

Age Demographics and the Organizational Dilemma Facing Academic Libraries

David W. Lewis
January 2016



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Introduction

Academic libraries are, because of the age demographics of the librarian workforce, facing an organizational dilemma. Stated most simply the dilemma is:

Academic libraries need to exploit new technologies using new service strategies to be effective. They will need to do so with a librarian labor force that consists of a large number of baby boomers many of whom will remain in the workforce for at least another decade. At the same time millennium librarians, who will replace the baby boomers, need to be attracted and provided an environment that will allow them to develop and grow, and that will productively use their skills and expertise. It will be important that both groups be productive and make contributions, but creating an organization with a structure and culture to do both will be difficult because in many cases aspirations and needs of the two groups will differ and be at cross purposes.

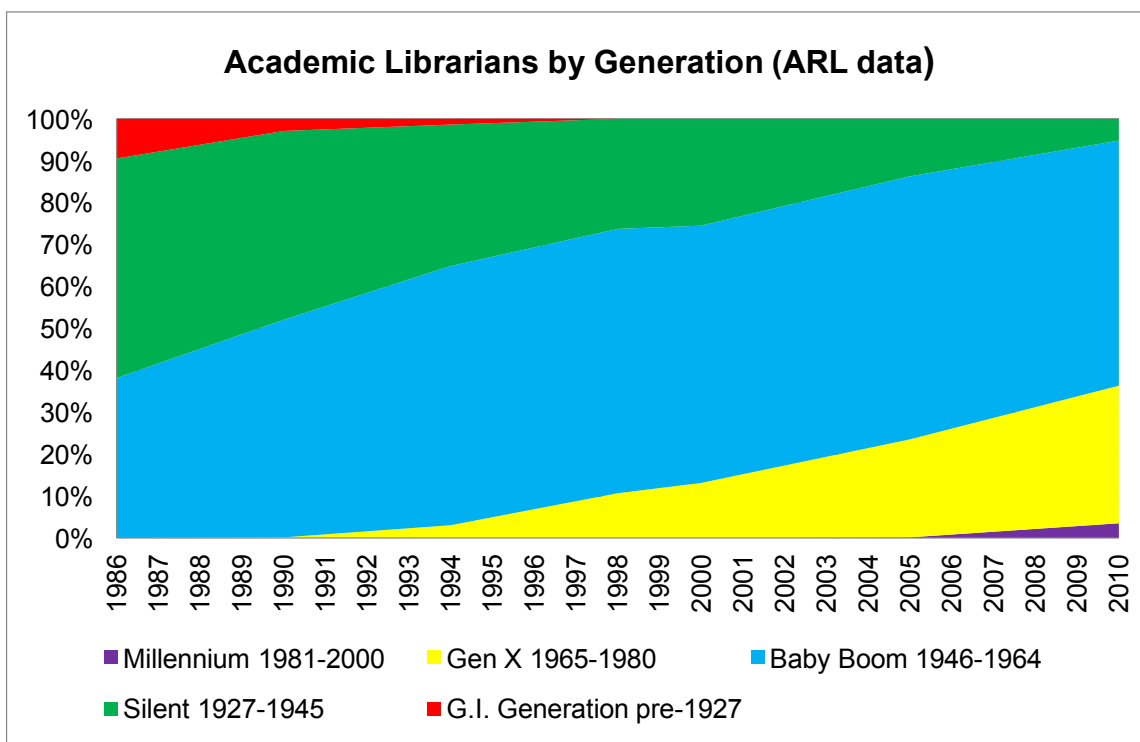
These two imperatives, keeping baby boomer librarians productive and providing millennium librarians opportunities to grow and develop can be accomplished simultaneously, but not without creatively thinking about the libraries organizational structure and attention to its culture. This paper will layout the problem and suggest the issues that need to be considered.

Academic Library Age Demographics

In dealing with this dilemma, we need first to establish the age demographics of the academic library profession. The best source for this data comes from Stanley J. Wilder who has been studying and writing about the demographics of academic librarians for twenty years, though to be precise he is generally looking at librarians working in ARL libraries. He conducted a series of studies for the Association of Research Libraries

that are the source of the data that will be used here to document the age demographics in academic libraries.¹ From Wilder's data a picture of the age demographics for 1986 to 2010 can be constructed. The data is presented as percentage of the total ARL librarians in each of the generations, from the G.I. generation to the Millennium generation. We will assume the ARL data is reflective of the academic library profession generally. Wilder looks at U.S. Census *Current Population Survey* data that indicates that this is a reasonable assumption to make. The data is shown in the table and the chart below.

Academic Librarians by Generation (ARL data)							
	1986	1990	1994	1998	2000	2005	2010
G.I. Generation pre-1927	9.4%	2.8%	1.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Silent 1927-1945	52.4%	45.2%	33.7%	26.2%	25.5%	13.7%	5.1%
Baby Boom 1946-1964	38.2%	52.0%	62.0%	63.2%	61.4%	62.7%	58.6%
Gen X 1965-1980	0.0%	0.1%	3.0%	10.7%	13.1%	23.4%	32.8%
Millennium 1981-2000	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	3.6%

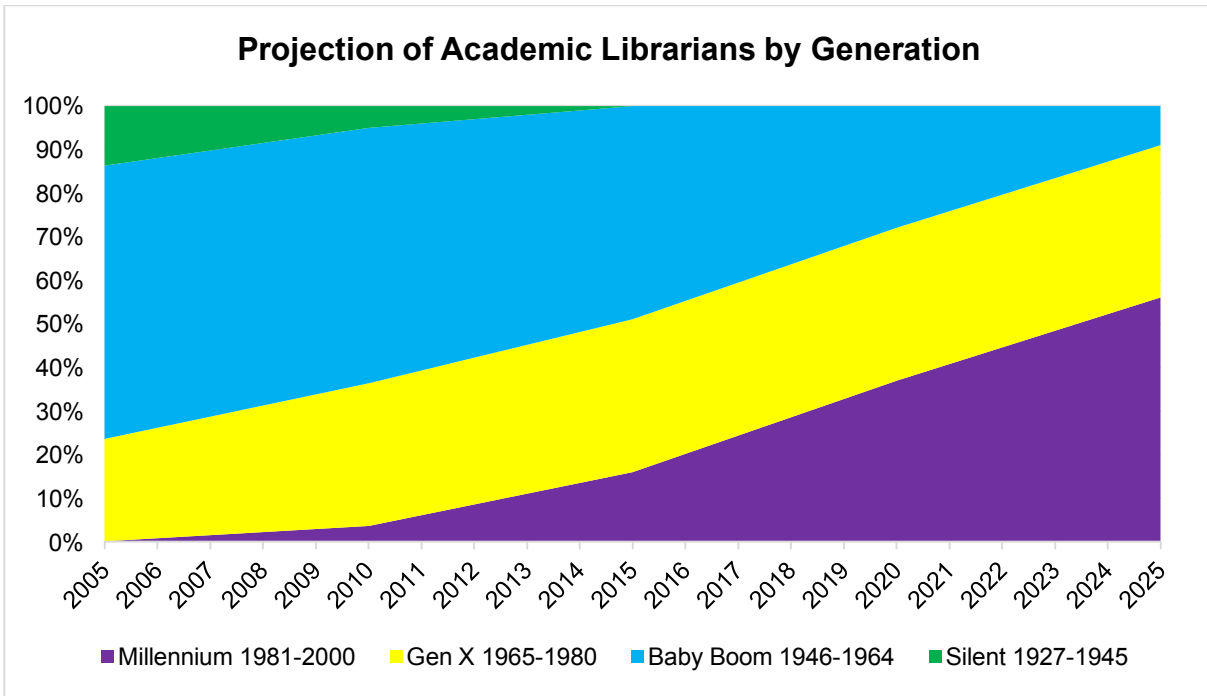


There are several points about this data that are worth making. First, the baby boomer generation of librarians is, and always has been, large. In 1990 when the first Gen X librarians entered the workforce 50% of academic librarians were baby boomers. By

1994 baby boomer librarians made up over 60% of the academic librarian workforce and maintained this percentage for the next 15 years. Second, while the Gen X generation is five years shorter than either the baby boomers or the millennium generation, it is still notably smaller than the baby boomer generation as a portion of the librarian workforce. In 2005, when the first millennium generation librarians arrived on the scene, Gen X librarians made up less than 25% of academic librarian workforce. Like baby boomers, the Gen Xers increased their percentage of the workforce in the first years after the next generation entered the workforce, and for Gen Xers this increase was, as it was for baby boomers, about 10% increase in their portion of the library workforce. In both cases this increase is likely the result of individuals making mid life career shifts into librarianship. It is worth noting that the total number of academic librarians declined slightly during the period based on Wilder's data. If you use National Center for Educational Statistic (NCES) data, the number of librarians employed in academic libraries increased 7.2%.²

If we make a projection of the generational breakdown of academic librarians for the next decade based on the data presented above and assume the Gen Xers maintain their percentage of the workforce and the baby boomers percentage declines as they reach retirement, assuming half retire at 65 and the remaining half by 70,³ and the remaining percentage is taken up by the millennium generation, the result is show in the chart and graph below. Note that the 2000 and 2005 figures are based on Wilder's data and the 2015, 2020 and 2025 figures are projections.

Projection of Academic Librarians by Generation					
	2005	2010	2015	2020	2025
Silent 1927-1945	13.7%	5.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Baby Boom 1946-1964	62.7%	58.6%	49.0%	28.0%	9.0%
Gen X 1965-1980	23.4%	32.8%	35.0%	35.0%	35.0%
Millennium 1981-2000	0.2%	3.6%	16.0%	37.0%	56.0%



Assuming this projection is approximately correct, there are two things worth noting. First, in 2025 we could expect that as much as 10% of the academic library workforce could still be baby boomers. Second, the millennium generation will need to supply over 55% of the library workforce in 2025 when the next generation, born after 2000, begins entering the workforce.

Characterizations of the Generations

In considering the characteristics of generations we need to look both at the characteristics that define the group based on when they were born and how their experience, both in the world and in libraries, shaped them. All of this will have an impact on their goals and aspirations.

Baby Boomer Generation (born 1946 to 1964)

It is useful to recall that baby boomer librarians began their careers, beginning as early as 1970, when catalogs had cards and managing large paper collections and finding answers to even simple questions required expert knowledge. Baby boomer librarians have successfully lived through huge changes in library technology, but in the process many of the skills and expertise that defined them as professionals no longer matter. Throughout their careers baby boomer librarians have adapted by learning new skills and transitioning to new roles, but the motivation to take on these tasks is likely to diminish as retirement nears. Baby boomers are also likely to be settled in their personal and work lives. The positions they currently occupy are ones they have probably had for some time and they will, for most part, be the ones they will keep

until retirement. In most case these librarians will possess a deep understanding of the institutions they serve and are likely to have rich relationships across campus. Because baby boomers entered the profession at a time when higher education was expanding they often established themselves in leadership positions at what would now be seen as a young age. Combined with the size of this cohort, this often limited leadership opportunities for the cohorts that followed.

Characteristics generally attributed the baby boomer generation, sometimes called the “me” generation, are that they are workaholics with little work-life balance, who value fulfillment and question authority. They tend to be consensual and collegial, communicate in person and favor meetings. Monetary rewards and titles matter to them. Baby boomers can view those who follow them as lazy, disloyal, and unwilling to pay their dues. They have not, in many cases, saved for retirement as they should have, and this may mean having to stay in the workforce longer for financial reasons.

Generation X (born 1965 to 1980)

Generation Xers, sometimes called the “lack-key” generation, began entering the library workforce in 1990. Card catalogs were nearly all gone and cataloging was transitioning form a professional to a para-professional responsibility. The internet was being used and the web would shortly be invented. CD-ROM databases on stand alone computers were common. The reference desk was busy and bibliographic instruction was a standard part of public service librarians’ jobs. Higher education was no longer expanding. Because of the flattening of library organizations and the large baby boomer cohort, Gen X librarians did not generally have opportunities to move into leadership positions until mid career.

Characteristics generally attributed to Gen Xers are that they are self-reliant, but want structure and direction. They like to know how they are doing so feedback is valued. Their communication style is direct and immediate. Achieving work-life balance is important to them. They often view baby boomers as being stodgy and resistant to change.

Millennium Generation (born 1981 to 2000)

The millennial generation has only really entered the workplace in the past five to seven years and because of the recession opportunities have been somewhat limited. They have grown up with networked, mobile, and social technologies. In libraries only a few will ever work at an active reference desk as most reference work will be remote and mediate through digital technology. Wikipedia and Google will for them always have been the important information tools. Instruction still matters, but it is not focused on teaching how to use the library, rather it is about teach how to use information. It is likely that early in their careers leadership opportunities will be limited, but once baby boomers begin retiring in large numbers, because of the relatively small size of the Gen X cohort, they will have many opportunities in their mid 30s. Many will carry significant student debt that may make starting library salaries an issue in recruiting talent.

Characteristics generally attributed to the millennium generation are that they have been coddled, but that they are confident and social. They have grown up in a multicultural world and tend to be socially conscious and tolerant. They are goal oriented, participatory, and entrepreneurial. It matters to them that they do interesting and meaningful work with other bright and creative people in organizations that treat them and others with respect. Work-life balance matters to them, but the two parts of their lives are often hard to differentiate as they are always connected to both.

The Dilemma

The situation academic libraries find themselves in today is this:

1. Upwards of 50% of their staff are baby boomers who are, for the most part, in the jobs they will have until they retire. Five years from now, in 2020, baby boomers could still be 30% of a libraries workforce and by 2025 it could still be as high as 10%. The best of the group will work continue to make contributions, adapt to new technologies and service strategies, and share with younger peers. They will have knowledge of the campus and organizational history and knowledge, but they will be increasingly behind the technological curve. Others in this group will be very good at doing jobs that no longer need doing. Some this group will be annoyed that the world has changed and that the work that once defined them as professionals is no longer valued. In the very worst cases they will be bitter complainers who have to potential to poison the workplace. It will be difficult for this group to recognize that because of the changes in libraries the experience of those who follow them will inevitably be different from their experience.
2. The smaller Gen X cohort will need to fill the leadership positions now occupied by the retiring baby boomers. There will be challenges in finding the number of leaders required for a number of reasons. First, Gen X cohort is relatively small. Second, leadership opportunities have generally come late to them so they may not have seasoning required for senior positions. Finally, they will often be settled in their personal lives and not be able or willing to relocate to move into leadership positions. Various leadership development programs will help, but are unlikely to fully solve this problem. As baby boomers leave leadership positions replacing them will be a challenge, though for Gen Xers able to move into leadership, there will be many opportunities.
3. The millennium generation that is entering the library workforce now will have opportunities, however they will come in the near, not the immediate term. When most of the baby boomers are gone the field will be wide open, but until then opportunities for leadership or even influence may be limited. Given the characteristics of this generation these early career constraints might be discouraging enough for them to pursue opportunities in other libraries or non-library organizations. Being good soldiers and waiting for their turn to come

around is not what this generation is about. This will mean that libraries could easily find themselves unable to attract and retain the talent they will need five to seven years from now. It could also lead to discontent and conflict in the library.

This creates the dilemma. The current organizational structures were built by the baby boomers and they work for them. Unfortunately, in many cases the baby boomers can no longer keep pace with the technology and their skills and expertise are less important than the once were. They are used to working independently when the work is increasingly closely collaborative. Keeping this group productive and positive will require using them in a way that they appreciate. The Gen X cohort will be too small to fill all the positions now held by the baby boomers. The millennium generation to whom many of these positions will fall could easily find their initial experience with libraries frustrating as they will not have the ability to shape their work or to work in the free-wheeling, participatory and collaborative ways that they find most fulfilling. Or, to put it less delicately, how do you get the baby boomers out of the way of the millennials and keep everyone happy and productive.

The dilemma is that in trying to fix one part of the problem you are likely to exacerbate another part. Most critically, is the need to create meaningful work for the baby boomers at the ends of their careers while at the same time provide opportunities for the millennium librarians to have the kinds of work and influence that will allow them to grow and develop into the librarians and library leaders that will be needed five to ten years from now, and will be needed in large numbers.

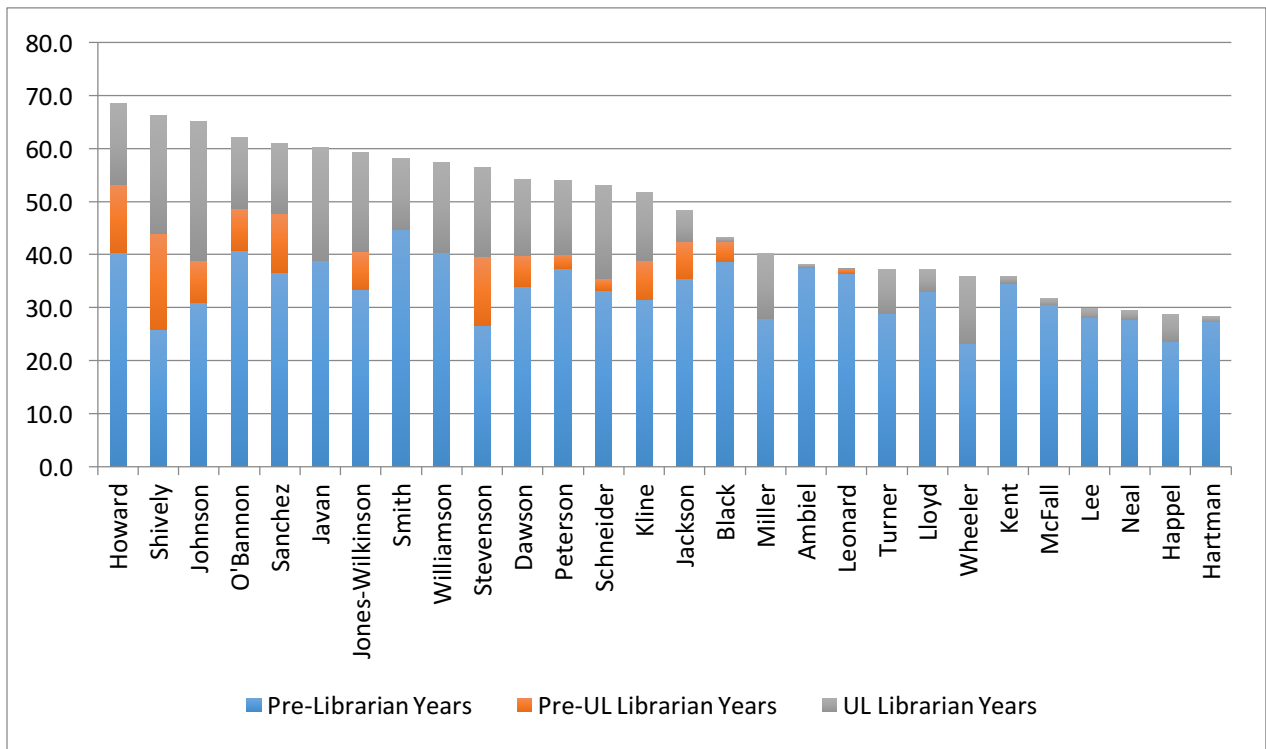
Strategies

This is a hard problem and there is probably not one magic bullet that will solve it. Rather, it is likely that a variety of strategies need to be deployed. These might include:

1. Understand the age demographics of the library. This is not really that difficult. It is simply a matter of keeping track. With the data organized it is easy to see where the library is and where it needs to respond. Examples of how this might look are shown in the chart and graph below. Note that in the chart the blue area is baby boomers; the rust area is Gen Xers, and the green area are millennials.

Last name	Date of Birth	Age	Start Date	Tenured	Rank	Women	Minority	Years at Library	Retirement Year (at 65)
Howard	03/28/47	68.7	07/01/00	1	Associate	1	0	15.4	2011.3
Shively	09/14/49	66.2	08/16/93	1	Librarian	0	0	22.3	2013.8
Johnson	10/01/50	65.2	09/18/89	1	Associate	0	0	26.2	2014.8
O'Bannon	09/21/53	62.2	06/01/02	1	Associate	1	0	13.5	2017.8
Sanchez	10/21/54	61.1	07/08/02	1	Associate	0	1	13.4	2018.9
Javan	09/12/55	60.2	07/01/94	1	Associate	1	0	21.4	2019.8
Jones-Wilkinson	07/15/56	59.4	01/15/97	1	Associate	0	0	18.9	2020.6

Smith	10/21/57	58.1	07/01/02	1	Librarian	1	0	13.4	2021.9
Williamson	06/25/58	57.4	10/26/98	1	Associate	0	0	17.1	2022.6
Stevenson	05/09/59	56.6	12/01/98	1	Librarian	1	0	17.0	2023.4
Dawson	08/24/61	54.3	06/25/01	1	Associate	0	0	14.4	2025.7
Peterson	09/29/61	54.2	10/15/01	1	Associate	0	0	14.1	2025.8
Schneider	10/02/62	53.2	03/01/98	1	Assistant	0	0	17.8	2026.8
Kline	03/04/64	51.7	03/02/03	0	Associate	1	0	12.8	2028.3
Jackson	08/05/67	48.3	01/15/10	0	Assistant	1	0	5.9	2031.7
Black	07/02/72	43.4	01/01/15	0	Assistant	1	0	0.9	2036.6
Miller	06/26/75	40.4	06/02/03	1	Associate	1	0	12.5	2039.6
Ambiel	08/21/77	38.3	05/01/15	0	Associate	0	0	0.6	2041.7
Leonard	03/25/78	37.7	09/01/15	0	Assistant	1	0	0.2	2042.3
Turner	07/27/78	37.3	07/01/07	1	Associate	1	0	8.4	2042.7
Lloyd	09/02/78	37.2	10/01/11	0	Assistant	1	0	4.2	2042.8
Wheeler	11/15/79	36.0	01/13/03	0	Assistant	0	0	12.9	2044.0
Kent	11/25/79	36.0	08/01/14	0	Assistant	1	0	1.3	2044.0
McFall	02/10/84	31.8	08/01/14	0	Assistant	1	1	1.3	2048.2
Lee	12/02/85	30.0	01/06/14	0	Assistant	1	1	1.9	2050.0
Neal	04/02/86	29.7	01/06/14	0	Assistant	0	0	1.9	2050.3
Happel	12/01/86	29.0	07/05/10	0	Assistant	0	1	5.4	2051.0
Hartman	06/15/87	28.5	10/13/14	0	Assistant	1	0	1.1	2051.5
Total				15		16	4	296.3	
Average		46.6		53.6%		57.1%	14.3%	10.6	



2. Once the situation is made visible, it is important for the baby boomer library leaders to recognize that age diversity in the organization is important to pursue. The first reason is so that when all of the baby boomers finally do retire, it would be best if there were Gen Xers and millennials with some experience in the organization ready to take their place. Second, as research has shown, diversity makes an organization more innovative and successful. This is in no way to suggest that an organization should, or needs to, discriminate on the basis of age when hiring. Rather, at a policy level, which positions to fill, how to describe them, and how requirements are structured can increase the age diversity in the organization. It may also be the case that an explicit organizational conversation about this issue will lead baby boomers to consider how to position the organization they will leave behind so that it can be most effective after they are gone.
3. Filling leadership positions internally when they become available and hiring at the entry level. This has the advantage of providing leadership opportunities to librarians inside the organization. Many of these will be baby boomer or Gen X librarians who are place bound and might not otherwise have had this kind of an opportunity. They can develop in new ways that require developing management, but not technical, expertise. It also means that the library will have the opportunity to hire librarians with new skills and expertise. These librarians will likely be Gen Xers or millennials and a critical mass of these cohorts will provide a counter to the baby boomer heavy organization and create space for younger librarians. The downside to this approach is that if there is not talent in the organization, it may not get the quality leadership from existing staff. This argues for the need to invest in leadership development as part of librarian professional development. Even when compromises are needed, this is probably a good strategy.
4. Use buyouts or early retirement incentives to encourage baby boomers to leave the organization and thus create opportunities for Gen Xers and millennials. A variation on this strategy would be to develop ways for baby boomers to move to part-time work and to transition into retirement over several years. This would free up some resources to hire new staff while continuing to have the contributes of librarians with a career's worth of experience. For the older librarian the work load would be reduced and some income would be maintained, which in many case might be a worth-while tradeoff.
5. One way to create leadership opportunities is to reorganize. For example, if the library currently has three or four associate directors who report to the director, it might be reorganized so that there are six to eight reports to the director, or maybe a deputy director. This would engage more people in leadership roles, but these roles would be less demanding and provide opportunities for those in the positons to develop. Leadership failures would have less consequence. It may be that the flatness of the organization should be seem as primarily responding to the level of leadership available to the organization. If the library

has a sufficient number of strong leaders who can take on broad responsibilities, then concentrating leadership with this group makes sense. If this is not the case, then spreading the leadership amount more people, but with smaller scope, might make sense.

6. Create a parallel organization. This is the strategy present by John P. Kotter in his 2012 *Harvard Business Review* article.⁴ Kotter is looking at how organizations respond to turbulence and disruption and why they so often fail to do so. As he says, “The examples always play out the same way: An organization that’s facing a real threat or eyeing a new opportunity tries—and fails—to cram through some sort of major transformation using a change process that worked in the past. But the old ways of setting and implementing strategy are failing us.”⁵ What Kotter proposes is a complementary network structure that sits alongside the hierarchy. The network consists groups are populated with people drawn from across the organization who have an interest in work of the problem or issue. These groups might be self-organizing and that are coordinated by a central group that Kotter calls the “guiding coalition”. Kotter argues that these groups, because they are outside of the hierarchy can move more quickly and imaginatively than the hierarchy and thus the organization is more adaptive and ultimately successful. Importantly the hierarchy remains in place to do what it does well, manage operations. Kotter suggest that the network structure does several things that are important in addressing the dilemma academic libraries face. The network groups can create many change agents, not just the usual few. It creates a want-to and a get-to, not just a have-to mind-set. It harnesses passion and allows for more leadership, not just more management. Kotter’s mantra is, “two systems, one organization.” The gross application of Kotter’s structure to our dilemma would be that the baby boomers maintain the hierarchy; the millennials populate the network, and the Gen Xers pick the role that suites them best. With luck, everyone is happy and productive.
7. The market for librarians will likely become intense as large numbers of baby boomers retire. Filling librarian positions with non-traditional candidates may then become a useful strategy. James G. Neal uses the term “feral” librarians meaning that these non-MLS professionals were raised without the standard library training. They were, as Neal puts it “raised by wolves.”⁶ Campuses with graduate graduate students may find this a good strategy as there will be individuals who may wish to stay on the campus and who are not otherwise able to faculty positions. Shifting positions from librarians to other types of professional may be difficult as in most cases, for example technologists, fund raiser, etc., the salaries required are often more, and sometimes significantly more, than those of librarians.
8. Reduce professional positions. It may be possible to increase the productivity of librarians by providing support for them by hiring non-professional staff to assist with simpler tasks. This could be full-time staff or student workers. The increased productivity would them allow fewer librarians to accomplish the same

work as was being doing before. If finding a sufficient number of talented professionals become a challenge, this might be a good option.

There are likely other strategies but approaches that do not take into account the demographic realities are likely to create conflict and they are unlikely to achieve the results they are aiming for.

Other Concerns

It is not clear that the pipeline for new librarians is sufficient to provide the workforce that will be required as the baby boomer cohort retires. Concerns with the ability of library school programs to produce a sufficient quantity of qualified and capable graduates are long standing, and they continue. As Deanna Marcum has recently put it:

The enormous changes occurring in research libraries are not matched by the pace of change in library program curricula. Required courses have often failed to keep up with changing practices and needs.... Even though the norm among university libraries is to require applicants for their positions to hold a master's degree in library and information sciences, we have the unenviable logical dilemma of disrespecting the professional schools that produce our colleagues and while also requiring that new professionals must have the same training we received.⁷

The market for talent will move from a buyer's market to a seller's market. There will be a need to compete for talented entry level librarians that will push starting salaries higher. This in turn will likely lead to salary compression that will risk alienating the Gen X librarians who are established in the organization. Given the limited capacity most libraries have increase salaries this could develop into a significant concern.

Final Note on Organizational Culture

In an Op-Ed piece in the *New York Times* of December 20, 2015 Adam Grant asks the question, "Which Company Is Right for You?" The advice he gives is to consider the organization's culture by listening to the stories told by the people who work there. As he says, "Take a close look at these stories, and you'll see that they deal with three fundamental issues. First is justice: Is this a fair place? Second is security: Is it safe to work here? Third is control: Can I shape my destiny and have influence in this organization?"⁸ These concerns are often cited as issues of importance to millennials, but they are important to everyone. What is going to be different going forward is that for the first time in a long while the market for librarians is a seller's market. Talented librarians who are prepared to move, as younger early career librarians tend to be, will have choices and they exercise them. If the stories told about your library depict a toxic environment, even good salaries and interesting work will not be enough to attract and keep the workforce the library needs. If the library is not fair, safe, and empowering, nothing else will matter.

-
- ¹ Stanley J. Wilder. *The Age Demographics of Academic Librarians: A Profession Apart: A Report Based on Data from the ARL Annual Salary Survey*, (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 1995), Stanley J. Wilder. *Demographic Change in Academic Librarianship*, (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2003), and Stanley J. Wilder. "The Academic Library Workforce in Transition: New Results from the 2010 ARL Demographic Data." (presentation slides, Association of Research Libraries, 2012.), http://www.arl.org/focus-areas/copyright-ip/fair-use/code-of-best-practices/1071-the-academic-library-workforce-in-transition-new-results-from-the-2010-arl-demographic-data#.VAhwNkvj_74
- ² The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reports academic library statistics every two years (though they missed 2002). These reports can be found in the Center's Library Statistics Program section at website at: <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/libraries/>
- ³ This seems a reasonable assumption. A 2014 Gallup poll looked at when baby boomers expected to retire. It found that, "Nearly half (49%) of boomers still working say they don't expect to retire until they are 66 or older, including one in 10 who predict they will never retire." See: Jim Harter and Sangeeta Agrawal, "Many Baby Boomers Reluctant to Retire," Gallup, January 20, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/166952/baby-boomers-reluctant-retire.aspx>
- ⁴ John P. Kotter, "ACCELERATE!" *Harvard Business Review* 90(11):44-58 November 2012 <https://hbr.org/2012/11/accelerate>
- ⁵ John P. Kotter, "ACCELERATE!" *Harvard Business Review* 90(11):46 November 2012 <https://hbr.org/2012/11/accelerate>
- ⁶ James G. Neal. "Raised by Wolves." *Library Journal* 131 no. 3 (February 15, 2006):42, <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2006/02/academic-libraries/raised-by-wolves/>
- ⁷ Deanna Marcum, *Educating the Research Librarian: Are We Falling Short?* Ithaca S+R Issue Brief, May 7, 2015, pages 4-5 <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/publications/educating-the-research-librarian-are-we-falling-short/>
- ⁸ Adam Grant, "Which Company Is Right for You?" *New York Times Sunday Review*, page 7, December 20, 2015 <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/20/opinion/sunday/the-one-question-you-should-ask-about-every-new-job.html>