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Ashley T. Hoffman

*Kennesaw State University*, [ashley.t.hoffman@gmail.com](mailto:ashley.t.hoffman@gmail.com)

Amy E. G. Barker

*Kennesaw State University*

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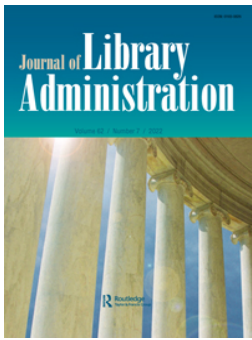
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# The Impact of the Interim Leadership Experience on Library Middle Managers

Ashley T. Hoffman<sup>a</sup> and Amy E. G. Barker<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Research & Scholarship Team Leader, Library System, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia;

<sup>b</sup>Instructional Design Librarian, Library System, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia

## ABSTRACT

Serving in an interim leadership role can be a great way to gain experience, but can also be stressful, negative, or traumatic for interim library leaders at the middle management level. In this exploratory mixed-methods study, researchers conducted a national survey and semistructured interviews of interim middle managers from public and academic libraries to explore the personal and professional impact of their interim role and recommend ways to improve the interim experience. The study revealed effects on individual well-being such as increased stress, but also increased confidence and positive career outcomes, particularly for librarians with a prior interest in leadership.

## KEYWORDS

Interim leadership;  
leadership; middle  
management;  
well-being

## Introduction

Many library staff will work for, or serve as, an interim leader at least once during their professional careers. Institutions may appoint temporary leaders when personnel changes occur such as retirements, reorganizations, medical leaves, misconduct, or voluntary separations. These appointments might be planned months in advance or could occur overnight—and may be of unforeseen duration. For some, stepping into a temporary leadership role can be an invaluable way to gain experience, make connections, or build a case for attaining the permanent position. However, for others, serving in an interim leadership role can be a harrowing experience of increased stress, damaged relationships, and no positive career development.

Due to the unexpected nature of many interim positions, librarians in these roles may not have adequate time to develop the skills and abilities they need to be successful. Although some interim leaders bring managerial or administrative experience from a previous position, for others the interim middle manager position is their first leadership role. Some interim middle managers find themselves in the awkward position of supervising their former peers or navigating political situations as an internal candidate for the permanent position. These factors make serving as interim middle manager a unique challenge with significant impacts on a librarian's career and well-being.

**CONTACT** Ashley T. Hoffman  [ahoffm18@kennesaw.edu](mailto:ahoffm18@kennesaw.edu)  Research & Scholarship Team Leader, Library System, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia.

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Having served as interim leaders themselves, the researchers of this article sought to measure the impacts of the interim middle manager experience on a library worker's personal well-being and career outcomes, as well as to investigate which factors, if any, promoted a more positive interim experience. By focusing on interim middle managers in both public and academic libraries, this research fills a gap in the existing literature, which centers on the experiences of interim leaders at the highest level of an organization and skews toward academic library experiences. The results of this research will be invaluable to potential interim leaders seeking advice as well as institutions charged with filling interim positions after vacancies.

## Literature review

The topic of interim leadership is well documented in the field of business and higher education; however, it remains rare in the field of librarianship. Most of the literature on interim leadership in libraries is relegated to academic libraries, and even then, research is focused on interim positions at the highest level, such as academic library deans or department chairs. Furthermore, much of the library literature on interim leadership is in the form of a personal narrative, rather than a research study. This brief literature review will summarize the available literature on interim leadership in libraries and its impacts on library workers acting in temporary leadership roles.

### *Interim leadership in libraries*

While the issue of interim leadership is not unique to libraries, there are a few factors that make interim leadership in libraries potentially more complex. Unlike in the private sector, where interim leaders are often brought in from outside the organization on a temporary basis with no expectation of assuming the permanent position, libraries often appoint an interim from within, who then has the option to apply for the permanent position (MacAyeal, 2017; Weingart, 2003). This internal promotion can create a cascading effect of interim leadership once an interim is appointed for a senior leadership position. At Utah State University Libraries, for example, a set of top-level vacancies led to eight separate interim leaders in different positions over a period of only three years (Weingart, 2003). During a reorganization in 2019, the authors' own institution of Kennesaw State University Library System had seven interim middle management positions at one time.

Further complicating the interim period in libraries is the significant amount of time and red tape required to permanently fill a vacant position (Benaud & Null, 1991). In academic libraries, six months is a common length of time for advertising, interviewing, and screening candidates for hire. In public libraries, hiring decisions may be centralized upwards to a district or county level, or may only occur seasonally when enough open positions warrant the formation of a search committee (A. Dupuy, personal communication, December 7, 2021). While interim periods of twelve weeks are standard for medical or maternity leaves, interim periods due to retirements or resignations can last a year or more for senior leadership positions (Irwin & deVries, 2019). Particularly for academic libraries, these complicating factors mean that interim middle managers are perhaps more common—and must remain in their interim role for longer—in libraries than in other fields.

### ***Positive impacts on interim library leaders***

When an interim middle manager position becomes available, there are several appealing reasons a library worker might volunteer for the temporary position. Librarians may be motivated by the chance to have more input on the direction of the library's development (Weingart, 2003), contribute to their organization (Benaud & Null, 1991), or the chance to "try before you buy" a permanent managerial position (Benaud & Null, 1991; Farrell, 2016; Rud, 2004; Weingart, 2003). Interim leaders may benefit from the opportunity to grow in their leadership abilities and develop their leadership style (Irwin & deVries, 2019). In addition, they may have the chance to demonstrate their talent to library administration and their colleagues, which may give them an advantage in applying for the permanent position (Benaud & Null, 1991; Farrell, 2016). Even if interim leaders do not secure the permanent position at their own library, interim experiences may be transferred to leadership opportunities at other institutions (Irwin & deVries, 2019).

### ***Negative impacts on interim library leaders***

Despite the positive aspects of an interim leader role, the literature also revealed potential negative effects on temporary library leaders. The most widely noted negative effect is that of increased workload. Interims often fulfill their regular job duties on top of new interim responsibilities (Benaud & Null, 1991; Farrell, 2016; Irwin & deVries, 2019; MacAyeal, 2017; Weingart, 2003). In a 2017 survey of interim academic library deans, authors Irwin and deVries (2019) discovered that 79.5% of survey participants performed their previous duties concurrently with the new responsibilities of the interim role (p. 250). Reflections from former interim leaders describe stress, exhaustion, and tests on their physical stamina as a result of this increased workload (Benaud & Null, 1991; Munde, 2000b).

The role of an interim leader can be a demoralizing one, particularly as it can be a challenge to establish authority and get buy-in from direct reports as a temporary leader (Benaud & Null, 1991; Browning & Boys, 2015; Weingart, 2003). Because of the fleeting nature of the positions and the lack of authority to make lasting changes, an interim leader's success is often determined by the state in which the incumbent left the position (Benaud & Null, 1991; Rud, 2004). According to Browning and Boys (2015), "Interims hang between the temporary nature of their role and the long-term implications of their decisions," (p. 179). Interim leaders may be frustrated or discouraged by their inability to truly lead and may decide not to pursue the permanent position at all (Browning & Boys, 2015).

### ***How to improve the interim library leadership experience***

The literature offers a list of advice for improving the interim experience for temporary leaders. The first suggestion is to plan for the future by mentoring potential leaders in one's organization in case interim leadership is needed (Munde, 2000a; Rud, 2004). Ortega (2017) notes that for interim roles, "librarians [are] often selected to become the interim or next department leader simply because they were good at their jobs and not

because they particularly wanted to serve as leaders,” (pp. 42–43). By developing potential leaders at all ranks of the organization, libraries will be better able to respond to unexpected vacancies in the middle management level.

The literature reveals the importance of clarifying an interim position’s goals and expectations (Irwin & deVries, 2019), however job descriptions often do not exist formally for most positions in the library, leading to a scramble to create them once a vacancy necessitates an interim leader (Weingart, 2003). In addition, a library may need a different type of leader for different situations, such as someone to lead a unit through a major change, or someone to simply keep things going until the replacement is hired (Farrell, 2016). While it may not always be possible, it is useful to project the length of time for the interim period or set a date to review the position’s length (Benaud & Null, 1991; Farrell, 2016). Irwin and deVries (2019) note that the longer the interim period lasts, the more critical it will be to backfill the interim leader’s previous role.

Finally, recognition and compensation are necessary (Farrell, 2016; Irwin & deVries, 2019; Weingart, 2003). This compensation can take the form of a stipend, extra vacation time, sabbatical time, or other incentives (Farrell, 2016). According to Farrell (2016), “While it is likely that pay will not fully compensate or reward an individual for taking on a temporary, challenging role, there are ways to recognize the many contributions that an individual makes for a library,” (p. 993). Still, the pay will often not reflect the extra effort (Benaud & Null, 1991).

As stated previously, most of the existing literature on interim leadership in libraries is comprised of personal narratives, with the notable exception of Irwin and deVries (2019), which features a survey and interviews of interim academic library deans. This study sought to follow the lead of that 2019 study and expand into different library types, as well as the middle management level.

## **Materials and methods**

In 2020, the researchers developed a mixed-methods study to evaluate the impacts of the interim library middle management experience on a person’s well-being and professional career outcomes, consisting of a national survey and follow-up interviews with selected survey participants.

### **Survey**

The researchers developed an 18-question survey instrument building on the instrument used in Irwin and deVries (2019)’s study of interim academic library leaders. The first question screened for participants who had served in an interim middle management role in a public, academic, or special library in the past five years (2015–2020). The first part of the survey collected independent variables about participants, including information about their institution type and size and their own previous experience with management. The second part of the survey asked a series of scaled questions to measure their interim experience, including questions about changes to their confidence and stress levels and about impacts on their health and relationships. The survey also included several optional questions, such as demographic questions and an open-ended

**Table 1.** Survey questions forming the Well-Being Scale.

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Survey Question 17: Please evaluate how different aspects of your personal life were impacted during your interim period (Better/Same/Worse)

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- My physical well-being/health
  - My mental health
  - My overall stress level
  - My emotional well-being
  - My feelings of self-worth
- 

question asking participants to share something about their experience. The full survey instrument is included in [Appendix A](#).

After receiving IRB approval in May 2020, the survey was distributed through Qualtrics to 35 national, state, and regional Listservs for professional library organizations. The survey received 359 responses, of which 259 met the threshold for validity, which was defined as participants who had consented to participate, served in an interim middle management position in a library within the previous five years, and completed at least one survey question. Valid survey responses included a large representation of participants from both public ( $n=141$ , 54.4%) and academic libraries ( $n=108$ , 41.7%), however the small sample size from special libraries ( $n=10$ , 3.9%) meant that no reliable findings could be generalized for that group.

With the assistance of Dr. Sherrill Hayes of Kennesaw State University's School of Data Science and Analytics, the results of the survey were analyzed via descriptive and inferential statistical methods using SPSS v26 with  $p$  values set at .05. A Well-Being Scale ( $\alpha = .876$ ,  $M = 8.34$ ,  $F(4, 231) = 98.06$ ,  $p < .01$ ) was created using five of the scaled questions on physical well-being, mental health, emotional well-being, stress level, and feelings of self-worth ([Table 1](#)).

For the single open-ended survey question, the researchers applied grounded theory to identify themes and assigned codes in Excel. In addition, the researchers conducted a simple sentiment analysis to identify positive or negative tone in respondent answers.

## Interviews

Based on the quantitative and qualitative data from the survey, the researchers created a set of 11 follow-up interview questions. The questions were designed to draw participants into a discussion of their overall experience, the support they received, and the impacts the interim role had on their health and relationships. The full list of interview questions can be found in [Appendix B](#).

After receiving IRB approval, the researchers recruited 13 interviewees from survey participants who had agreed to be considered for follow-up interviews. The researchers used purposive sampling to attempt to represent a variety of library types and experiences from the interim period. The researchers conducted the interviews virtually using Microsoft Teams in November 2020, with each interview lasting 30–60 minutes. One researcher served as the interviewer and led participants through the list of questions in a semistructured interview style, which allowed the participant and the interviewer to engage in a dialogue about the participant's interim experience. The other researcher served as a notetaker.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed using automatic captioning and were then manually corrected by the researchers. The researchers then applied grounded theory to create and assign thematic codes using NVivo, as well as to identify trends and themes across participants.

## Results

### *Characteristics of interim leaders and interim roles*

The first step in the researchers' data analysis process was to describe the factors surrounding interim leaders and their experiences, including the demographics of the participant, the characteristics of their library institution, and the circumstances surrounding their interim role.

### *Demographics of interim leaders*

There were 222 complete responses to the optional demographic questions at the end of the survey. Survey respondents were overwhelmingly female ( $n = 187$ , 84.2%) and white ( $n = 191$ , 86.0%), with the plurality in the age group of 36–45 ( $n = 81$ , 36.2%). As compared to the 2017 ALA Demographic Study, the gender and age distribution aligns with that of the general library profession, with the age of the survey participants trending slightly younger than the profession average. The overall percentage of nonwhite participants was equal to the profession as a whole, with a slight overrepresentation of participants who identified as Black or African American (5.0% vs. 4.4% in the profession) and an underrepresentation of participants who identified as Hispanic or Latino/a (3.2% vs. 4.7% in the profession), Asian (1.8% vs. 3.6% in the profession), and American Indian or Alaska Native (0.9% vs. 1.2% in the profession) (ALA Office for Research & Statistics, 2017) (Table 2).

The survey also captured information about the respondent's prior interest in and experience with management, as well as their intention to apply for the permanent position. Of those who answered these questions, the vast majority did have prior

**Table 2.** Interim leader demographics.

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	187	84.2
Male	34	15.3
Non-binary	1	0.5
What was your age when you began serving in this interim role?		
<25–35	60	26.8
36–45	81	36.2
46–55	50	22.3
Over 55	33	14.7
What is your ethnicity?		
White or Caucasian	191	86.0
Black or African American	11	5.0
Hispanic or Latino/a	7	3.2
Asian	4	1.8
American Indian or Alaska Native	2	.9
Multiple Races/Other	7	3.2
Totals	222	100.0



**Table 3.** Interim leader experience with and interest in management.

Did you have prior supervisory experience?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	198	76.4
No	61	23.6
Total	259	100.0
Did you have prior interest in management?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Agree	171	72.5
Neutral	30	12.7
Disagree	35	14.8
Total	236	100.0
Did you volunteer to serve in this role?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	139	56.0
No	109	44.0
Total	248	100.0
Do you intend to apply for the permanent position?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	120	48.4
No	69	27.8
Undecided	17	6.9
Ineligible/Not applicable	42	16.9
Total	248	100.0

supervisory experience ( $n = 198$ , 76.4%) and prior interest in management ( $n = 171$ , 72.5%). Only 27.8% ( $n = 69$ ) indicated that they did not intend to apply for the permanent position (Table 3).

Despite this previous interest and experience, only 56% ( $n = 139$ ) of valid survey responses indicated that the participant volunteered for the interim role. Some interview participants revealed that they were approached by library administration about taking on the role and felt that they should not or could not decline. According to one participant:

... when your boss asks you, "Can you hold down the fort for a while?," you don't usually say no, and there was no reason I had to say—I mean, I can't imagine saying no. [...] It needed to be done, and I knew how to do it. It just wasn't my favorite part of the job. But I knew how to do it. I was respected in doing it. So, I did it.

Regardless of whether they actively volunteered, study participants cited several factors motivating them to take on the interim role, such as a desire to gain experience, to attain the permanent position, or simply to serve their organization in a time of need.

### *Circumstances of the interim period*

There were 259 complete responses to the portion of the survey which collected data about the interim leader's institution and interim period. As described earlier, a slight majority of survey respondents were from public libraries. Most were from smaller institutions with fewer than 50 employees ( $n = 155$ , 59.8%) and most participants supervised

**Table 4.** Institution descriptions.

	Frequency	Percent
At what type of institution did you (or do you) serve in this interim role?		
Public library	141	54.4
Academic library	108	41.7
Special library	10	3.9
How many direct reports did/do you supervise in this role?		
1–5 people	114	44.0
6–10 people	82	31.7
11 + people	63	24.3
How many staff librarians does the library employ?		
Less than 50 employees	155	59.8
More than 50 employees	104	40.2
How long did you (or have you) served in this interim role?		
0–3 months	35	13.5
3–6 months	61	23.6
6–9 months	32	12.7
9–12 months	52	20.1
>12 months	79	30.5
Totals	259	100.0

a small number of direct reports during their interim period, with 44% ( $n = 114$ ) having five or fewer direct reports and 31.7% ( $n = 82$ ) supervising 10 or fewer people. Over half of survey respondents ( $n = 131$ , 59%) served interim terms longer than nine months. During the interviews, the researchers learned that some interim middle managers had been in their roles for multiple years (Table 4).

Of the 248 survey participants who answered the question, 31.1% ( $n = 77$ ) received financial compensation that was less than the amount of the permanent position's salary. Only 25.8% ( $n = 64$ ) received compensation equal to the permanent position's salary, and a smaller number of participants ( $n = 33$ , 13.3%) received some other form of compensation, such as additional paid time off. Still, 29.8% ( $n = 74$ ) received no additional compensation at all. One interview participant explained that they initially did not receive any compensation, but later negotiated for a stipend.

The reasons for the open interim position varied widely, with some respondents filling in their own explanation for their circumstances. The most common reasons for an interim middle management position were someone voluntarily leaving the organization ( $n = 78$ , 30.1%) or retiring ( $n = 63$ , 24.3%), with lesser occurrences of someone being on personal leave ( $n = 36$ , 13.9%), someone else being promoted ( $n = 30$ , 11.6%), a newly created position ( $n = 12$ , 4.6%), or someone having been fired ( $n = 11$ , 4.2%). Twenty-nine participants (11.2%) provided other reasons for the interim middle management position, describing more unique circumstances or sometimes multiple reasons for interim positions (or even multiple interim positions).

Qualitative data from the open-ended survey question and the interviews revealed more details surrounding interim roles.

*Extraordinary circumstances.* Some interim assignments began in extraordinary circumstances, such as the dramatic departure of the predecessor. According to an interview participant:

My supervisor [...] walked out of the library [...] shouting, 'I quit. I can't take it anymore.' And I think my mouth fell open, I watched her leave, and walked down the hall

to the director's office and said, 'Do you know what just happened?' And he said, 'Yes.' And he asked if I would be willing to step in and serve as interim ...

Other interim periods coincided with tragic circumstances, with one survey participant noting that their predecessor became terminally ill, and another two survey participants revealing that their predecessors had died unexpectedly. One interview participant described an emotional period a few months into their interim role, when their University Librarian passed away after a long illness.

*Reorganizations.* A notable number of interview participants ( $n = 7$ , 53.8%) at both public and academic libraries mentioned that their interim role was because of, or coincided with, a reorganization of their library. These reorganizations often resulted in multiple interim positions created at one time, caused the interim period to last longer while the reorganization was completed, or sometimes even caused the interim leader's original position to be eliminated. One interview participant referred to the high number of interim positions in a reporting chain at their organization as "the chaos of having an unstable org chart."

*Shared interim positions.* Interestingly, four interview participants (30.8%) shared their interim role with one or more people as a team of leaders. In most cases, this was a result of no one person being available to take on the entirety of the role's responsibilities, multiple library workers being suitable for the position, or a desire to create more opportunities for leadership in the organization. However, for one interview participant the decision to create a shared interim position was a result of a conflict of interest in the supervision of the interim leader's romantic partner.

*Unions.* Some study participants from public libraries were members of a union, which created a different set of circumstances for their interim role. Union rules could dictate how interim leaders were chosen, based on seniority or based on classification of staff as managerial or otherwise. These rules could also define the length of interim assignments, or the pay scale associated with the role. One survey participant described frustration with union rules, which made it impossible for the vacant position to be covered by anyone not already designated as a manager, resulting in several middle managers taking on increased responsibilities and hours without extra compensation. However, most participants in roles where unions were a factor expressed neutral or favorable impacts of the union on their position.

*COVID-19 pandemic.* One final circumstance of note was the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted many of the interim leaders who served in their temporary roles in 2020. The pandemic created challenges for interim middle managers in terms of their staffing, their work modality, and the duties they were expected to perform. One interview participant's interim assignment ended abruptly in March 2020 with the advent of pandemic orders to shelter in place. Another interview participant from a public library found their interim role changed entirely during the pandemic, when they were required to assist with emergency operations at the library and participate in county public health initiatives for homeless populations. Many others reported that the search

for the permanent position was interrupted due to the pandemic. For all interim middle managers during the pandemic, it was difficult to tell which impacts were due to their interim experience and which were the result of living through a pandemic. According to one interview participant, "...because the pandemic has been most of this year, I can't tease apart whether it's the stress of the pandemic, the world in general, or the stress of the job. That's what I'm grappling with. It's just all intertwined." The following section of this article will explore these and other impacts in further detail.

### ***Impacts of the interim leadership experience***

In the second phase of data analysis, the researchers sought to describe the personal and professional impacts of serving in an interim middle manager role for the interim leader.

#### ***Mental impacts***

Mental impacts were far more common for study participants than physical impacts. These impacts related primarily to stress, mental and emotional health, and self-esteem.

***Stress.*** The most reported impact of the interim experience on study participants was stress, with most survey participants ( $n = 163$ , 70.6%) and interview participants ( $n = 8$ , 72.7%) reporting that their overall stress level was worse as a result of their interim role. Many interview participants said that they performed all or a portion of their previous duties on top of their new managerial responsibilities, which greatly added to their workload. Other participants cited unclear expectations or general uncertainty about their role as the source of their stress. According to one interview participant:

Mentally, I would definitely say the first nine months or so were just strain. I would say—just stressful—again, not sure what exactly was expected of me, having to ask a lot of clarifying questions, stepping into things when maybe it would've been better if I would've stayed out. You know, just learning how I could be helpful to the people in my department was just a mental puzzle, honestly.

As described earlier, some study participants could not distinguish between the stress of their interim middle manager role and other external factors causing stress in their lives, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, moving to a new state, family issues, or even the death of a colleague. Even study participants who reflected on their interim experience overall as being valuable acknowledged that the stress took a large toll. One survey respondent summarized, "Overall, my experience has led to a lot of growth (personally, professionally) but at the cost of a lot of stress and pain."

***Mental & emotional health.*** Impacts on the mental and emotional health of study participants were not as widespread, with a large number of survey participants ( $n = 105$ , 45.5%) reporting that their mental health stayed the same and 8.2% ( $n = 19$ ) reporting that their mental health got better. This should not minimize the significant negative impacts, however, as 45.9% ( $n = 106$ ) of survey participants reported that their mental health got worse and 42.9% ( $n = 99$ ) of survey participants reported that their emotional well-being got worse during their interim period. In the qualitative data, participants

revealed feelings of isolation and lack of trust, feeling overwhelmed, anxiety and uncertainty, and a sense of inadequacy. Two interview participants (15.4%) revealed that they had cried at work while serving as interim. Another interview participant described feeling increased anger at work and at home. In an acute instance, one interview participant shared that they used alcohol more frequently during their interim role and began undergoing therapy and taking antidepressants.

*Self-esteem.* Impacts on self-esteem were mixed across participants, with the plurality of survey participants reporting that their feelings of self-worth stayed the same ( $n = 102$ , 44.2%) and only 22.9% ( $n = 53$ ) saying it got worse. Several interview participants described feeling like they were failing against their supervisor's—or their own personal—expectations. According to one interview participant:

... the first few months I definitely felt very insecure. I felt like a fish out of water, and I am the kind of person that I take a lot of satisfaction in that I feel competent in my job, and I feel [ ... ] like I'm in control of things. And I didn't have that for several months.

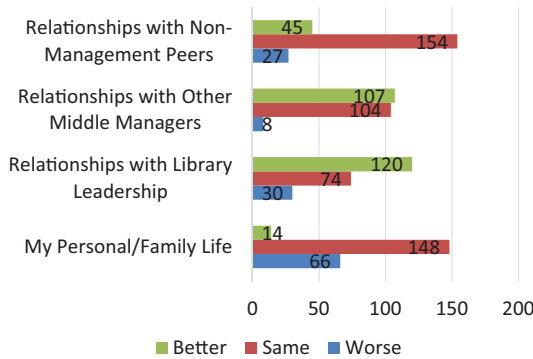
On the reverse, 32.9% ( $n = 76$ ) of survey participants reported that their feelings of self-worth improved during the experience. One interview participant described how being able to make firm decisions without having to seek approval from a supervisor improved their sense of self-esteem, as well as the personal satisfaction of “knowing that you can be the boss.”

### *Physical impacts*

Most study participants ( $n = 124$ , 53.7%) indicated that their physical health stayed the same, while 41.1% ( $n = 95$ ) said that their physical health worsened during their interim period. Only a few interview participants specifically mentioned physical health impacts, but the most commonly reported were fatigue, lack of exercise, weight gain, and flare-ups of chronic illnesses. Some study participants indicated that balancing personal care against the physical toll of the position comes with time, with one interview participant saying, “I have had to purposefully commit to self-care practices in a way that I don't think I had to intentionally do in the past, for better or worse.”

### *Impacts on relationships*

Four survey questions and one interview question asked about impacts on the personal life and relationships of participants. While many relationships stayed the same, more survey respondents reported that their relationships with library leadership improved ( $n = 120$ , 51.9%) than other categories of relationships. Several interview participants explained how they previously had very little interaction with library administration and that the interim role helped them develop relationships with senior leaders. Two interview participants (15.4%) noted in particular that they began to see their supervisor as an individual rather than just an administrator. Study participants also noted improved relationships with other middle managers ( $n = 107$ , 46.3%), particularly in instances where there was a cohort of other interim leaders. One interview participant referred to the camaraderie between other interim middle managers as “foxhole friends,” referring to shared bonding through a difficult situation (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Changes in relationships.

While most ( $n = 148$ , 64.1%) reported that their personal relationships stayed the same during their interim period, more participants ( $n = 66$ , 28.6%) reported that these relationships got worse than for any other category. Interview participants discussed “bringing work home” more often and relying on family and friends for emotional support. As one interview participant said, “my poor [spouse] got a lot of stress and insecurity dumped on [them].” Other interview participants complained of being so fatigued from work that they did not have the energy to spend time on personal relationships.

Survey respondents reported the least change with their relationships with non-management peers, with 66.7% ( $n = 154$ ) reporting no change to those relationships. When asked about these relationships, interview participants described the conscious distancing they engaged in to avoid conflicts of interest with former peers they now supervised. As one interview participant described:

I think the one big challenge that I’ve had as well in this transition has been going from someone who was a peer to a supervisor, but always had the risk of going back down to being a peer. Not that I was ever really a jerk, but there was always that thing in the back of your mind of just, “be careful” ...

One interview participant was mildly reprimanded for socializing with their former work peers on a weekend. Another experienced resentment from a former peer who wanted the interim position for themselves, and another described a challenging disagreement with a former work friend over a denied request for paid time off. Despite these instances, most interview participants said they were able to navigate their new relationship dynamics with former peers and that these relationships remained good during their interim role.

### **Measured outcomes**

The final phase of data analysis was to assess overall impacts on an interim middle manager’s well-being and career.

### **Sentiment analysis**

The researchers coded the open-ended survey responses ( $N = 153$ ) for overall sentiments of positive, negative, or undetermined. The plurality ( $n = 72$ , 47.1%) of comments were

negative, with the qualitative themes of lack of support, professional exploitation, and a personal toll being the most common. These comments revealed stories of stressful situations, toxic work cultures, and regrets about the experience, such as this comment from one study participant: “It was extremely stressful, discouraging, detrimental to my career growth and development, and financially costly. I felt like I walked right into a trap and was completely set up for failure.” Only 27.4% ( $n = 42$ ) of the survey comments were explicitly positive, and these overwhelmingly tended to describe the interim role as good experience for career development. A typical positive comment is exemplified in the following response:

I was definitely interested in supervisory roles prior to my experience as an interim manager but saw it as something I would do later in my career. The experience I gained as an interim manager really built my confidence and helped me to see that I could handle additional responsibility, and that I really enjoyed it.

The remaining open-ended comments ( $n = 39$ , 25.5%) contained mixed sentiments or were unable to be categorized as positive or negative. An example of a mixed sentiment comment is “I got great experience, but feel as though it was not appreciated or respected by my institution.” Many comments contained neutral commentary, offered generalized advice about interim leadership, or made observations irrelevant to their positive or negative view of their experience, such as this comment: “Serving as an interim allows you to see the management side of the library.” Comments such as these were not coded as either positive or negative and were not included in the sentiment analysis.

### **Well-Being Scale**

Using survey data, the researchers compared several characteristics of interim middle managers against their score on the Well-Being Scale, which was derived from survey questions on physical well-being, mental health, emotional well-being, stress level, and feelings of self-worth. Three variables were compared to these scores: prior management experience, prior interest in management, and whether or not the participant volunteered. Neither prior management experience ( $X^2(1, 230) = 0.20$ ,  $p = 0.654$ ) nor whether or not the participant volunteered were significant ( $X^2(1, 230) = 0.17$ ,  $p = 0.684$ ) in predicting a higher Well-Being Score; however, prior interest in management did turn out to be statistically significant ( $X^2(2, 230) = 10.738$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ) (Figure 2).

This means that interim middle managers who had a prior interest in management were more likely to have higher Well-Being Scale scores, indicating a more positive outcome on their individual well-being.

### **Changes to interest in management and confidence**

The survey asked two sets of scaled questions measuring a participant’s interest in management and confidence in their leadership abilities before and after their interim experience. There was little change in an individual’s interest in management prior to serving as interim ( $n = 236$ ,  $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) and after ( $n = 236$ ,  $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ); however, there was a slight increase in the average confidence level reported before serving as interim ( $n = 236$ ,  $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) and after ( $n = 236$ ,  $M = 4.22$ ,

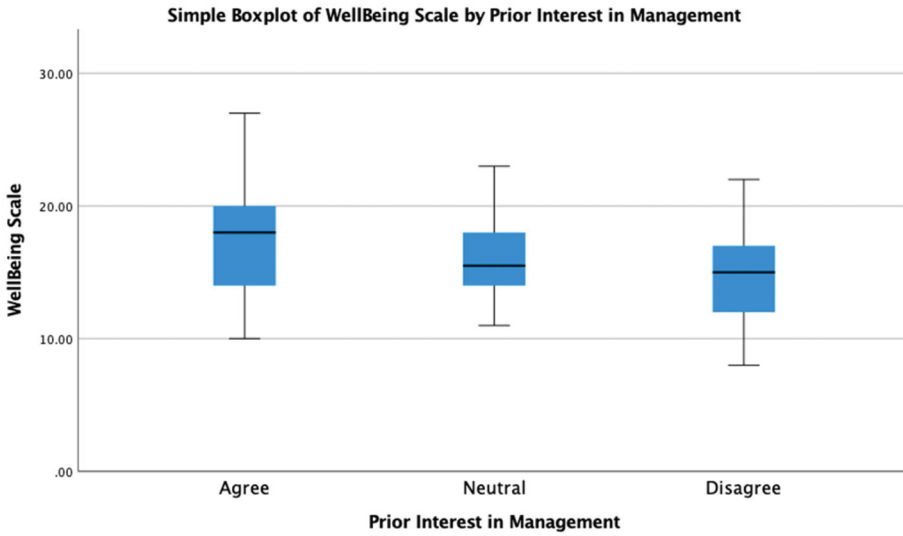


Figure 2. Boxplot of Well-Being Scale by prior interest in management.

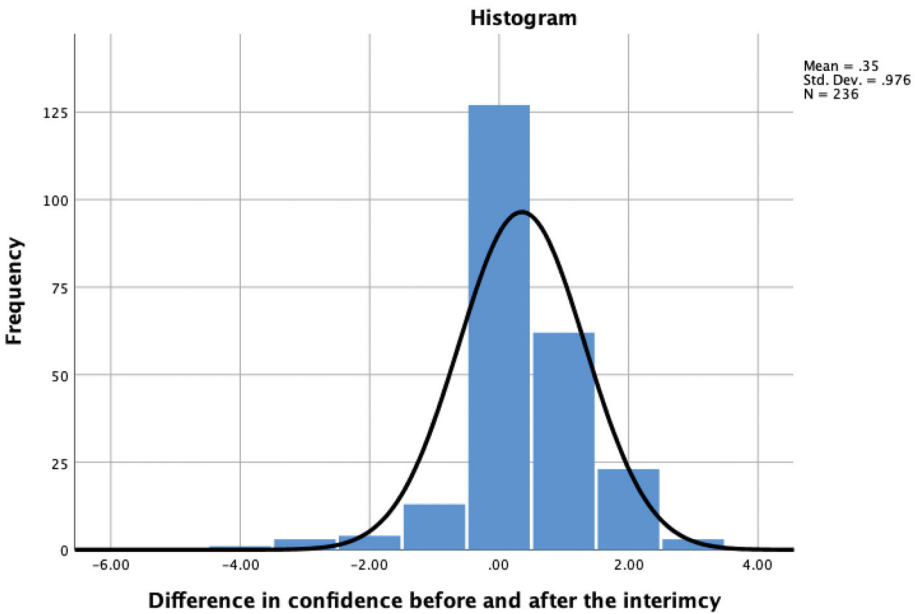


Figure 3. Difference in confidence before and after the interim role.

$SD = 1.18$ ), with the measure of change calculated from the difference between the two means ( $N = 236$ ,  $M = 0.35$ ,  $SD = 0.976$ ). This indicates that study participants on average became more confident in their leadership abilities after serving as an interim middle manager (Figure 3).



**Table 5.** Professional outcomes.

Did you (or do you) intend to apply for the permanent position?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Yes	120	48.4
No	69	27.8
Undecided	17	6.9
Ineligible/Not applicable	42	16.9
Total	248	100.0
359		
Were you offered the final position?		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Search ongoing	9	7.5
Yes, and I accepted the position	66	55.0
Yes, and I declined the position: [Please describe]	4	3.3
No: [Please describe]	24	20.0
Other: [Please describe]	17	14.2
Total	120	100.0
359		

### *Professional outcomes*

It is notable that most interim middle managers in the study did not apply for the permanent position at all, either by choice ( $n = 69$ , 27.8%), ineligibility for the position ( $n = 42$ , 16.9%), or indecision ( $n = 17$ , 6.9%). Of those who applied for the permanent position ( $N = 120$ ), study participants reported a high percentage of success ( $n = 70$ , 58.3%) in receiving an offer for the permanent position. Of these, only a small number ( $n = 4$ ) turned down the position. Twenty percent ( $n = 24$ ) of those who applied were not selected for the final position, 7.5% ( $n = 9$ ) reported that their search was still ongoing, while 14.2% ( $n = 17$ ) answered “Other,” citing reasons such as a hiring freeze affecting the search, or the position being redefined (Table 5).

The majority of interim middle managers who either did not apply for the permanent position or who were not selected for the permanent position transitioned back to their previous role ( $n = 63$ , 66.32%), with only a few respondents indicating that they transitioned to a different role at the same library ( $n = 9$ , 9.47%), they moved on to another institution ( $n = 6$ , 6.32%), or “Other” ( $n = 17$ , 17.89%). Most “Other” answers described their previous role changing slightly while they performed the interim managerial function, a reorganization of the library, retirement, or other circumstances. These results largely indicate that the interim period had modestly positive or neutral professional outcomes for survey participants.

### **Discussion**

After analyzing the experiences of many interim middle managers across a variety of libraries, the researchers found that only the factor of prior interest in management had a statistically significant connection to an individual’s personal well-being while serving as an interim middle manager. Other hypothesized factors, such as whether an individual volunteered, library size and type, compensation, the length of the interim term, or

even the success of the application for the permanent position, did not have a statistically significant relationship to an individual's well-being. The researchers were unable to explain how some individuals seemed to be able to reflect mostly positively on their interim experience, while others verbalized much more negative emotions. It is possible that individual personality, which was not measured in any way in this study, played a large role in an individual's perception of their experience.

### ***Factors associated with quality of experiences***

While the researchers were unable to establish causal links between certain factors and positive or negative interim experiences, there were several factors associated with these types of experience which may be generalized as advice for potential interim leaders and institutions seeking to fill interim positions. Besides the previously discussed correlation with positive experiences and prior interest in management, study participants overwhelmingly cited training for their new role, the establishment of clear expectations, and support during their interim period as factors contributing to a positive experience. Some participants also discussed the importance of a good workplace culture in promoting a positive interim leadership experience. Study participants who described negative experiences cited factors such as insufficient preparation, lack of support from administration, toxic workplace culture, a lack of authority to perform the role, and a feeling of exploitation. These findings are supported by the existing literature on interim leadership in libraries, which emphasizes the importance of clarifying an interim position's goals and expectations (Irwin & deVries, 2019) and projecting the length of the position's term (Benaud & Null, 1991; Farrell, 2016). In contrast with the literature, which strongly advocated for compensation and recognition (Farrell, 2016; Irwin & deVries, 2019; Weingart, 2003), compensation did not seem to significantly impact the experiences of most participants in this study, although a few mentioned that compensation "would have helped."

### ***Study limitations***

This study attempted to measure the experiences of public, academic, and special library workers serving as interim middle managers with a single survey instrument, which proved challenging given the different terminology and organizational structures used by different libraries. For example, public librarians who served as interim branch managers considered their position to be middle management, while academic librarians might consider that position equivalent with a library director or dean. Larger academic libraries also had many levels of management, complicating the attempt to compare experiences between an interim director of a small service unit and an interim department chair who has other managers reporting directly to them.

Additional limitations of this study include the inability to evaluate potential differences in impact for special library middle managers compared to academic and public library middle managers, due to the small sample size. Survey respondents also overwhelmingly identified as white and female, so the authors were unable to explore differences in experience related to gender or racial identity. Future studies focused on

different minority populations in interim management positions would be a benefit to the profession and librarians from minority groups who are interested in pursuing management positions.

Based on personal observations during the interview process, the authors also suspect it might be of value to conduct a future study combining a personality test with the Well-Being Scale developed here to explore any possible relationship between innate traits and perceived outcomes of the interim experience. There also seems to be a need for a closer look at the severity of mental health impacts. While only one or two interview participants reported particularly severe impacts, it is impossible to know the severity of the impacts on the 106 survey participants who reported that their mental health worsened. The authors are also confident there are many other questions that could be explored, as most scholarship in this area recounts personal experiences or advice, and few research studies of any sort can be found in the extant literature.

## Conclusion

Middle management interim positions can be a valuable professional opportunity to gain managerial experience and serve your library organization during a period of transition. They are also highly stressful and frequently have negative impacts on personal well-being, with no guarantee of adequate compensation or attaining a permanent management position. Institutions and librarians can work together to minimize these negative effects and ensure that the interim period is positive for the individual, those reporting to them, and the library as a whole.

Libraries can improve the interim experience by clearly defining the role in advance, reassigning previous responsibilities to avoid overloading the interim leader, providing adequate training to interim leaders prior to taking on the assignment, and providing sustained support throughout the duration of the interim term. Based on this study, all of these forms of support seem to be the exception, not the rule, at most institutions. Thus at this time, those interested in management should consider exploring leadership training on their own and build a professional network to whom they could turn for support. Potential interim leaders should also carefully consider all aspects of their unique opportunity prior to accepting the position, especially their own potential interest in management.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendix A. Survey instrument

### Online survey consent form

**Title of Research Study:** Experience of Interim Middle Managers in Libraries, Study #20-509

**Researcher's Contact Information:** Amy Barker, 470-578-2861, [abarke24@kennesaw.edu](mailto:abarke24@kennesaw.edu) and Ashley Hoffman, 470-578-2735, [ahoffm18@kennesaw.edu](mailto:ahoffm18@kennesaw.edu)

**Introduction:** You are being invited to take part in a research study conducted by Amy Barker and Ashley Hoffman of Kennesaw State University. Before you decide to participate in this study, you should read this form and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

**Description of Project:** The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of librarians who have served as interim leaders in libraries at the middle management level. For the purposes of this study, “middle management” includes any supervisory position at a library *except* those at the highest level of the library administration, such as the director or dean of the library. “Interim” includes anyone who served in a management position for a limited/temporary term, often with titles including the word “acting” or “interim.” The study investigates the impact of interim leadership service on professional relationships and career, personal relationships, and individual well-being. The goal of the study is to learn how serving in an interim leadership role impacts librarians and gather advice on how to approach these positions.

**Explanation of Procedures:** You are invited to complete a survey about the circumstances leading to your interim leadership role and your experiences in that role. The entire survey will be completed online and consists primarily of multiple-choice and Likert scaled questions.

**Time Required:** The survey is anticipated to take approximately 15 minutes.

**Risks or Discomforts:** There are no known risks or anticipated discomforts associated with participation in this survey.

**Benefits:** You may not receive any direct benefits from the study, although some of the questions may prompt you to reflect back on your interim role and improve your understanding of your individual experience. Your participation will help the researchers learn about the impact of serving as an interim leader on the professional and personal life of librarians.

**Confidentiality:** The results of this participation will be anonymous. No personally identifiable information will be collected about you. Only the researchers will be able to see individual survey

responses; any published findings will be shared in aggregate form. At the conclusion of the survey, you will have the option to provide contact information for later interviews. If you choose to provide it, this information will not be connected to your survey responses.

**Inclusion Criteria for Participation:** You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study and have served in an interim middle management position in a library.

**Use of Online Survey:** Data collected will be handled in an anonymous manner and Internet Protocol (IP) addresses WILL NOT be collected by this Qualtrics survey.

Research at Kennesaw State University that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities should be addressed to the Institutional Review Board, Kennesaw State University, 585 Cobb Avenue, KH3417, Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591, (470) 578-6407.

PLEASE PRINT A COPY OF THIS CONSENT DOCUMENT FOR YOUR RECORDS, OR IF YOU DO NOT HAVE PRINT CAPABILITIES, YOU MAY CONTACT THE RESEARCHER TO OBTAIN A COPY

Q1 Are you currently or did you serve as an interim middle manager at a library within the past 5 years (2015 on)?

*For the purposes of this study, “middle manager” includes any supervisory position at a library except those at the highest level of the library administration, such as the director or dean of the library. “Interim” includes anyone who served in a management position for a limited/temporary term, often with titles including the word “acting” or “interim.”*

- Yes  
 No

Q2 Describe the circumstances leading to your interimcy.

- New position created  
 Someone was promoted  
 Someone retired  
 Someone was on approved leave  
 Someone voluntarily left  
 Someone was fired  
 Other: [Please describe]

---

Q4 Did you have prior management or supervisory experience?

- Yes, in a library  
 Yes, outside of libraries  
 No

Q5 How many years at the institution at onset of interimcy?

- <1  
 1-3  
 3-6  
 6+

Q6 How long did you (or have you) served in this interim role?

- <3 months  
 3-6 months

- 6–9 months
- 9–12 months
- Over 12 months

Q7 At what type of institution did you (or do you) serve in this interim role?

- Public library
- Academic library
- Special library

Q8 How many staff and librarians does the library employ (excluding student assistants or volunteers)?

- 1–10
- 11–25
- 26–50
- 51+

Q9 How many direct reports did/do you supervise in this role?

- 1–5
- 6–10
- 11–15
- 16+

Q10 Did you volunteer to serve in this role?

- Yes
- No

Q11 Did you receive additional financial compensation for serving in this role?

- Yes, amount equal to permanent position salary
- Yes, amount less than permanent position salary
- No additional financial compensation
- Other compensation or benefit provided: [Please describe]

Q12 Did you (or do you) intend to apply for the permanent position?

- Yes
- No
- Undecided
- Ineligible/Not applicable

Q13 Were you offered the final position?

- Search ongoing
- Yes, and I accepted the position
- Yes, and I declined the position: [Please describe] \_\_\_\_\_
- No: [Please describe] \_\_\_\_\_
- Other: [Please describe] \_\_\_\_\_

Q14 Did you (or do you intend to) transition back to your previous position?

- Yes
- No, moved to different role at same institution
- No, moved to different institution
- Other: [Please describe] \_\_\_\_\_

Q15 Please select the best option to indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding your experience serving as an interim middle manager.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I was interested in a leadership or management position <b>prior</b> to interimcy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am interested in a leadership or management position <b>after</b> interimcy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I was confident in my leadership abilities <b>prior</b> to serving in this role	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am confident in my leadership abilities <b>after</b> serving in this role	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I find/found this position challenging	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I find/found this position rewarding	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The compensation I received was worth the effort involved	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The transition back to my previous role was smooth	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The transition to the permanent position was smooth	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q17 Please use the following options to evaluate how different aspects of your professional and personal life were/are impacted **during** your interimcy.

	Better	Same	Worse	Prefer not to say/ Not Applicable
My relationship with my non-management peers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My relationship with other middle managers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My relationship with library leadership	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My personal/family life	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My physical well-being/health	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My mental health	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My overall stress level	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My emotional well-being	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My feelings of self-worth	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q18 [optional] In your own words, what would you most like to share related to your experience serving as an interim middle manager?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Q20 The following demographic questions are optional. Please select the forward arrow to continue without answering.

Q21 What was your age when you began serving in this interim role?

- <25
- 26–35
- 36–45

- 46–55
- Over 55

Q22 What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Nonbinary
- Please describe: \_\_\_\_\_

Q23 What is your race?

- White or Caucasian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino/a
- Asian
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- From multiple races
- Other: [Please describe] \_\_\_\_\_

Q24 Would you be interested in participating in a follow-up telephone interview? (Your survey answers will not be linked with your contact information)

- Yes
- No

Q25 Thank you for agreeing to participate in a follow-up telephone interview, which will tentatively take place in late Fall 2020. Please follow the link below to fill out your contact information. Your survey answers will not be linked with your contact information.

## Appendix B. Interview protocol

### *Online consent form*

**Title of research study:** Experience of Interim Middle Managers in Libraries, Part 2

**IRB Study Number:** IRB-FY21-178

**Researcher's contact information:** Amy Barker, 470-578-2861, [abarke24@kennesaw.edu](mailto:abarke24@kennesaw.edu), and Ashley Hoffman, 470-578-2735, [ahoffm18@kennesaw.edu](mailto:ahoffm18@kennesaw.edu)

### *Introduction*

You are being invited to take part in a research study conducted by Amy Barker and Ashley Hoffman of Kennesaw State University. Before you decide to participate in this study, you should read this form and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

### *Description of project*

The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of librarians who have served as interim leaders in libraries at the middle management level. For the purposes of this study, “middle management” includes any supervisory position at a library except those at the highest level of the library administration, such as the director or dean of the library. “Interim” includes anyone who served in a management position for a limited/temporary term, often with titles including the word “acting” or “interim.” The study investigates the impact of interim leadership service on professional relationships and career,



personal relationships, and individual well-being. The goal of the study is to learn how serving in an interim leadership role impacts librarians and gather advice on how to approach these positions.

### ***Explanation of procedures***

You are invited to complete a semistructured interview of 11 questions about your experiences in an interim leadership role. One researcher will conduct the interview, while the other observes and takes notes. The entire interview will be completed via video conferencing. After you have consented to the interview, the video and audio recording will be turned on. The recording is intended to assist the researchers in transcribing your responses, and will not be shared.

### ***Time required***

The interview is anticipated to last approximately 45 minutes.

### ***Risks or Discomforts***

There are no known risks or anticipated discomforts associated with participation in this survey.

### ***Benefits***

You may not receive any direct benefits from the study, although some of the questions may prompt you to reflect back on your interim role and improve your understanding of your individual experience. Your participation will help the researchers learn about the impact of serving as an interim leader on the professional and personal life of librarians.

### ***Confidentiality***

The results of this participation will be kept confidential. Only the researchers will be present during your interview, and no one else will have access to your responses; any published findings will be shared in aggregate form. A recording will be made to assist the researchers in analysis; this recording will be kept secured in a password-protected platform. All recordings will be deleted no later than January 29, 2021.

### ***Inclusion criteria for participation***

You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study and have served in an interim middle management position in a library.

Research at Kennesaw State University that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities should be addressed to the Institutional Review Board, Kennesaw State University, 585 Cobb Avenue, KH3417, Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591, (470) 578-7721.

PLEASE PRINT A COPY OF THIS CONSENT DOCUMENT FOR YOUR RECORDS, OR IF YOU DO NOT HAVE PRINT CAPABILITIES, YOU MAY CONTACT THE RESEARCHER TO OBTAIN A COPY.

- Yes, I consent to participate in this interview and have my interview recorded
- No, I do not consent

Please sign this consent form for our records. You will have the option to download a signed copy of your consent form upon completion.

### Interview Questions

Follow-up questions listed below main question text. Follow-up questions will be omitted if the interview participant answers them in their response to the main question. Additional follow-up prompts may be asked depending on the participant's answers.

1. Let's start with the basic details of your interim experience. How did you become interim middle manager?
  - a. How long did you serve?
  - b. What circumstances led to this position?
  - c. What external factors were happening in the library during your term as interim?
  - d. Why did you choose to take on this role?
  - e. Did you receive any financial or other compensation for serving in this role?
2. Tell us about the end of your interim term.
  - a. *(if still serving as interim)* When will your interim position end?
  - b. Did you (or do you intend to) apply for the permanent position?
  - c. *(If applicable)* Did you transition back for your old position?
3. What interest did you have in management prior to serving as interim?
  - a. Did you already have management experience?
  - b. *(If applicable)* Are you still interested in management?
4. What kind of preparation did you have for serving in this role?
  - a. Did you receive any training?
  - b. Did you have a mentor?
  - c. Did you have prior experience?
5. What kind of support did you receive during your term as interim?
  - a. *(If applicable)* Where did the support come from?
  - b. What kind of support do you wish you'd had?
6. Tell us about the new responsibilities you took on as interim.
  - a. While serving as interim, what happened to your previous responsibilities?
7. Tell us about your relationships with others during your period as interim. Did they change at all? If so, how?
  - a. What about relationships with library administration?
  - b. "... " with other middle managers?
  - c. "... " with former peers?
  - d. Now we have a few questions about how your experience impacted you personally. Let's start with your personal relationships (in or out of work). How were those impacted (if at all)?
8. How did serving as interim impact you personally, if at all?
  - a. How did it impact your physical health?
  - b. "... " your mental health?
  - c. "... " your self-esteem?
9. Now we'd like to invite you to reflect on your interim experience as a whole. How would you describe it?
  - a. What was one of the most rewarding aspects?
  - b. What was the most challenging project or experience you had during your time as interim?
  - c. What was something you learned during your time as interim?
10. What would you tell someone else who is considering taking on an interim middle management position?
11. Is there anything we didn't ask that you feel is important to mention?