

# The Changing Profile of Research Library Professional Staff

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In demographic terms, librarianship in North America is a profession apart. Librarians are, as a group, substantially older than those in comparable professions, and they are aging at a much faster rate. This much you may have read in this publication in the spring of 1996, when I reported the highlights of my analysis of unpublished, demographic data sets compiled from ARL's 1990 and 1994 salary survey of librarians employed in ARL's university member libraries. The full report was published in 1995 as *The Age Demographics of Academic Librarians: A Profession Apart* (Washington: Association of Research Libraries, 1995).

ARL's collection in 1998 of comparable demographic data on 8,400 professional staff positions in 110 university member libraries<sup>1</sup> provides an opportunity to update the 1995 study. The additional data allow for a broader perspective from which to assess the significance of apparent changes in the population. This article describes what the 1998 data reveal about age trends in the ARL university library population, with special analyses by racial/ethnic classification and by type of position.

## Age Profile of Librarians in the United States

For the sake of context, it is important to note that, as a group, librarians in the U.S. are unusually old and aging rapidly. Data from the Federal government's Current Population Survey (CPS) put the percentage of librarians age 45 or over at 45.8% in 1990, 52.8% in 1994, and 56.7% in 1998. The contrast between librarians and workers in comparable professions is significant. For example, only 37.7% of comparable professionals (the Professional Specialty occupations in the CPS data) were age 45 or over in 1998, a gap of 19 percentage points. (See [Chart 1](#).)

## Age Profile of the ARL University Library Population

As a group, ARL university librarians are older than comparable professionals and even older than U.S. librarians in general, and they are aging quickly: in 1986, 42.4% of the ARL university library population was age 45 or over,<sup>2</sup> compared to 48.0% in 1990, 58.0% in 1994, and 66.1% in 1998. [Chart 2](#) shows the shift of the age curve for professional staff in ARL university libraries over this twelve-year period. During the 1990s, the age gap between the ARL university library population and the general population of U.S. librarians widened: this gap was 2.2 percentage points in 1990, compared to 5.2 percentage points in 1994, and 9.4 points in 1998.

The aging of the ARL population appears to be the result of several factors:

- The rate of hire for ARL libraries in 1998 was 25% lower than in 1990, though it has remained stable since 1994.
- In 1998, new professionals--the primary source of youth for the population--accounted for 38% of new hires in ARL libraries, but only 4% of the larger ARL population.<sup>3</sup>
- The age of students enrolled in ALA-accredited M.L.S. degree programs--a traditional source of new professionals hired by ARL libraries--remained high in 1998, though not as high as in 1994.
- To the degree that baby boomers dominate the general population of working people, they also dominate the pool of people available to fill vacant positions. All but the youngest baby boomers are currently age 40 or over, hence their prevalence has the effect of aging the population.

## Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups in U.S. ARL University Libraries

The *ARL Annual Salary Survey* includes data relating to the race and ethnicity of only U.S. ARL university librarians.<sup>4</sup> In these libraries, the age profiles of racial and ethnic minority groups differed markedly from that of the majority White population between 1990 and 1998, but not in a consistent

fashion. [Chart 3](#) summarizes the age differences of the racial and ethnic groups as of 1998.

#### *African Americans*

The population of African American librarians is significantly younger than that of White librarians. This may be, in part, a result of successful recruitment efforts, despite meager growth (3%) in the overall size of this population, since 1990. The best explanation, however, may be the hiring practices prior to the mid-1970s, when librarians age 50 or over in 1998 would most likely have entered the population. Although African American ARL university librarians in the U.S. are younger than their White counterparts, they are aging rapidly: in 1990, 37.4% were age 45 or over, compared with 51.1% in 1998.

#### *Asians*

In the 1995 study, I noted that the population of Asian ARL university librarians in the U.S. was quite a bit older than the general ARL population, with almost 20% age 60 or over in 1994. This compared to only 7.8% of White ARL university librarians of similar age. Retirements through 1998 did nothing, however, to shift the age profile of Asian ARL librarians toward the younger age cohorts. While the number of Asians in U.S. ARL university libraries increased 11% between 1990 and 1998, 20% of the population remains age 60 or over. Retirements still threaten to reduce substantially the population of Asian ARL librarians in the next five years.

#### *Hispanics*

In U.S. ARL university libraries, the age profile of Hispanic librarians is similar to that of their White colleagues until the 50-54 age cohort, when the Hispanic profile drops sharply, only to rise again in the older cohorts. The unusual shape of the Hispanic curve may reflect sociological factors, and it may also reflect the small size of the population. While the number of Hispanic ARL university librarians has increased 9.4% since 1990, they accounted for only 138 of 7,672 U.S. ARL university librarians in 1998.

### **ARL University Library Directors**

The age of the ARL directors population increased dramatically from 1990 to 1998. For example, 63% of ARL university library directors were age 50 or over in 1990, compared to 91% in 1998. More to the point, 28% of these directors were age 60 or over in 1998, which suggests that retirement alone may account for as many as 30 vacant directorships in the next five years. When one considers that directors commonly move from one ARL library to another, overall turnover among ARL directorships could be extraordinarily high in the near future.

In the 1995 study, I noted that male ARL directors were substantially older than their female counterparts and were thus likely to retire in disproportionately large numbers in the near future. While men held 63% of ARL university library directorships in 1994, women were being hired for just under half of the available director positions. The combination of disproportionate retirements and greater equity in hiring suggested that the number of female directorships would rise quickly. I did not, however, expect this change to happen as quickly as it did: between 1990 and 1998, the percentage of female ARL university library directors rose from 37% to 47%. Further, there is every reason to expect that women will soon overtake men in ARL directorships. In 1998, there were still nearly twice as many men as women in the age 60 or over director cohort, which suggests that retirements will continue to affect men to a much greater degree than women. Equally significantly, recent hiring has favored women over men: women filled 58% of ARL university library directorships between 1994 and 1998.

### **Canadian ARL University Librarians**

The 1995 study noted that Canadian ARL librarians were significantly older than their U.S. colleagues in 1994. Since that time, however, age proved to have far less impact on the Canadian ARL population than staff reductions. Canadian ARL university libraries lost almost 12% of their professional staffs

between 1994 and 1998, most between 1996 and 1997. The main *ARL Statistics* clearly shows that this precipitous drop is the result of staff reductions at five institutions in Ontario and Quebec. (See [Table 1.](#))

The staff reductions could have had almost any impact on the age profile of the Canadian ARL population. If early retirements had figured heavily in the reductions, for example, the population could have grown younger. Instead, the population aged dramatically. In just four years, from 1994 to 1998, the portion of the Canadian ARL university library population age 50 or over rose from 41.6% to 53.7%. Put another way, fully one-half of the current population of Canadian ARL university librarians is likely to retire within the next 15 years. Or consider that 25.8% of this population was age 55 or over in 1998, hence likely to retire within the next 10 years.

### **Catalogers and Reference Librarians in ARL University Libraries**

Like the Canadian ARL population, catalogers in ARL university libraries were already older than the overall ARL population in 1994, and like the Canadian population, staff reductions, not age, had the greatest impact on the ARL cataloger population from 1994 to 1998. In 1998, there were 302 fewer catalogers in ARL university libraries than in 1990, despite the addition of three libraries to the data set. This constitutes a drop of 25% in just eight years. We will see below how changes in hiring patterns have contributed to this phenomenon.

Reference and cataloging have traditionally been the two most important points of entry for new professionals, hence it is instructive to compare their respective age profiles. [Chart 4](#) illustrates a large gap in the number of young people in cataloging positions: while 30% of reference librarians in ARL university libraries were age 39 or under in 1998, only 19% of catalogers in those libraries were in that age range. At the other end of the scale, we find that 30% of catalogers were age 55 or over in 1998, and hence likely to retire in the next 10 years; this compares to only 17% of reference librarians.

### **New Hires and the Rise of the Functional Specialist**

The decrease in the number of catalogers and that population's advancing age suggests that, in the 1990s, cataloging positions became particularly vulnerable to elimination or re-allocation to other job categories. If this is true, the shift of resources away from cataloging must be part of a larger shift in priorities among ARL libraries. Gauging the shape and direction of this shift goes beyond the scope of this work, but, by examining the population of new hires, we can supply an answer to one question related to this change: what types of positions are currently being filled in ARL libraries?

There are, in fact, important changes afoot in the ARL population of new hires. The most important of these changes concerns the growth of the job category "functional specialist" (FS). According to the instructions for the *ARL Annual Salary Survey*, functional specialists are

*media specialists or...experts in management fields such as personnel, fiscal matters, systems, preservation, etc. Specialists may not be, strictly speaking, professional librarians (i.e., have the M.L.S.). The "specialist" category would generally not be used for someone with significant supervisory responsibilities, who should instead be listed as a department head or assistant director....<sup>5</sup>*

[Table 2](#) presents the top five job categories among new hires in ARL university libraries in 1990 and 1998. The number of newly hired functional specialists jumps 72% in the period, accounting for nearly one-quarter of all hiring in 1998. The rise of the functional specialist coincides with a steep decline in the number of hires in skill areas traditional to librarianship, especially cataloging. The figures in [Table 2](#) suggest a substantial shift in priorities among ARL libraries.

Who are these newly hired functional specialists?

- **Predominantly systems related:** 61% were hired for a systems-related job, whereas 11% were hired for both archival and personnel positions. The remaining FS categories each amount to less than 5%.<sup>6</sup>
- **Fewer library degrees:** 55% have library degrees, compared to 92% for those of other categories.
- **More males:** 44% are males, compared with 28% of other categories.
- **Substantial experience gap:** Functional specialists have an average of 4.6 years experience, compared to 7.1 for other categories.
- **Smaller salary gap:** While their average experience is only 65% that of other categories, functional specialists earn 91% of the average pay.

The shift in hiring priorities already has had an impact on the larger ARL population. [Table 3](#) summarizes the changes among the top five job categories in ARL university libraries from 1990 to 1998. [Table 3](#) indicates that the number of ARL university librarians in reference, "head, other," and subject specialization positions increased between 1990 and 1998, although not as much as the number in functional specialization positions. The number of cataloger positions fell by one-quarter over the same period.<sup>7</sup>

One is tempted to say that the dramatic shift in hiring patterns is simply a matter of libraries taking advantage of processing efficiencies in a period in which they are stretching to support burgeoning technological needs. The truth is surely richer and more complex than that, and more work needs to be done to address the question.

### Conclusion

When examined over time, the *ARL Annual Salary Survey* data give the impression of a profession in the midst of a watershed change. Retirement levels are already high, and will grow much higher in the near future, especially for catalogers, directors, Asian librarians, and Canadian librarians.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, ARL libraries are shifting their hiring priorities to accommodate their need for new kinds of expertise. This shift is significant to the degree that it represents a movement away from traditional library skills and library education generally. One is left with the overpowering sense that while the individuals who are about to leave this population may be replaced, their skills and professional training may not. And while we expect the skills required of academic librarians to change along with the information environment they mediate, the speed and direction of this change will present ARL libraries with a tremendous challenge for the future.

*For more information on the ARL Annual Salary Survey and a copy of the survey instrument, see <<http://www.arl.org/stats/salary/>>.*

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### Endnotes

1. George Washington University became ARL's 122nd member in 1998 but their data were not included in the 1998 *Salary Survey* due to the timing of the survey.

2. Data on the age distribution of the 1986 ARL university library population was recently located and incorporated into [Chart 2](#).

3. A new professional is defined here as an individual with a value of zero or one in the "Years Experience" variable of the Salary Survey; a new hire is defined as an individual with a value of zero or

one in the "Years in Library" variable. (Counting only those with a value of zero would seriously under-represent new professionals and new hires. The Survey instructions state, for example, that a person with seven months of professional experience as of 1 July 1998 should have a value of one for "Years Experience.") In 1998, survey respondents reported 797 new hires, 300 of whom were new professionals.

4. Note that the data on minority professionals is provided by only the U.S. university member libraries following the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) definitions; Canadian law prohibits the identification of Canadians by ethnic category.

5. Martha Kyriallidou, Julia C. Blixrud, and Jonathan Green, comps. and eds. *ARL Annual Salary Survey, 1998-99* (Washington: Association of Research Libraries, 1999), 87.

6. As part of the additional "demographic" categories present in the 1998 data, libraries were asked to indicate which functional specialists fall in the following categories: acquisitions, archivist, audiovisual/media, interlibrary loan, personnel, preservation, serials, staff training, systems analysis/programming.

7. When the data set is restricted to the 98 university libraries who were ARL members throughout the data collection history (from 1980 to 2000), the changes in the number of positions are as follows: reference 4%, cataloger -24%, functional specialist 50%, subject specialist 9%, "head, other" 1%. The addition of three new libraries to the university library data set from 1990 to 1998 contributed to the change in each of the five categories shown in [Table 3](#), and accounts for most of the increase in "head, other" positions. But additional factors are surely at work in the decrease in cataloging positions and the increase in reference and functional and subject specialist positions.

8. The ARL age projections from the 1995 study are currently being revised and should be available later this year.

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