Why We Leave:
Exploring Academic Librarian Turnover and Retention Strategies

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Introduction

Employee turnover is a popular research area in Human Resources Management and Organizational Psychology, but it has not been widely studied in academic libraries. Studies show that institutions with high employee turnover suffer from decreased organizational performance, lower morale, and increased expenses. Meanwhile, institutions with higher rates of employee retention benefit from having well-trained and committed staff members. In academic libraries, higher retention can support the success of our students, faculty, and staff.

A majority of the research surrounding employee turnover in U.S. academic libraries comes from the early 2000's, particularly after the 2002 ACRL Focus of the Future Taskforce identified recruitment, education, and retention of librarians as pressing issues.[1] Several of these studies examined employee turnover and retention, finding that career goals outside of librarianship, limited opportunities for growth or advancement, dissatisfaction with future salary prospects, and unpleasant work environments were the leading factors that led to librarian turnover.[2] Studies on retention have shown that job autonomy, flexible working hours, professional development opportunities, and collegiality are among employees most favored retention strategies, while professional development opportunities are the most commonly deployed by academic libraries.[3] This paper presents preliminary data from a 2018 survey that investigated the contributing factors to academic librarian turnover and makes recommendations for potential retention strategies based on participant responses.

Methodology

To explore the main factors that contribute to employee turnover in academic libraries, an anonymous mixed methods survey was administered to current academic librarians in the fall of 2018. The survey was distributed on several general and specialized library listservs to gather information from all areas of academic librarianship. Participation was limited to librarians in the United States who voluntarily left one academic librarian position for another within the past five years.

The survey instrument was modeled on previous studies conducted in academic libraries as well as studies conducted in the fields of human resources management and organizational psychology and behavior.[4] These studies identified various leading factors of librarian and white-collar employee turnover.[5] Based on their findings, a list of potential factors was created for inclusion in the survey. A total of 20 factors were grouped into four major categories:

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- Work Environment
- Compensation and Benefits
- Job Duties
- Personal Factors

Participants were asked to indicate the degree to which dissatisfaction with various external, work-related and personal factors influenced their decision to leave their previous position. The instrument included Likert scale questions associated with each major category. Librarians rated their (dis)agreement on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly agree to Strongly disagree (1= Strongly agree, 2 = Somewhat agree, 3 = Somewhat disagree, 4= Strongly disagree). After responding to the scaled questions associated with each category, participants were invited to share additional factors that contributed to their decision-making process.

Results

For librarians who remained within the profession, the top reasons identified as compelling them to leave for another position were consistent with previous studies indicating that librarians seek to improve their work environment, growth and advancement opportunities, and future salary prospects. Further breakdown of work environment factors revealed that considerations such as library culture and morale, and supervisors and administration were key to a librarian's decision to move to another position.

The number of librarians interested in taking the survey was much higher than anticipated; 565 respondents entered the survey and 553 indicate they would like to participate after reading the survey description. 470 met the criterial of being currently employed as an academic librarian within the United States, and of those, 354 met the criteria of voluntarily leaving an academic librarian position within the past 5 years. The survey was completed by 275 academic librarians. The majority of responses came from those who identified their current role as Reference, Instruction and/or Outreach librarians (44%); the remaining responses came from Library Management (21%), Archivists or Special Collections (9%), Technical Services and Cataloging (9%), Web and Electronic Services (8%), Other (8%), and Access Services (1%).

The following discussion highlights the leading factors within each major category that influenced librarian departure, organized by average level of dissatisfaction: Work Environment (51.63%), Job Duties (45.24%), Compensation and Benefits (44.64%), and finally Personal Factors (32.72%).

Work Environment

Librarians were asked to rate their level of (dis)agreement with nine statements about various aspects of their previous work environment (see table 1). While many participants indicated that more than one factor related to their work environment was relevant to their decision to leave, the factors which most strongly influenced the decision to leave were library administration and direct supervisors, and library culture and morale. Although relationships with coworkers was not a highly ranked factor in itself, participants mentioned coworkers several times in relation to morale and library culture.

Library Administration and Direct Supervisors

Half of all participants strongly agreed that dissatisfaction with library administration was a key factor in their decision to leave their previous position. Participants expressed frustration with what they described as unfair practices that stunted or prevented their growth as professionals through practices such as inconsistent application of policies, lack of transparency or involvement in decision making, and lack of stability within the administration. One participant indicated the challenge of turnover for those who remain: "High dean turnover,

Response	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N-Size
TABLE 1 **Academic Librarians' Dissatisfaction with Work Environment**					
I was not satisfied with my direct supervisor(s)	43.43%	20.44%	14.23%	21.90%	274
I was not satisfied with library administration	50.00%	22.06%	9.93%	18.01%	272
I was not satisfied with my co-workers	12.92%	31.37%	24.72%	31.00%	271
I was not satisfied with librarian status or rank (e.g., faculty/non-faculty status, tenure track)	19.19%	19.56%	20.66%	40.59%	271
I was not satisfied with the level of inclusivity	15.56%	28.52%	30.74%	25.19%	270
I was not satisfied with the culture of the library	36.03%	33.82%	17.56%	12.50%	272
I was not satisfied with the morale in the library	49.45%	30.04%	8.79%	11.72%	273
I was not satisfied with the library's reputation	9.23%	15.50%	34.695	40.59%	271
I was not satisfied with the university's local or national reputation	8.82%	18.75%	26.47%	45.96%	272

with each one making decisions that went against what the last one had decided," while another noted that, "My library dean was the driving force enacting change and forward movement within the library. When I learned they were leaving the university, I decided I did not want to stay at that library without them." More comments, however, were in agreement with the sentiments of another participant, who pointed out the ripple effects of tension with administration: "The library dean had a strained relationship with the department, with an associated impact on our department's collective morale."

Direct supervisors also influenced the likelihood that librarians would seek employment elsewhere, according to participants. Several indicated that lack of support from their direct supervisors influenced their decision to leave, while additional comments mentioned micromanagement and the lack of training or preparation to be a supervisor, evidenced by poor handling of situations such as managing interpersonal conflicts. Some participants noted their dissatisfaction with supervisors grew out of a lack of response to addressing long-term issues between coworkers. Another concern voiced by a participant was the effect that a disinterested supervisor had on the rest of the library: "My direct supervisor had very little involvement with the actual running of the library and was putting all of his time into his own project. There was little supervision and some employees did not pull their weight, requiring other employees to pick up the slack."

Library Culture and Morale

The actions (or inaction) of supervisors and administrators were cited by participants as heavily influencing the culture and morale of the library. Several mentions of bullying or toxic environments were linked to their effects on overall library morale. Additionally, a sense of imbalance in terms of both recognition and reward was repeatedly mentioned, indicating that morale is tied into perceptions of injustice in areas including workload, compensation and even office configurations. One participant shared: "The people who worked the hardest and contributed the most were not rewarded." Tension between departments contributed to a less satisfactory work environment for some participants, including one who indicated the existence of a "clear divide between reference and technical services librarians—the overall poor treatment, lower pay, and worse work environments for technical services (e.g. we were given small cubicles and shared 1 phone/printer, while reference librarians were

given offices and adequate technology/office supplies).” A few comments specifically cited the harmful effects that gender issues and sexism had on library morale.

Job Duties

Librarians were asked to rate their level of (dis)agreement with four statements about their previous job duties (see table 2). Responses from participants who felt that job duties played a role in their decision to leave showed that, while participants have a strong desire to grow as professionals, a lack of funds, a lack of support from the administration, or both can interfere with professional development. Ultimately, this influenced their decisions to seek job opportunities elsewhere. Narratives indicated that librarians who left their jobs because of dissatisfaction with job duties did so because they felt the need to seek opportunities elsewhere in order to develop as a professional and advance in their career. Others were overwhelmed by the number of duties they were assigned, which often prevented them from focusing on their area of specialization.

TABLE 2 Academic Librarians’ Dissatisfaction with Job Duties					
Response	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N-Size
The job was a mismatch with my long-term professional interests	10.91%	21.82%	29.82%	37.45%	275
I was not satisfied with my job tasks	9.12%	27.37%	33.94%	29.56%	274
I was not satisfied with my potential for advancement or promotion within the library	41.82%	28.36%	14.18%	15.64%	275
I was not satisfied with my opportunities for professional development or training	16.06%	25.91%	27.74%	30.29%	274

Potential for Advancement or Promotion

“The primary reason I left was because I felt my career had stalled,” one participant commented, adding, “To advance any further, I would have had to leave for another institution.” This comment reflects a common concern among survey participants that staying in the same position at the same institution means foregoing opportunities for advancement.

Another participant shared that “the only way to be promoted was to wait for my direct supervisor to retire.” Many survey participants felt that in order to advance to a higher position, they needed to either wait for a colleague to leave that position or leave for another institution altogether. “I was told that a job had to open…to obtain greater rank or pay.”

Other participants commented on the lack of opportunity to gain the experience needed to move into more advanced positions: “When you’re a faculty librarian at a small institution, there is very little room to gain supervisory experience and move up.”

Opportunities for Professional Development

For those who felt that job duties played a role in their decision to leave, the lack of opportunity for professional development was also a common factor. The responses here show that participants have a strong desire to grow as professionals. However, a lack of funds, a lack of support from the administration, or both can interfere with this goal, leading librarians to seek job opportunities elsewhere.

"We tried very hard to access professional development opportunities for ourselves and our staff, but there was no financial/organizational support," one participant commented. Another spoke to concerns for those on the tenure track: "I was in a tenure-track position, but there was very little in the way of support for professional development. You were expected to present at national conferences, but you had to pay for most of the cost associated with this yourself."

Job Tasks

Though this factor did not attract a strong Likert response, many librarians indicated in their comments a particular dissatisfaction with their job tasks. Responses related to this factor tended to fall into two categories: librarians who felt they were being asked to carry the weight of too many duties and others who wanted more specialization. In some cases, responses overlapped.

The problem of too many duties seemed to cause librarians the most distress. "I found myself overwhelmed by the sheer volume of work and the pressure to complete it quickly," one participant shared. The participant added, "I received little to no support from my coworkers." Often, librarians commented that job duties were added after the departure of their colleagues. "I was asked to do far, far too much as an entry-level librarian. Two other librarians…left within my first year. Two additional librarians had left the previous year…due to so much turnover, the extra job duties got piled on me as the last person left standing," according to one participant. Another stated, "My workload significantly increased after the departure of several professional employees…it was too much for me to do it all well."

The desire for more specialization sometimes overlapped with comments related to too many job duties. One participant commented that "I was in a position that required me to teach and provide reference services while simultaneously managing electronic resources, leading all web-based projects and initiatives…, and finally, coordinating social media…what I wanted most was to teach…as time went on, I had less time to devote to instruction." According to another participant, "I was a subject librarian, which I loved, but I also shared responsibility for general library instruction for the freshman composition program, which I always struggled with."

From these responses, it seems that librarians are often asked to do the job of many, which interferes with their ability to focus on areas where they feel most effective or interested. Leaving their current position seems to be the solution for those who seek more manageable or focused workloads.

Compensation and Benefits

Librarians were asked to rate their level of (dis)agreement with four statements about their compensation and benefits at their previous workplace (see table 3). While a majority of participants reported dissatisfaction with

TABLE 3 Academic Librarians' Dissatisfaction with Compensation and Benefits					
Response	**Strongly Agree**	**Somewhat Agree**	**Somewhat Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	**N-Size**
I was not satisfied with my salary	30.55%	29.45%	22.55%	17.45%	275
I was not satisfied with my future salary prospects	37.82%	28.73%	18.55%	14.91%	275
I was not satisfied with the amount of paid leave available to me	10.58%	12.04%	27.01%	50.36%	274
I was not satisfied with the other benefits (e.g., retirement package, health insurance, educational assistance) available to me	11.64%	18.55%	33.45%	36.36%	275

salary considerations, less tangible factors from other categories received stronger responses. Compensation and benefits would appear to be a straightforward category, but comments often went beyond the practicality of earning a decent wage to job security, self-worth, and workplace morale.

Future Salary Prospects

Lack of raises and salary freezes were commonly cited reasons for dissatisfaction with future salary prospects. "My salary was not in line with the standard pay for my position, and when I asked for a raise, I was told that I deserved one but that admin would never approve it." Several participants wrote that raises were unlikely to happen, even if there was a consensus that pay increases were needed. Also, over a dozen responses that indicated dissatisfaction over future salary prospects also identified cost of living as a major factor in their departure. Participants' stories included salary ranges that did not factor in housing costs or merit increases that did not match inflation rates.

In addition to a lack of raises or salary freezes, participants concerned with their future salary prospects identified anxiety over budget crises. "There would be no increases in salary for years and it was probable that hours and benefits would be cut due to a system-wide budget crisis." Those who left due to budgetary concerns took positions at private institutions or state institutions where their new rank would provide more stability. "… my position was non-tenure-track, so it may very well have disappeared at some point due to reduced budgets, if I hadn't left first." The common theme among these responses was lack of security; whether from an inability or unwillingness of institutions to maintain the purchasing power of salaries or from a statewide budget crisis threatening their position.

Salary

Over half of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they were dissatisfied with the salaries at their previous institutions. Participant comments indicated the unique situations at each workplace, but what they tended to have in common was lack of reward for remaining at an institution. Instead, institutions seemingly incentivized turnover.

The most commonly cited reason for dissatisfaction was non-competitive salary rates. "My institution's pay is the lowest in the state. While it was decent, I knew that I could make more money doing the same job just about anywhere else." Quite a few participants commented that they did not enter librarianship seeking wealth but, while salary was not the primary factor in their decision to leave, pay disparity—particularly between peers—was a motivating factor.

Salary compression was also a leading area of concern and was often described in conjunction with non-competitive salaries. As one participant described: "Salary was on the low end for starting employees. Admin adjusted it finally but did not bring the current faculty up to the same level. We were told they would "Catch us up" at the next annual review, but many people were denied a raise and were kept at a salary lower than new hires, many who had just completed grad school and had no professional experience." The narratives varied but generally centered on recent library school graduates receiving higher salaries than current employees with more experience. Participants from both sides of the pay-discrepancy commented on how salary compression negatively impacted morale at their institutions. Those with lower salaries were frustrated with administration, those with higher salaries were concerned about their future salary prospects, and all were concerned about the tension caused by the compression.

Overall, the preliminary results indicate that intrinsic factors are stronger determinants of librarian departure than salary or other benefits. Many participants commented that they "were fairly compensated," that

"money was not the issue," or even that the "compensation actually kept me in the job longer than [it] should have." As one participant wrote: "I've never been paid more than I was at that position, and the benefits were outstanding. Future prospects were likewise excellent. But money doesn't matter when you hate your life, which the job was making me do."

Personal Factors

Librarians were asked to rate their level of (dis)agreement with three statements about personal factors related to their previous position (see table 4). Most notably, while this category demonstrated the lowest levels of dissatisfaction across the board, a number of distressing comments about workplace discrimination were shared. Concerns about geographic location were fairly evenly split, with participants mostly dissatisfied if the location was too far from loved ones. Caregiving and unrealistic work hours were also areas of concern, although less than half of participants expressed dissatisfaction with the work-life balance factor.

TABLE 4 Academic Librarians' Dissatisfaction with Personal Factors					
Response	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N-Size
The job was a mismatch with my personality (e.g., introvert working outreach or public services)	1.47%	8.42%	31.50%	58.61%	273
I was not satisfied with the geographic location	20.88%	27.11%	19.78%	32.23%	273
The job expectations did not provide me with a satisfactory work-life balance	18.32%	21.61%	30.40%	29.67%	273

Geographic Location

The most commonly identified personal factor influencing their decision to leave was the geographic location of their previous position. In open-ended responses, participants pointed to several common grievances including geographic distance from loved ones, high cost of living, long commutes, and a general "lack of things to do" in the area.

The most frequent complaint related to geographic location was that the town the librarian lived in was too far away from their family or significant other. Almost a dozen comments stated sentiments similar to this participant: "I wanted to move closer to my family and had an opportunity to do so." Other participants described "hour long commutes both ways" or more social concerns such as, "the town didn't have a nightlife to speak of" and "the university basically was the town, so there was nothing else to really do and it was almost impossible to make friends."

Work-life Balance

The second most common personal factor was dissatisfaction with work-life balance. Several comments on work-life balance issues mentioned caregiving. Many librarians are responsible for the caregiving of an elderly parent, child with special needs, and/or young children. For various reasons, several librarians found it easier to leave their positions in order to provide better care for their family members. Other librarians cited being asked to work outside of normal working hours as a factor that influenced them to leave. One librarian stated, "as reference student supervisor, [I was asked] to be available to my employees 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, even while on vacation or out sick."

Other Personal Factors

Other personal factors made appearances in the open-ended portion of the survey. Several librarians reported that their previous position was negatively impacting their health, with one stating, "we were so overworked and understaffed that I was putting in 10-12 hour days just trying to keep up. It was not good for my health." Facing discrimination at work also came up several times in the survey. One librarian wrote, "I am disabled, and the library was actively hostile towards disability" while another reported, "as a religious minority, I felt deeply unsafe there." Reports of discrimination were distressing, if unsurprising, and deserve to be studied more fully in the future to better understand how discrimination impacts employee retention in academic libraries.

Recommendations

The most effective retention strategies will be those designed to fit the needs of the institution and its people. The recommendations from this study are based on preliminary results and are meant to contribute to the conversation about academic librarian turnover. Many of these recommendations can be found in the literature from nearly a decade ago.[6] However, the concerns and strategies addressed in these pieces remain relevant and grow in importance as more librarians retire.

Recommendations have been organized into three broad categories: empowerment & flexibility, transparency & communication, and mentorship & training.

Empowerment & Flexibility

Scan the environment and address internal issues associated with morale and library culture. To appeal to a variety of employees, multiple paths to address these issues are needed rather than one administration-driven morale builder. Involving all library employees in identifying these paths and setting goals to reduce divisions between departments and generations of librarians may help create more of a team atmosphere. Recognition that improving culture and morale takes time, and providing that time for employees to participate in meaningful ways, is also needed.

Allow for a reasonable amount of self-determination in the workplace. While the institution's budget and geographic location is outside the control of library management, telecommuting and flexible scheduling can assist employees facing a variety of challenges ranging from long commutes to caregiving.

Improve employee work-life balance. For example, have regular conversations about job duties in order to make mutual decisions on how to prioritize work, assuming reducing the number of duties is not possible. Decisions about what gets prioritized should represent a reasonable time commitment for the librarian. Such conversations may prevent burnout.

Give librarians the opportunity to take on a project of their own making that relates to their specialization or professional interests. Work together to create a plan that allows the librarian a reasonable amount of time to work on their project while also tending to prioritized duties.

Transparency & Communication

Communicate openly in order to build trust, and to reduce rumors and misconceptions. Organizational transparency from within the library and the institution may correct the misconceptions of employees who are not privy to the larger picture. This includes providing information about funding and what the current administrative priorities are, and how that impacts the library's priorities. When possible, offer opportunities to contribute to the decision-making process. Future leaders can be given opportunities to lead projects, and given feedback in a consistent and constructive manner.

Distribute professional development funds fairly and equitably, making the process for distributing funds as transparent as possible. Where budgets may be inadequate, library administrators can encourage librarians to take advantage of professional development opportunities by creating awareness of grants, scholarships, and other options for alternative funding at all levels. It may be beneficial to hold in-house workshops on how to write effective grant or scholarship applications where those who are new to the process can learn from those with more experience for free. This empowers employees to move from passive to active roles regarding the finances of their institution, opening lines of communication with their supervisors and increasing organizational buy-in.

Mentorship & Training

Take advantage of management training offered within the institution and/or the profession. Library professional organizations offer many low-cost or free webinars and readings that can enhance leadership skills. Human resources training may also be useful for those without experience supervising others..

Prepare librarians for the next step in their careers. Retaining a librarian who is seeking a better fit or to take on increasing levels of responsibility may be out of the control of any individual library administrator, but they can ease the transition. Communicate with the librarian about their ambitions and what experience they need in order to be successful. Facilitating the librarian's training and education during their remaining time will improve the librarian's morale and they may stay longer in order to gain experience or complete their projects. In the meantime, the library will benefit from their professional growth.

Future Research

Future research should be expanded to include librarians who have moved into other librarian positions outside of academia or who have left the profession completely. The authors received nearly two dozen emails from such librarians who wanted to participate in the survey. Although they were outside the scope of the current study, the response was significant enough to suggest that adapting this study for those who have left traditional academic librarianship (e.g. for government positions, career centers, or historical societies) would be worth exploring in the future.

Replication of existing research would be useful to analyze the value of retention initiatives over time, such as in the works by Strothmann and Ohler and Markgren, et.al.[7] It would also be interesting to learn whether changing jobs solved the problems participants mentioned. Did they find satisfaction after the change and, if so, did it last? Markgren, et.al. touched on this psychology nicely in "The Five-Year Itch," but a fresh analysis centered on this concept would be useful for supervisors and job seekers alike.[8]

Ultimately, this paper is intended to discuss preliminary findings and highlight participant narratives. Final data analysis and findings will be explored in a future publication.

Conclusion

This study investigated the primary causes of academic librarian turnover. Preliminary results of the study indicate that the five factors that elicit the strongest levels of dissatisfaction for librarians who left a position are library administration, morale, direct supervisors, potential for advancement or promotion, and future salary prospects. While many of the factors included in this survey may be out of library administrators' control, those who seek to improve the retention of employees might consider strategies such as better work-life balance, allowing for greater autonomy, and transparent communication.

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

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