

CHAPTER 1

Interim Leadership by the Numbers: Leadership Turnover in Academic Libraries

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Introduction

Interim leadership is, at its core, unstable. The entire point of interim leadership is that it's supposed to be a short-term solution while a long-term solution is identified. And yet, as the chapters in this book will show, interim leadership is frequently used, even unintentionally, as a long-term solution. Leaders are placed into interim positions and then stay there for years while the organization holds its breath, waiting to understand what should or will be the permanent outcome.

I served in an interim leadership role for most of three years, holding a place in the leadership role for longer than the permanent leader before me, whose spot I was selected to keep warm. My interim role, initially expected to be short, was the start of a complete turnover of the senior leadership team. For a full year, all three senior leadership roles (one dean and two associate deans) were filled by interim appointees. We noticed at the time that it seemed our peers in other institutions were all having the same experience. This impression doesn't seem to be confirmation bias: top-level transition is widespread in academic libraries for several reasons described below (and probably a few others, too). One of the outcomes of this pervasive turnover among senior leadership in libraries is a widespread reliance on interim leadership for gaps that almost always turn



out to be longer than anticipated. This reliance on interim leadership generates a need to better understand the impacts of interim leadership, both for organizations and individuals. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate some of the circumstances generating leadership turnover to help libraries and individuals better understand what leadership turnover means for the field as a whole and for their individual institutions.

Generational Changes

It is already widely understood that Generation X is significantly smaller than the generations on either side of it—baby boomers ahead of them and millennials and Gen Z behind them. See figure 1.1.

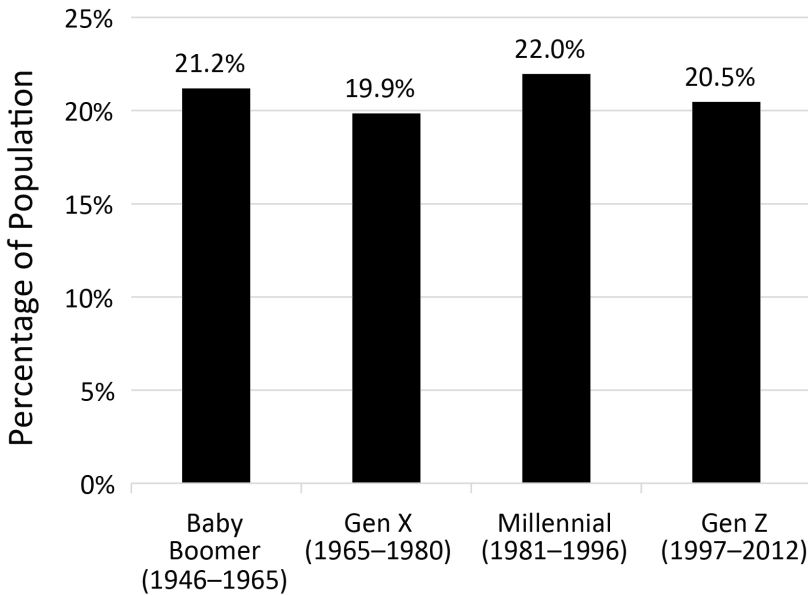


Figure 1.1

Generation size in the US population in 2019, adapted.¹

Gen X is generally understood to include people born between 1965 and 1980.² This generation, then, is currently between the ages of 42 and 57, which includes the average age of managers in academia.³ The oldest members of Gen X are already within a decade of retirement, theoretically. And yet, it was only in 2015 that Gen X became a larger generation in the overall US workforce than the baby boomer generation.⁴ Within two years of outnumbering baby boomers in the workforce, Gen X was already outnumbered by millennials.⁵ Specifically in libraries, Gen X was not projected to become larger than baby boomers until 2020, and

millennials are projected to overtake Gen X by 2025.⁶ Thus, Gen X, the current generation most likely to be of “senior leadership” age, has been and will continue to be smaller than the generations around it for nearly their entire careers.

A “normal” retirement schedule on the part of the baby boomer generation would likely have resulted in professional growth opportunities for Gen X as senior positions were slowly vacated over the 2000s and 2010s. However, persistence in the workforce of baby boomers after the Great Recession of 2007–2009 complicated the opportunities for leadership experience of Gen X. The smaller generation size of Gen X combined with baby boomer persistence created a very narrow market for experienced potential high-level leaders.⁷ While libraries as an industry are by no means unique in the unexpected persistence of baby boomers, it is also the case that the demographics of libraries skew older than other parts of the US workforce, making the challenges presented by this persistence even more acute. Lewis and Orr found that baby boomers have been disproportionately represented in libraries compared to the workforce overall, meaning that there are more people close to retirement in libraries than in the workforce generally. The same study identified that library leadership, specifically, is “remarkably old,” with the population of ARL librarians being older on average than had been measured at least since the ’80s and older than the general workforce.⁸ According to Stanley Wilder, in 2003, only 2 percent of ARL directors were over the age of sixty-five. In 2015, by contrast, a “whopping” 39 percent of ARL directors were older than sixty-five!⁹ And that number included Canadian ARL directors. Calculated from ARL directors in the US exclusively, fully *45 percent of ARL directors were over sixty-five* in 2015. Also in 2015, an enormous 14 percent of US ARL directors were *over seventy* years old. In the field overall, less than 2 percent stay after seventy, throwing the high percentage of directors over seventy into sharp relief.¹⁰ These data point to probable turnover at the director level in the neighborhood of at least 50 percent over only five to ten years, and we’re probably right in the middle of that at the time of this writing in 2022.

Lewis and Orr summarize some of the generational challenges of our field this way. “First, the Gen X cohort is relatively small. Second, leadership opportunities have generally come late to them so they may not have the seasoning required for senior positions. They may not even have the inclination.”¹¹ Indeed, Gen X is often identified as a generation that values work-life balance and may have less interest in management roles.¹² That work-life balance might decrease their interest in high-level leadership, and it additionally might decrease their interest in moving themselves or their families to a new location for the sake of professional opportunities.¹³ There does seem to be some evidence as well that Gen X is particularly sensitive to a values mismatch with their organizations.¹⁴ It seems logical to conclude that, since top leadership roles tend to be extremely demanding, the focus on work-life balance would contribute to limiting the size

of candidate pools in an already small population. All of these circumstances combine to create a field in which there are fewer Gen X leaders to go around than there were of the previous generation. Lewis and Orr claim that “the field will be wide open for millennials when the boomers retire, but that might be too late for millennials, who expect much quicker advancement.”¹⁵

The Wave of Retirements that Never Was, Until It *Really* Was

As a field, we’ve been talking for at least twenty years about the imminent massive retirement wave that would generate immense turnover and consequential renewal in the field.¹⁶ But this massive retirement wave didn’t materialize as predicted in 2005–2010, at least partly as a result of the Great Recession in 2007–2009. The retirement wave continued not to materialize in libraries into the mid-2010s. Yet, as Wilder says, “the population can’t age indefinitely.”¹⁷ Baby boomers are now leaving the workforce in large numbers. So here we are: the famed, or infamous, retirement wave is upon us now, and we don’t have enough leaders prepared to take over for these departing leaders because of the lack of opportunity for prospective leaders to gain experience combined with the small size of Gen X.

The data from Wilder demonstrates that senior-level leadership positions were remarkably stable for a very long time.¹⁸ But as the sixty-five-plus and seventy-plus leaders exit the workforce in close succession, that stability has morphed into similarly remarkable instability. As long ago as 2002, ARL’s ARL “Focus on the Future” Task Force identified training future leaders as a top priority.¹⁹ In 2009, the Taiga forum issued a statement about impending leadership retirements in 2010–2015 and the potential long-term detrimental effects of the absence of the earlier expected retirement wave.²⁰ Essentially, the postponement of the expected retirement wave built up a backlog into a much bigger retirement wave behind it, the effects of which we are feeling now. In 2015, 55 percent of ARL directors were over the age of sixty, suggesting that the current massive retirement pace will continue for some time. Wilder points out that “ARL libraries are almost certain to be in the midst of an unprecedented changing of the guard in leadership. Those who hold these positions currently face an urgent need to attend to succession planning, mentorship, and organizational design.”²¹

And yet, Galbraith et al. found very little succession planning, defined as preparing existing personnel for future leadership. Retirements combined with scant succession planning could easily result in long interim periods while libraries attempt to find someone with experience to bring into a permanent leadership role. Despite now two decades of literature about the impending retirements, very little has been actively done to prepare future leaders.²² Thus, widespread interim leadership presents the primary training ground for new leaders.

Turnover in ARL Library Directors²³

While ARL libraries represent only a portion of library leadership, data provided by the ARL regarding their leadership rosters over time demonstrate clear evidence of the upheaval in high-level leadership.

A surprisingly high number of ARL leaders have been in interim roles in the past ten years. The 125 ARL libraries²⁴ have had 20 or more (16 percent-plus) interim leaders at a time in four separate years since 2012 and 15 or more every year since 2013. See figure 1.2.

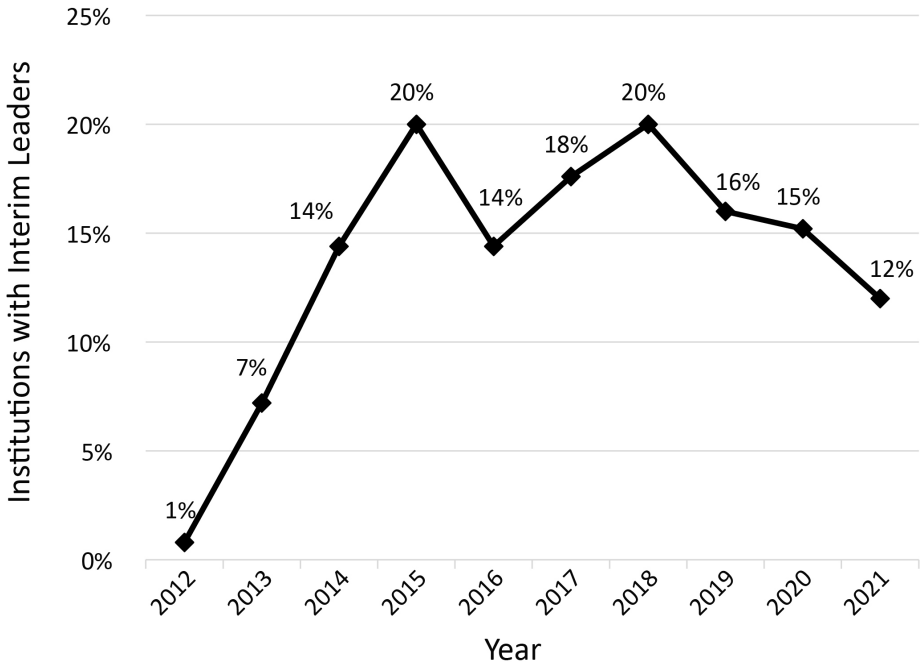


Figure 1.2

Percentage of 125 ARL member institutions with interim deans/directors between 2012 and April 2021.

Twice since 2012, fully 20 percent, or 25 ARL libraries, had interim leaders *at the same time*. See table 1.1.

Table 1.1

Number of Interim Deans/Directors of ARL Libraries

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Number of Interim Leaders	1	9	18	25	18	22	25	20	19	15

These interim appointments among ARL leaders since 2012 vary in their length. The average length is one year (11.4 months). Median length, which dampens the influence of very long and very short appointments on average, is slightly shorter at 9 months. While some interim appointments were only for a couple of months, the longest was 49 months—over 4 years in an interim role. That is longer than the permanent appointments of 17 deans or directors since 2012, not including any of the 51 current ARL deans/directors whose terms have been shorter than 49 months. That appointment length is less of an outlier than it might appear. The second-longest interim appointment was 48 months, and 16 interim appointments since 2012 were longer than 18 months.

The length of permanent appointments signals the long-term stability of some directors. Since 2012, the average length of a permanent appointment or an ARL dean/director is one month short of 8 years. The median, which dampens the effect of the very long appointments, is just over 6 years. The longest appointment over that time, for one dean in the same position, is just over 32 and a half years. Removing the current directors from the data raises both the average and the median by two years to 10.5 and 8.7 years respectively. The longest-serving current library director has been in place for 20 years. Only 15 current ARL directors (12 percent) have been in place for 10 years or longer, showing that the other 110 current ARL directors (88 percent) were hired after 2011. Turnover of 88 percent over 10 years at the ARL director level is additional clear evidence of pervasive instability of high-level leadership in libraries. And that doesn't even incorporate the many institutions that have changed their senior leaders more than once in that time.

ARL data from 2012–April 2021 show 311 total individual directors for 125 ARL libraries. That's an average of 2.5 leaders *per institution* over only 8 years. Between 2012 and the first three months of 2021, ARL institutions hired more than 25 new leaders (20 percent) *in a single year*, either interim or permanent, four separate times. See figure 3. Annual turnover between 2012 and 2020 (the last full year for which data were available) was only below 15 percent twice. These data demonstrate that even for institutions with permanent appointments, those permanent leaders are moving around among other ARLs, which is another indication of the volatility at the top level.

Three times since 2012, the ARL has hired more interim leaders than permanent leaders in a single year. See table 1.2.

Table 1.2

Number of Interim and Permanent New Hires Among ARL Deans/Directors

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Interim	1	8	11	15	5	13	12	9	12	3
Permanent	14	20	9	14	13	13	18	14	7	5

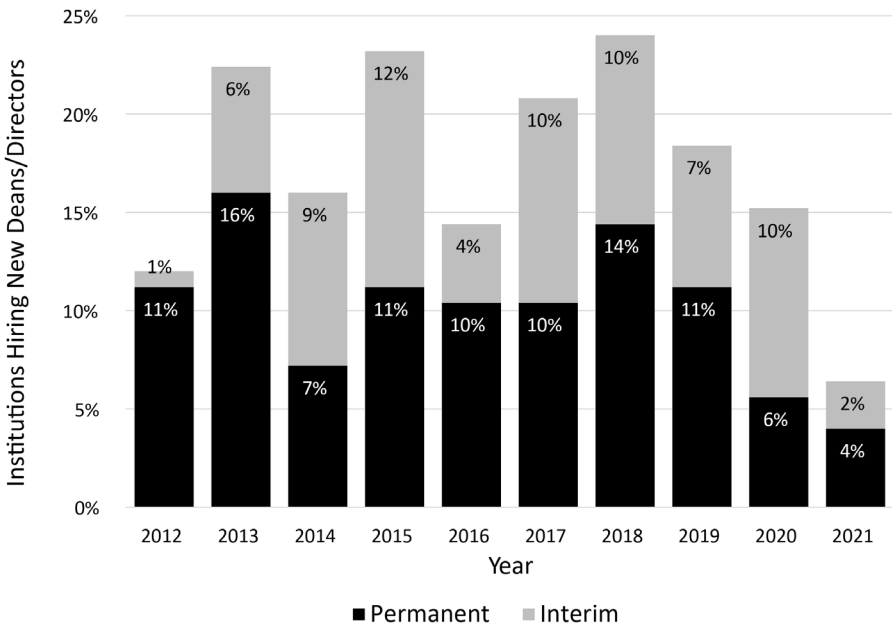


Figure 1.3

New hires among deans/directors of 125 ARL institutions between 2012 and April 2021.

Importantly, the instability of senior leadership reflected in this ARL data is not restricted to the director level. For every interim or newly hired leader, a downstream effect of instability is created at the level of AUL and department heads, as those ranks are raided in the attempt to fill the director-level roles. In my own experience, I served as an interim administrator for most of three years as a result of three associate deans in my institution being tapped for either permanent or interim roles as deans, necessitating an all-interim crew of associate deans at my institution for some time, which generated multiple consequent interim roles at department heads for the same window. Absent the succession planning that the field needed but largely failed to implement in the 2000s, this kind of interim leadership serves as professional, hands-on preparation for future leaders.

Library personnel who are distant from the interim role are still profoundly affected by interim leadership. Interim appointments and new permanent appointments are both times of stress and anxiety at every level of staffing in libraries.²⁵ In addition to the fear and anxiety attached to uncertainty related to senior leadership transition, organizations with interim leadership often are required to shift workloads to cover open roles or responsibilities left unfilled. Shifting responsibilities, or even hiring temporary staff to complete them, create a burden of training. It is important for organizations to clearly understand that

an interim senior leadership position influences the entire organization in the same way that a permanent one does, but with the addition of structural instability that challenges the institution in ways that are different from a permanent leader.

While data are not available for similar turnover and interim statistics at smaller academic libraries or special libraries, the overall demographic data suggest that this trend of dramatic turnover among leadership is widespread in the field as a whole. It is certainly the case that the leaders of smaller institutions are frequently chosen to lead the ARL institutions described in the data above, creating the same gaps at those institutions that are evidenced at the ARLs.

The Never-Ending Dean Search

Information on how long successful recruitment takes for library leaders is difficult to find and obviously would vary widely depending on the context of a particular institution. Yet, what little information is available certainly suggests that the search for a dean is time-consuming, requiring “several months to a year or more.”²⁶ Wilder’s analysis of hiring and staffing indicates that “administration” and “director” are two of seven areas in which hiring outpaces the total population.²⁷ This problem is especially acute for these roles, which almost universally require substantial experience that, by necessity, takes both time and opportunity to build. Anecdotal observation from the many dean searches that have been happening in the past several years suggests that it’s common to have searches that require more than a year to proceed from start to finish; it is also common for the first search attempt to fail, especially in such a tight market, and to have to conduct the search a second time.

For most libraries, simply leaving a senior leadership role empty while searching for it isn’t realistic or feasible, given the extended timelines required for hiring. Additionally, it is common to wait to even begin a search until a position is empty. Many organizations, such as federal agencies and many public universities, have strict restrictions against posting positions until they are empty, necessitating gaps in coverage and making succession planning even more challenging. These structural constraints in the industry as a whole make interim leadership even more common as a strategy during leadership turnover. While it may not be realistic—or necessarily even wise—to conduct these processes more quickly, the combination of slow hiring processes and high turnover rates results in even more interim leaders active in the field.

The Unexpected Interim

Certainly, some librarians see themselves, from the start of their careers, as future high-level leaders. Memorably for me, I recall a course in my first semester of my

LIS program in 1999 in which the professor asked three questions: “Who intends to go into library leadership? Who does not expect to go into library leadership? Who would rather change careers than go into leadership?” It was quite noticeable that very few people (almost all of them men) raised their hands after the first question, a smattering after the second, and a large number of hands went up after the third. I took several lessons away from this small exercise, and one of them was that many library school students do not aspire to become leaders, at least at the time they are entering the field. And yet, many of them do eventually accept those responsibilities. Decisions to accept leadership roles that one did not intend to pursue may simply reflect a change of heart, a sense of obligation, or an awakening of an interest one didn’t recognize before. Yet because leadership is not always a career plan from the start, it is also likely that these leaders may not have been preparing themselves for leadership roles before they find themselves in one. This is especially true in an interim role, which often comes up with little notice or time to prepare. The chapters in this book provide scope for interim leaders to reflect and prepare for a role they may not have anticipated until they were in it.

Conclusion

Demographics, retirements, and search timelines, in addition to the already-scant executive onboarding, all point to the continued need for interim leaders. The data point very clearly toward tremendous upheaval at senior leadership levels in libraries. Even for permanent leaders, executive onboarding and transition planning are necessities that are often overlooked or neglected. Senior leadership turnover impacts everyone in the organization no matter their role or their professional proximity to the leader. Turnover is natural, inevitable, and often very positive but unavoidably stressful for the organization. Handling turnover better and more thoughtfully is to the advantage of the whole organization, not just the individuals directly involved. Since interim leadership is a commonly used strategy for gaps between permanent leaders—gaps that are sometimes multiple years—organizations and individuals considering interim positions would be wise to think carefully about how to set up interim leaders for success.

Endnotes

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