beyond the state's few major metropolitan areas. Three out of four non-metropolitan paraprofessionals report that access to online courses would encourage them to pursue LIS degrees or other credentials. Almost half of that group would be discouraged by inconveniently located educational institutions.

Why aren't more of those who already work in libraries pursuing library education? Of paraprofessional study participants not considering pursuing LIS credentials, over half believe a degree is not necessary to do their job and more than 2 out of 5 feel constrained financially from academic pursuits. Public and school library workers, in particular, report feeling discouraged by concerns about family obligations. Responding academic library paraprofessionals are most discouraged by a perceived lack of employer support. Reflecting the concern of all library workers that librarianship is not a well-paid profession, a third of all paraprofessionals do not believe a degree would improve their compensation.

Conclusion

To sum up the major findings of this Colorado study, many librarians are retiring, but far more from the school library sector than any other. The factors that make librarianship attractive to incumbent librarians are service to others, intellectual challenge, and love of books and reading. The most powerful factors that discourage choosing librarianship as a profession are clear to them. By far, the most discouraging factor is low financial compensation, followed by public misconceptions about the field. Recruits to librarianship tend to be those in their middle years seeking second careers. The "competition" for these individuals comes from education (both K-12 and higher), computer technology, and business. Incentives they believe would encourage more people to pursue LIS education include financial aid, flexible work schedules, more conveniently located class sites, and online courses.

The full report on this study, "Retirement, Retention, and Recruitment: The Future of Librarianship in Colorado," and related documents are available at <http://www.LRS.org>. In addition to providing full documentation of the study and its findings, the report offers recommendations for action to state leadership organizations, library decision-makers and individual libraries, library educators, librarians, and library job-seekers. (See http://www.lrs.org/documents/closer_look/RRR_web.pdf.) Accompanying the report is a trifold mini-brochure, "Quotable Facts About the Future of Librarianship in Colorado," which summarizes the major findings. (See http://www.lrs.org/documents/quotable/QF_Future_Librarianship.pdf.) Related issues of FAST FACTS: Recent Statistics from the Library Research Service are also posted on the LRS Web site. (See <http://www.lrs.org/fastfacts/ff2005.asp>.)