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# #NotAllLibraries: Toxicity in Academic Libraries and Retention of Librarians

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# #NOTALLLIBRARIES:
## *Toxicity in Academic Libraries and Retention of Librarians*

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## INTRODUCTION

Diversifying the profession has been part of the professional discourse in academic libraries for many years, often with a focus on recruitment and retention of BIPOC librarians. While many of us would say this issue is very important, our ranks have remained conspicuously white.[1] There have been a number of initiatives designed to recruit BIPOC librarians to academic libraries, and studies to determine effective practices in recruitment, but fewer studies on how to make sure we retain BIPOC workers once they join our organizations, and in fact not much clarity on what "retention" even means to us as a profession.

The existing conversation about retention in academic libraries tends to center institutions and programs designed to improve their own retention or reduce local turnover. This type of inquiry, however, sidelines the stories of librarians themselves who acutely understand what made them leave a job (or institution) or what encouraged them to stay. Insights from librarians who left their jobs, who were "not retained," are highly context-specific and personal. As a result, their stories are unfortunately easy to dismiss as one-off situations or just a result of a bad fit with an organization, if they are even gathered at all.

In this qualitative study, we explore the accounts of librarians who have left academic library jobs before they intended, and identify recurring themes that can help us better understand retention (and lack thereof) in the profession as a whole. By reporting on semi-structured interviews with ten participants, we give voice to their stories and hope to signal to others that their stories matter too. From our analysis, we describe academic libraries' failures to retain librarians (especially BIPOC librarians) as a result of structural forces that shape our profession that need to be acknowledged if we truly want to improve retention. From our findings, we learned that many of these forces are related to toxic environments and the ways in which librarians are forced to behave until they're able to leave those environments. A few themes we explore are: how innovation, hard work, and "shining" are actively punished; ineffective managers and lack of support from Human Resources; effects on librarians' physical and mental health; and systemic racism.

### *Library Research on Retention*

While retention is consistently mentioned in library literature, the concept of retention is not well defined. There are studies that investigate what libraries are currently doing to retain employees,[2] recommendations and strategies for retaining workers,[3] and studies that explore the

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contributory factors that lead to librarian turnover.[4] However, the definition of retention is always implicit, not explicit. When organizations mention retention, they are typically referring to people staying in their institution and not leaving the institution for a new job. When the library profession writes about retention, they reference library workers staying in the profession as a whole. However, retention is a complicated set of interlocking concepts that can be outside of the control of libraries or the profession.[5] Employees may leave their positions because of the end of contracted work, family issues, lack of interest in their current position, or a desire to advance outside of their organization, all of which would be considered positive or neutral reasons for separation. However, they may also leave because of toxic structures within their position that seem insurmountable, a decidedly negative phenomenon that we believe our profession should work to avoid. Retention can also be a question of engagement in both job duties at an institution and the choices librarians make to stay in the profession as a whole.

In 2001, Musser suggested that one reason that retention is overlooked is because retention is an "ongoing effort requiring continuous and sustained effort rather than periodic activity" that is not easily maintained by a typical academic library.[6] Ultimately Musser recommends that organizations create proactive mechanisms to gather data about why employees stay within an organization. In 2016, Bugg examined the retention of librarians of color in relation to advancement to middle management positions.[7] This research focused more on the intrinsic motivators that pushed librarians of color to middle management positions but they found that for the participants, there was a strong connection between the ability to advance and remain in the profession and job satisfaction.

## Retention and Race

The current state of library research has prioritized studying the recruitment and retention of library workers of color, with an emphasis on recruitment. A number of studies have examined how race plays a role in retention of academic librarians and how libraries can retain a diverse workforce.[8] Damasco and Hodges, in their study on the tenure and promotion experiences of librarians of color, reviewed the relationship between tenure, retention and job satisfaction.[9] They found that, of the librarians of color in their survey population, less than 30% of tenure track librarians intended to stay in their place of work after receiving tenure while 40% of currently tenured librarians intended to stay in their place of employment. The researchers pointed out that a significant number of librarians demonstrated a great deal of ambivalence and uncertainty about their places of work and were explicit about the burdens and inequities present.

In a library-specific systematic review of diversity initiatives across North America, Kung and colleagues found that of the interventions in place to recruit and retain, 75% focused on recruitment strategies, 40% focused on retention, 25% focused on support and 10% focused on advancement in the profession.[10] They believe that there is a gap in the interventions between librarians being encouraged to enter the profession and the commitment to retaining diverse mid- and late-career librarians. The authors further noted that the initiatives, which often lack an evaluative component, focus on short term commitments and often lack details on how the interventions were actually carried out. They argue that short term commitments do not provide a space for critical reflection in libraries of what worked and didn't work in their efforts and creating a place for systemic improvements.

Recruitment and retention patterns in academic libraries closely mirror those of academia more generally, which we can see in studies of academic faculty of color. These patterns include a lack of data generally about retention of faculty with an emphasis on recruitment and recruitment initiatives,[11] the need for stronger mentoring programs to help retain faculty,[12] and a general recognition for the need for structural systemic improvement to academia as a whole.[13]

## Why Do People Leave?

In their paper, "Contributory factors to academic librarian turnover: a mixed-methods study," Heady and colleagues identify a few key reasons why academic librarians are dissatisfied with their jobs and choose to leave.[14] Chief among them is the work environment, followed by compensation and benefits, job duties, and personal

factors. Using both quantitative and qualitative data, the authors uncovered more detailed information about how work environment influences librarians' dissatisfaction with their jobs. Looking at the quantitative data, librarians were most dissatisfied with the morale of the library, followed by library administration. This is also reflected in the qualitative data, with open-ended responses pointing to ineffective library leadership and ineffective university leadership, as well as lack of growth and advancement opportunities.[15] They state plainly: "results from the study indicate that employees are not fleeing their positions, they are fleeing work environments they feel are toxic. Quantitative data revealed that library morale, culture, administration, and direct supervisors, albeit not in that order, were the top factors in their decisions to leave".[16]

According to Henry and colleagues, libraries have workplace characteristics that are rare within historical contexts. Those characteristics relate to the mission-orientation that can lead to workplace environments that foster or exacerbate incivility. They make the argument that the mission oriented nature of the profession leads to a lack of self-reflection that creates a prevalence of workplace dysfunction.[17] This phenomenon is explored more broadly in Fobazi Ettarh's 2018 paper on vocational awe, which explores librarianship's tendency to view the field as inherently above reproach, thus solidifying dysfunctional behavior as simply part of the work of being in libraries.[18] In their 2016 study, Freedman and Vreven explore workplace bullying in academic libraries. They find that "sixty-nine percent of U.S. academic librarians experienced at least three negative acts in any six-month period, and nearly 22 percent experienced three negative acts on a weekly or daily basis."[19] The authors quote Hecker (2007), who researched mobbing, where several people "gang up" on another, causing harm to the targeted person, in academic libraries and found that mobbing takes place in schools, universities and libraries at twice the rate of workplaces in general.[20] Additionally, a study done by Ortega, Høgh, Pejtersen, and Olsen,[21] demonstrates that workplace bullying carried out by both supervisors and coworkers occurred more frequently in professions with high gender ratios such as education (76% female),[22] the military (84% male),[23] and librarianship (82% female).[24]

In the past decade-plus, researchers have started reviewing and researching deeply structural issues in library workplace culture that lead to dysfunction, including low morale,[25] librarian burnout,[26] and systemic racism.[27] Other researchers have focused on the structural causes of workplace dysfunction. In their 2017 book on toxic leadership in academic libraries, Ortega makes the direct connection between toxic leadership (defined as "egregious actions taken against some or all of the members, even among peers, of the organization a leader heads; actions that cause considerable and long-lasting damage to individuals and the organization that often continue even after the perpetrator has left the organization"[28]) and the retention of librarians in academic libraries. Ortega further found that "approximately two-thirds (65.4%) of the librarians who participated [in their study] had either witnessed or experienced toxic leadership in their careers as academic librarians."[29]

## METHODS

In our investigation, we sought to explore structural forces that interrupt retention in academic libraries through the experiences of librarians who left jobs sooner than planned for job-related reasons. We conducted ten semi-structured interviews between January 2021−June 2021, lasting approximately 1 hour each. Participants were drawn from a pool of 57 responses to a screening survey administered in fall 2020, which was sent to several listservs and specifically sought participants who had left a job before they planned to. From our pool of respondents, we used random number generators to select 4 participants who identified as Black, 3 participants who identified as non-Black POC, and 3 participants who identified as white. We purposely oversampled BIPOC librarians, to center their voices as we explored the role of race and retention, and in acknowledgment that people who are historically marginalized are positioned to have the most insight about dominant cultures. The interview guide (see Appendix A) was developed based on a preliminary literature review on retention and toxicity in libraries.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom by two researchers (one questioner and one note-taker) and audio-recorded with the participants' permission. The audio was then transcribed using Descript, transcripts were examined, identifying information was redacted, and the original audio recordings were then destroyed. Participants were asked how they'd like us to describe them in our writing, using either a description, a pseudonym, or both, but ultimately, we decided to include only their assigned code number (e.g. "Interviewee 7"), their

self-identified gender, and whether they identified as BIPOC or white. We also retained our original scheme for numbering interviewees.

Interview transcriptions were analyzed using grounded theory methodology, per Strauss and Corbin, meaning that there were no pre-existing codes and a coding structure was developed by the researchers based on themes that emerged from the interviews.[30] In addition to exploring cross-cutting themes and theory-building to help us make our profession better, it was also our goal to provide space for participants to share their experiences that had often been filed away or outright silenced.

## THEMES AND FINDINGS

Our ten interview participants had varying backgrounds, contexts, and experiences, but we were able to determine several common themes among their stories of leaving jobs sooner than they had planned. Most tellingly, they all described leaving because of toxic work environments, consistent with the findings of Heady and colleagues.[31] In their stories, interviewees told us about the toxicity they encountered, why they believed toxicity persisted, what they tried to do about it, how they coped, and how they eventually were able to leave. The themes described below capture some of their many insights.

### Innovation, Hard Work, and "Shining" Are Actively Punished in Toxic Environments

One of the most notable aspects explored in our interviews was the consistent experience that hard work and innovation were either dismissed or actively punished. Many of our interviewees reported excitement upon starting the job they would eventually leave. They came into their new workplaces with energy, ideas, and opinions. But at a certain point, they realized that expressing those ideas and opinions was not welcome. When we asked what he would say to someone entering the job he left, **interviewee 7**, a BIPOC man, responded,

> "I would say **you have to really not shine**. You have to really just go under the radar. That's what the senior colleagues told me, too: stay under the radar. Don't try to do too much. I don't think I was doing too much. I think I was doing what I was able and capable of handling, which is also publishing, presenting and getting grants, scholarships, and making deep connections."

Similarly, **interviewee 11**, a BIPOC woman, who initially felt welcome at her new job, eventually realized that her new ideas weren't welcome. After she faced a conflict with a coworker and subsequent lack of support from her supervisor, she explained:

> "Like, I just put the rest I put on autopilot, right. **I stopped sharing ideas.** I stopped doing what-- I was like, whatever…this is what it is. And I devoted myself to my job search."

> "I think if I knew then what I know now, I would have kept my mouth shut. I would not have shared my ideas. **I would not have tried.** Like, I think I still would have done like some of the things in my classroom, but I wouldn't have talked about them. I would try to keep them under wraps."

Interviewee 11's situation was complicated by the fact that she is a BIPOC woman and the colleague she had a conflict with, as well as her supervisor, were white women. The interviewee felt that her white colleagues were initially excited to have a BIPOC woman among them, but became resentful when she began sharing ideas and opinions. Her experience isn't uncommon. In 2013, Thomas coined the term "pet to threat" to describe the phenomenon of predominantly white institutions hiring people of color and taking pride in workplaces that "looked" diverse without seeing their new colleagues as full colleagues. Workers who resist being seen superficially in the workplace and attempt to establish their identity and/or act as contributing members of their organization move from being superficially embraced to being viewed as actively threatening to the structure of the institution.[32]

**Interviewee 10**, a BIPOC man, had an experience of outright sabotage when he developed a program at his library during an election year to encourage students to vote. Library administration did not like that the program was not going to take place at the library, so they attempted to cancel the program behind his back. Interviewee 10 went forward with the event and was penalized and written up in the process. In this situation, the interviewee was not only foiled in his attempts to innovate, he was disciplined for it. His experience leads us to our next point.

## Managers at Best Don't Help and at Worst Actively Hinder in Toxic Environments

In our interviews, we found that many people we talked to did not feel that their managers were people they could rely upon for help. In some cases, managers were *laissez-faire*, or "hands off" in a way that was detrimental. In other cases, the managers were actively hostile, making no secret of their contempt for the interviewees. An example of the "hands off" style manager comes from **interviewee 11**, who was yelled at by a colleague over a miscommunication. Interviewee 11 went to her supervisor for help:

> *"One of the things that really frustrated me at the time was my boss actually asked me…what do you want me to do? And I was like, I don't know, you're the boss, like you tell me what you can do here."*

An example of the actively detrimental supervisor comes from **interviewee 14,** a white woman, after she began working for a new boss:

> *"I was a high achiever. I seemed to be moving forward.* ***And my boss turned to me-- my new boss, in a meeting with other people there and said, "there are people in this organization that think that they are moving forward and they will never move forward under me"*** *while staring at me very directly. So, I mean, I didn't have a career there anymore, so."*

**Interviewee 14's** experience is an example of a supervisor who makes no secret of their contempt for those who work under them and, in fact, was open about their plans to sabotage their employee's career.

**Interviewee 12**, a BIPOC woman, also had a boss who actively hindered her career, although wasn't as open about it. Interviewee 12's boss didn't support them, gave them mediocre reviews, and refused to support them going up for tenure. ***"And now I realize that motherfucker set me up to fail."*** This made interviewee 12 jaded and even mad at their mentors who misrepresented library culture to them.

Within library literature, there is a circular body of research around the structural problem of library management. Articles about the necessary competencies for management, ways for managers to be better communicators, exploratory work on the relationship between DEI and management, examining the characteristics of a good library leader, probing the path of library leaders, and looking into library leadership training.[33] However there is little on the explicit connection between the seeming lack of accountability in library structures and the subsequent impact on library retention. The majority of interviewees identified that the structural issues within their libraries were insurmountable and recognized that the toxicity they were dealing with was ingrained in their libraries. The white interviewees were more likely to state that the problems were specific to their individual libraries, however the BIPOC librarians were more likely to state that the problems were more entrenched in the library profession itself.

In every interview, we asked whether or not the interviewees felt that seeking assistance from Human Resources was an option for them to help resolve interpersonal issues. Nearly every interviewee said "no." In at least one case, this was because the HR representative was part of a "toxic web" of employees. **Interviewee 13**, a white woman, states:

> *"And I had been warned about this dynamic, like when I came in by my friend who was the administrative assistant, that there was like this very toxic web happening. And that basically, if I wanted anything to stay private, speak to none of them… and she had said like, if something's in your HR*

*file, these people will find out about it because that person in HR was part of this web, so that was that aspect as well. So HR did not feel like a safe place there at all."*

## Racism and Toxic Environments

We found that our interviewees who identified as BIPOC had a lot to say about racism in toxic environments, racism in academic libraries, and the nature of systemic racism in libraries. **Interviewee 11**, a BIPOC woman, made the connection between her experience of being attacked by a colleague and then not supported by her boss (both of whom were white women) and the culture of libraries as spaces where white women are valued more than women of color:

> *"…library culture in general is just…you know, reifying the needs, experiences and emotions of white women, **allowing them to weaponize their fears, their tears**. Allowing them to weaponize their insecurities…I became the victim of someone else's sort of issues, right. Another-- a white woman's issues. And I think that that happens across libraries all the time. But that's-- the culture is, you know, **the almighty white woman**… that's who lays down the law. That's whose feelings count, that's whose experiences count, and anyone who speaks-- anyone who does anything that counters that or challenges that, or interrogates that is, is a problem. And like most problems they get, you know, they get pushed aside. They get pushed out. They get crushed down."*

**Interviewee 16,** a BIPOC woman, faced racism directly from her boss. The interviewee grew up and went to school and college in majority Black institutions and areas, so she always felt very supported and affirmed:

> *"So this is really my first real experience with that kind of in-your-face racism. So yes, she was a racist. She was very condescending. She was just disrespectful… how I ended up leaving that institution is that she actually told me one day that I was not her first choice and that she had actually wanted to hire someone else and that person took a job somewhere else and that's how they ended up getting me"*

**Interviewee 16** also states:

> *"Well, she just really assumed that I had a very limited life experience, you know, that my experiences had not been rich. You know, made assumptions about my abilities that weren't based on any actual knowledge or experience. She was-- she liked to correct me publicly. She also wasn't respectful of boundaries…She was just not respectful of space and stuff, like I remember she would sit on my desk when she came into my office. Just really disrespectful."*

**Interviewee 7**, a BIPOC man, had many experiences with racism in his job, including racist comments about [his heritage] as well as having to work with a colleague the interviewee identifies as a white supremacist. All in all, every person of color we interviewed had experienced some form of racism in their jobs, and often experienced racism at more than one library job. These experiences ranged from blatant to subtle. This leads us to our next point, which is that both racism and toxic systems are a feature of academic libraries, not a bug.

## Is this a Library Culture Thing? Yes.

**Interviewee 1**, a BIPOC woman, stated:

> *"I feel like I've seen some version of these problems, if not the exact same thing, [at] almost every library I've been in. You know, I have a lot of librarian friends and each new terrible thing brings a fresh round of indignation, but nobody is super shocked because everybody's heard something similar to this."*

*"I inspired a couple of people to go to library school and **I literally apologized** to them because I'm like, I'm sorry I made this look like something you would want to do because a lot of people, I, I mean, again, there are things I like about my job. There's things I do well, and I am happy that I get a chance to do it, but on the whole, I think that the way that librarianship is now, the way that libraries are now…I don't want to send people into a burning house. **And I feel like librarianship is a burning house**."*

**Interviewee 16**, a BIPOC woman, brought up the conflict between white librarians saying they want diversity but not committing to the systemic changes that true inclusion requires:

*"I guess I'd be remiss if I didn't say [that] for a profession that is constantly talking about recruitment, especially for librarians of color, the talk and the walk are just not aligned. And I think this goes back to the culture. It's like, **We want brown faces in white spaces.** We, and we want those white spaces to remain unchanged, unaltered, and unchallenged. And it's, it's the visual representation. So we want to say that we invited them, but we want the culture to stay the same. And if you don't fit into that culture, then you're either going to acclimate to it or you're going to leave. And so again, there's just a lot of contradictory behavior within the profession where things don't line up that we want-- again, do we want brown faces or do we want changed libraries?"*

**Interviewee 12**, a BIPOC woman, pointed out the hypocrisy of universities wanting the clout of diversity without the commitment to it:

*"They would lean into the diversity that wasn't created or supported really by them, just the demographics of a community like ours, the school's right next to the [redacted]. And so there was a lot of like, look at what we're doing to, for the [redacted] but we won't let students from [redacted], the predominantly HBCU school come over."*

On a similar note, **Interviewee 10**, a BIPOC man, said that he has heard many white librarians lament lack of diversity, particularly in certain parts of the country. But he applied to many jobs in states that supposedly BIPOC people don't want to work in, didn't get the jobs and never heard back. He stated that there is "lip service" paid to diversity in our profession.

## Leaving Toxic Environments

Multiple interviewees mentioned their own and their colleague's mental and physical health. Interviewees discussed how they and their colleagues experienced burnout, defined by *Psychology Today* as "a state of emotional, mental, and often physical exhaustion brought on by prolonged or repeated stress."[34] **Interviewees 11 and 12** both pointed out the importance of taking care of one's health first and foremost:

*"You first, first and foremost, you have to take care of yourself. You have to survive, right? Like, you know, you on your own may or may not be enough to tip over a change in this culture, but you don't want to risk yourself on that. You don't risk your health on that."*

*"… And like your health matters and that's what you need to value. And that's what you need to care about…"*

All of our interviewees left their jobs in environments they perceived as toxic. When they did so, they found that no effort was made to make things right in order not to lose them. **Interviewee 5**, a white woman, explained:

> *"That was part of the problem. They didn't do a lot to retain people. They just relied on, you know, the benefits and the clout of the university and saying, you know, of course you're grateful to work here…"*

Likewise, when **interviewee 13** was preparing to leave her job, no effort was made to retain her when she left. In fact, the library director later indicated that she "could do better" than this institution.

While many of our interviewees indicated that nothing could have been done at that point to keep them in their positions, it is noteworthy that their managers and library leadership made no efforts to encourage them to stay.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our interviews are significant because they provide evidence that academic librarians leaving jobs under duress are running from toxic environments above all else. In these environments, toxicity is persistent. The interviewees we spoke to did not just have a bad day or even a bad month. They experienced toxicity so consistently that they felt they had no choice but to look for work elsewhere. Our interviewees wanted to succeed and even go above and beyond in their job duties, but were foiled, sabotaged, hindered, and beaten down. In toxic environments, hard work and creativity are at best ignored or taken advantage of and at worst punished.

When our interviewees realized they needed help, the systems set up to help them–specifically their supervisors and Human Resources–failed them. In our interviews, nearly every interviewee indicated that HR was not a realistic or effective option and that going to their direct supervisors was also not helpful. In some cases, this was because the supervisor was toxic themselves and made no secret of their contempt for the interviewee. In other cases, the supervisor was simply dismissive or, for whatever reason, unable or unwilling to support the interviewee.

We also found that racism is a large part of many of our interviewee's stories. The BIPOC interviewees we talked to experienced racism ranging from subtle to explicit. Although our white interviewees suffered within toxic academic library environments, our BIPOC interviewees faced the additional burden of racism on top of the other toxic aspects of their workplaces.

As a profession, we have a lot of work to do on retention, including a bigger discussion about what "retention" means to us and why we think it's important. Regarding DEI initiatives and diversifying the profession, recruitment alone is not working and we need to spend more of our energy on retaining BIPOC librarians and library workers already in the profession. And as a consequence, libraries need to be more reactive and proactive in changing their culture.

There are things individual libraries can (and should) do better, but our findings suggest that there are also structural problems within the profession that need to be addressed. We are not offering specific solutions here, since that is outside the scope of this paper. Instead, we hope to provide thematic groundings for future research, center the stories of librarians who have left their positions, and let those librarians currently entrenched in toxic environments know that they are not alone and that their experiences are real and important.

# APPENDIX A. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

However you answer, we aren't here to judge you. We are coming from a place of research and empowerment. Your experiences are valid and are being heard.

Before we begin, we want to review a piece of the Informed Consent Statement you signed—as stated there, public reports of our research findings will invoke participants by a pseudonym and job title only, and that you will be given the chance to designate your own job title. This could be more specific (like "social sciences liaison librarian"), less specific ("liaison librarian"), or very general ("academic librarian") depending on your preference. You are also welcome to choose your own pseudonym if you'd like.

- What appealed to you about Job 1?*
- What was your interview process like for Job 1? Did you feel any red flags? In retrospect?
- If someone was working at this organization, what would you like them to know?
- How was the library structured administratively? Where did you fit in the hierarchical structure of the library? Who did you directly report to? Did you have any direct reports?
- What aspects did you like about your daily job duties?
- What aspects did you dislike about your daily job?
- Did you have colleagues you trusted?
- How were they able to navigate their jobs?
- Did you have support?
- How did that support manifest?
- Kendrick[35] defines "trigger events" as "an unexpected negative event *or* a relationship that developed in an unexpected and negative manner." Was there a trigger event for you?
- How did you begin your new job search?
- Did you feel that the environment was personal, or was it part of a larger cultural problem?
- Did HR ever seem like an option?
- Were attempts made to retain you? Is there anything that could have been done to retain you? How would you have liked to see this event handled?
  a. How could this have been made right?/How would you have preferred supervisors/admin to have addressed the issue?
- In retrospect, would you have done anything differently?
- Do you think that the problems were specific to that library, or library culture in general?
- What would you tell someone else who is in a similar situation?
  a. What would you tell someone who is interested in applying to your (old) position?

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* Note: Some interviewees had more than one experience leaving a job before they'd intended, so we asked them to think about one job at a time. If they wanted to talk about a second experience, we repeated the questions for "Job 2."

## NOTES

1. Librarians in ARL libraries are probably not directly representative of all academic libraries, but are 82% white as of 2020. Anam Mian, "ARL Annual Salary Survey 2020" (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2020), https://doi.org/10.29242/salary.2020.

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6. Linda R. Musser, "Effective Retention Strategies for Diverse Employees," *Journal of Library Administration* 33, no. 1–2 (March 2001): 64, https://doi.org/10.1300/J111v33n01_06.

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