

The Age Demographics of Academic Librarians

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In demographic terms, librarianship in North America is a profession apart. Relative to comparable professions, it contains one third the number of individuals aged 35 and under and almost 75 percent more individuals aged 45 and over. Librarians, particularly academic librarians, are older than professionals in all but a handful of comparable occupations.

The relatively advanced age of librarians is not a new phenomenon. *Library Manpower*, a landmark study of librarianship by the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), established that as of 1970, U.S. librarians were older than their counterparts in most comparable professions. Populations do not age the same way that individuals do; they may grow younger, remain the same, or age. In fact, the average age of U.S. librarians did not change between 1970 and 1990 and in theory, librarianship could have remained older than comparable professions for the next 25 years in a stable, predictable way. However, between 1990 and 1994, librarians in the United States aged rapidly. In 1990, 48 percent of librarians were aged 45 and over, compared with 58 percent in 1994. The aging work force is a well-established phenomenon in North America, but it is unlikely to account for such dramatic change in so short a time.

To understand better this change in the age demographics of librarians, this study drew from a variety of data sources, but is based on two unpublished data sets collected by ARL. These data sets, compiled from ARL's 1990 and 1994 salary surveys, contain basic demographic data, including age, for librarians employed in [ARL's 108 university member libraries](#). The data sets were analyzed with three main objectives in mind: to explain the shape and movement of the ARL age profile, to project retirements, and to examine subgroups within the ARL population for age-related anomalies.

The ARL Age Profile

The unusual shape of the ARL age distribution is anomalous because of its under-representation of young people and over-representation of individuals aged 45 to 49. Possible explanations for these anomalies include the unprecedented increase in the number of librarian positions in the 1960s, the subsequent, equally dramatic, reduction in the rate of hire for ARL libraries, the limited mobility of many ARL librarians, and the transfer of experienced librarians into ARL libraries.

The ARL data reveals that the number of librarians employed grew by 50 percent between 1963 and 1970, 1 percent between 1971 and 1983, 12 percent between 1984 and 1988, after which there was a leveling off to near stability between 1989 and 1994.

It is important to note that most of the 1960s hires were not baby boomers; they were recruited to service the college-aged baby boom. But the baby boomers who became librarians, most of whom were aged 40 to 48 in 1994, do have an enormous influence on the age curve as they have been hired in disproportionate numbers each year since 1970.

The ARL population also demonstrates limited mobility. Based on 1994 data, 54 percent of all ARL librarians with 20 or more years of professional experience have worked at only one library thus reducing the number and impact of transfers into and out of the ARL population.

The size and prestige of ARL libraries may have some effect on retaining existing and attracting experienced librarians. But there is a basic demographic explanation as well: ARL libraries hire disproportionately from the 40-49 age group because it is unusually large. The pool of available librarians has a disproportionate number of baby boomers in it, and so they will account for an inordinate share of new hires.

The under-representation of younger people in the ARL distribution is explained in part by the low rates of hire in recent years, exacerbated by the relative lack of mobility of experienced ARL librarians that reduces the number of vacancies available for young people. The low number of younger people is also associated with the unusually high age of library and information studies students relative to those in other professional programs.

The movement of the ARL age curve between 1990 and 1994 is extraordinary for so short a period of time and the best explanation is the outsized population of 1960s hires and baby boomers. Between 1990 and 1994, the large number of librarians aged 40-44 moved into the 45-49 age cohorts, and the population's apex moved with them. This group's influence is amplified by the reduction in new hires, from 15 percent of the population in 1990 to 10.8 percent in 1994. The decline in the number of new professionals, from 5 percent in 1990 to 4 percent in 1994, may also have played a role in the movement of the curve.

Many comparable professions experienced the demographic pressures exerted by growth in higher education in the 1960s and the baby boom, yet they did not age between 1990 and 1994. What sets the ARL population apart? One possible answer is that ARL libraries have not hired large numbers of librarians since the early 1970s and those who have been recruited were relatively old. These two factors increased the already pervasive influence of the 1960s hires/baby boomer group in the ARL population. As the projections below indicate, this group should continue to dominate ARL's age distribution well into the next century.

Retirement Projection

The 1990 and 1994 ARL data, combined with U.S. demographic data, provide the basis for projections on the age profile of ARL librarianship and allow for a reasonable approximation of the rates at which ARL librarians will retire over the next 25 years. The projected movement of the age curve is like a wave crashing on the shore. The peak of this wave consists of the individuals aged 45-49 in 1995, and it moves along with them until 2010, when large numbers of baby boomers begin to leave the profession. As a result, the projection for 2020 reflects a younger population than in 2010. The projection analysis allows for a reasonable approximation of retirements.

Percent of ARL Population Expected to Retire

Years	Percent
1995 to 2000	16%
2000 to 2005	16%
2005 to 2010	24%
2010 to 2020	27%

Analysis of Subgroups Within ARL Populations

There are a number of interesting anomalies associated with some of the subgroups in the ARL population.

Catalogers and Reference Librarians

One commonly held belief among ARL librarians is that reference librarians are younger than catalogers, and this is indeed the case. In 1994, 35 percent of ARL catalogers and only 27 percent of reference librarians were age 50 and above. Part of the disparity lies in the degree to which the two populations are being refreshed with new hires. While reference librarians constitute 20 percent of the ARL population, they accounted for more than 27 percent of new hires in 1994. Catalogers also received a disproportionate number of new hires, but the margin was much smaller: catalogers were 12 percent of the population and 15 percent of the new hires in 1994. The combined effect of high retirement and low recruitment produced a 13 percent decline in the number of catalogers between 1990 and 1994, compared with a 7 percent increase in the number of reference librarians. Considering that the number of new hires was low in 1994, it is clear that ARL libraries are not replacing their retiring catalogers on a one-to-one basis.

Minority Groups

There are two minority groups in the ARL age profile that stand out from the rest: first, there is a highly unusual Asian curve, which peaks in the 60-64 age cohort. ARL libraries are certain to lose large portions of their Asian population in the very near future, although hire statistics indicate that the Asian population is being refreshed so as to maintain the size of the group.

The African American curve is interesting because it is skewed dramatically towards the younger age cohorts. Lower percentages of African Americans in the older age cohorts suggests that the portion of the population they represent is bound to increase over the next 10 years, even without vigorous recruitment efforts. This suggests that tracking the African American proportion of total new hires is a better indicator of the success of recruitment efforts than a simple percent of total population.

Directors

Directors tend to fall into a narrower range of ages than any other job title category. In 1994, more than 82 percent were between the ages of 45 and 59. While the comparable figure from 1990 is almost identical, the age profiles for the 2 years are quite different. The aging trend that affected the ARL population between 1990 and 1994 apparently affected the director group as well, since the percentage of the population aged 55 and over rose from 25 to 43 percent. The percentage of the population in the 60 to 64 age group is twice that of the population as a whole, but this is not surprising given the experience generally required of directors. However, directors are not more inclined than other ARL librarians to remain in their positions after age 65.

Male ARL directors are substantially older than their female counterparts: 21 percent of male directors were age 60 or over in 1994, compared with just 3 percent of female directors. Thus retirements in the near future are likely to have the effect of increasing the proportion of female ARL directors.

Canadians

Canadian ARL librarians, who make up 9 percent of the ARL population, are significantly older than their counterparts in the United States. Only 16 percent of the Canadian ARL population is under age 40, compared with 23 percent of those in the United States. At the other end of the scale, 42 percent of the Canadian librarian population are age 50 and over, 20 percent higher than in the United States. It is also remarkable that there are only slightly fewer librarians in the 50-54 age group than the 45-49 group.

How to explain the difference? While some demographic factors, such as the baby boom and the growth of higher education, affected both Canada and the United States, there are many obstacles to applying the same analysis to both countries. The array of federal laws that affect hiring, pension and retirement issues, and census data collection all complicate comparisons, as do differing employment patterns in higher education in the two countries, and library and information science student demographics. A special study would be necessary to understand how these factors affect the Canadian age profile.

Conclusion

The age profile of librarianship has important implications for the health and continued viability of the profession. Career choice is a complex matter, but money is one compelling explanation of why librarianship might be attractive to those in mid-life and relatively unattractive to young people. The growing scarcity of young people in the general population may create pressure to increase entry level salaries in librarianship. But libraries might also adjust by moving work once performed by librarians to support staff, or off-site in the form of outsourcing. The demographic aspects of the salary issue may produce a decrease in the number of librarians and an increase in the salaries of those remaining.

Librarianship has a record of successful adaptation, most notably in its adoption of new technologies. The next adaptation will require that librarianship translate its print-centered expertise in the evaluation, selection, organization, and preservation of information to the new digital environment. Competition for this new role will be intense, however, and the advantage will go to groups that can combine traditional "librarian" skills with technical and managerial ones. If librarianship is successful in claiming this role, the new skill mix may well be recognized in the form of expanded opportunity and higher salaries, making librarianship a career of first choice for more young people.

*The [Louisiana State University Library](#) supported Mr. Wilder's research as a Visiting Program Officer with [ARL's Statistics and Measurement Program](#). The complete study, *The Age Demographics of Academic Librarians: A Profession Apart*, is available from [ARL Publications](#)*

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Last Modified: July 25, 2001