

Hiring and Staffing Trends in ARL Libraries

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We are who we hire.

As it turns out, we are also **how many we hire**, for **what jobs**, with **what skills, credentials, and experience**.

Hiring decisions are palpable expressions of our evolving values, and in 2015 ARL's demographic data series reflected a profession in a state of flux unlike any since the data series began in 1986.¹ In some cases, change is consistent with longstanding trends, but some changes in the ARL data are recent, surprising, even counterintuitive. Taken as a whole, these changes in hiring amount to an epochal shift in the nature of library work, in what it means to be a library professional, and in the value that research libraries propose to contribute to society.

The most dramatic change relates to the rate at which ARL libraries are hiring professionals, which at first glance appears not to be undergoing epochal change at all, but rather to be simply low, in its usual way. To compare hiring rates across years, we look to the number of new hires as a percentage of the overall population. Figure 1 illustrates this approach, and suggests that in 2015, hiring was slightly lower than in past years, but not exceptionally so.

The problem with this analysis is that it assumes reasonable stability in the age profile of the population as a whole. The delayed retirements described in installment 1 of this series² are one indication that ARL's population is anything but stable as regards to age.

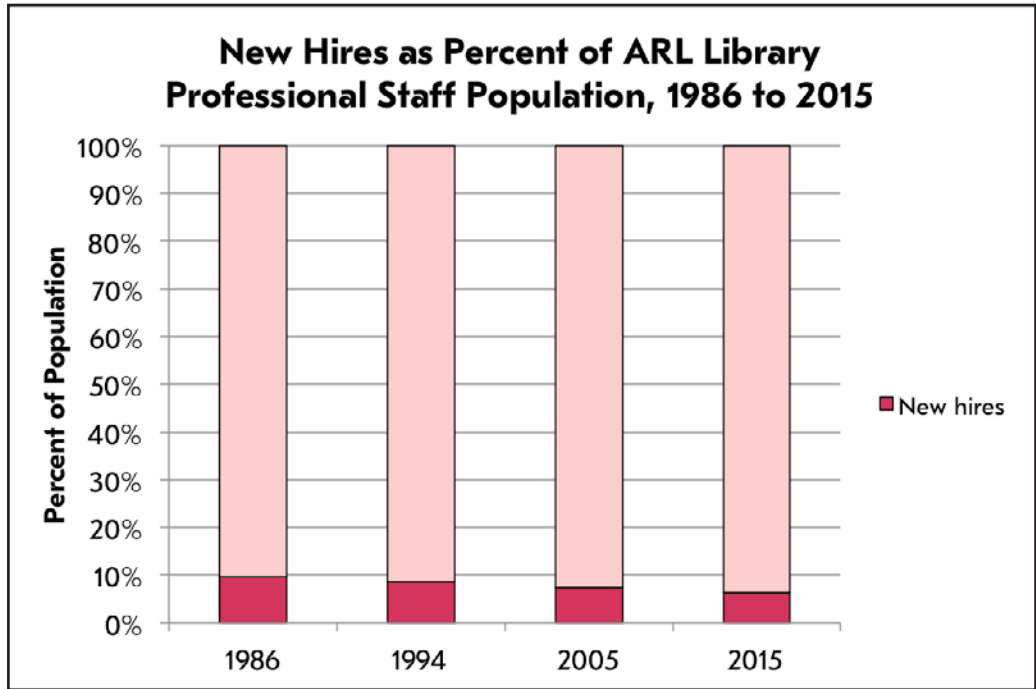


Figure 1

Figure 2 illustrates ARL’s underlying hiring problem by presenting the portion of the population aged 60–64 in one data set, alongside the portion in the 65+ cohort in the set four or five years later.

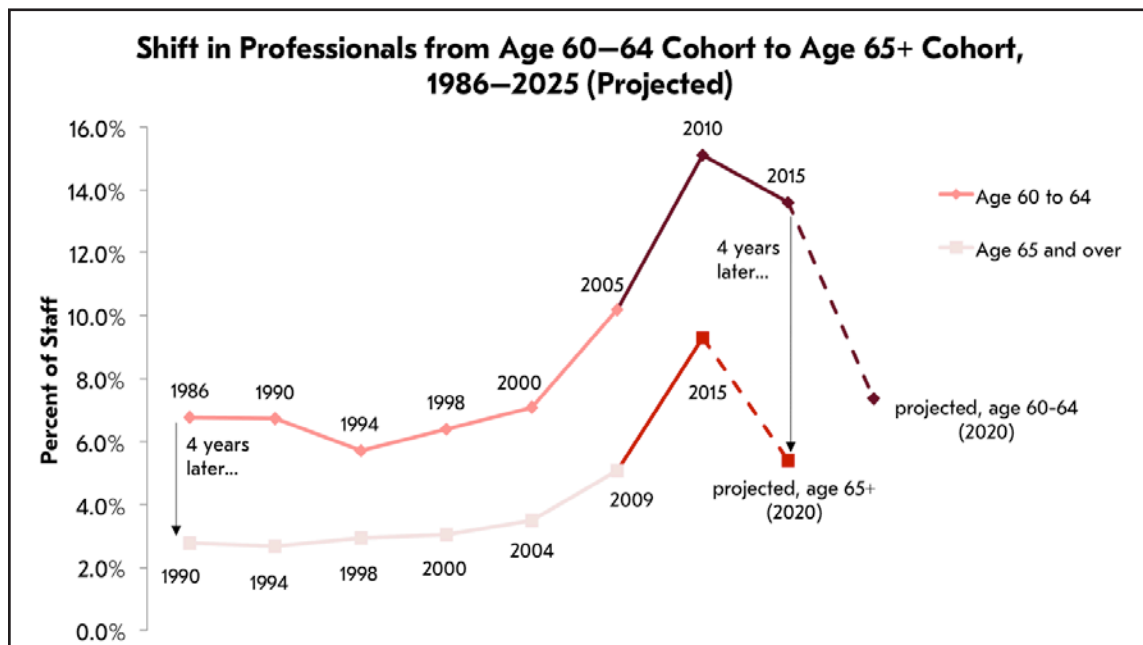


Figure 2

As we'd expect, we see a significant drop as the individuals in the first cohort age into the next, until 2010–2015, the period in which delayed retirements became a factor. The large percentage of individuals aged 65 and over in 2015 is an aberration, and it begs the question as to what will happen to this group in the 2020 data.

This happens to be a question we can answer with reasonable certainty. The key lies in isolating those individuals aged 70 and over across the data sets. Doing so reveals that very few ARL professionals work past age 70, about 1% in every data set since 1986. It is certainly possible that, in 2020, those who were in the 65+ cohort in 2015 might suddenly prove to be the first to work past 70 in large numbers, but this is highly unlikely. The 2020 data will almost certainly reflect the retirement of at least 8% of the ARL population from the 2015 65+ cohort alone, the equivalent of over 800 individuals. (See Figure 3.) For perspective, 8% retirement in this cohort would be 2.5 times the number retiring between 2005 and 2010, and almost 5 times the number retiring between 2000 and 2005.

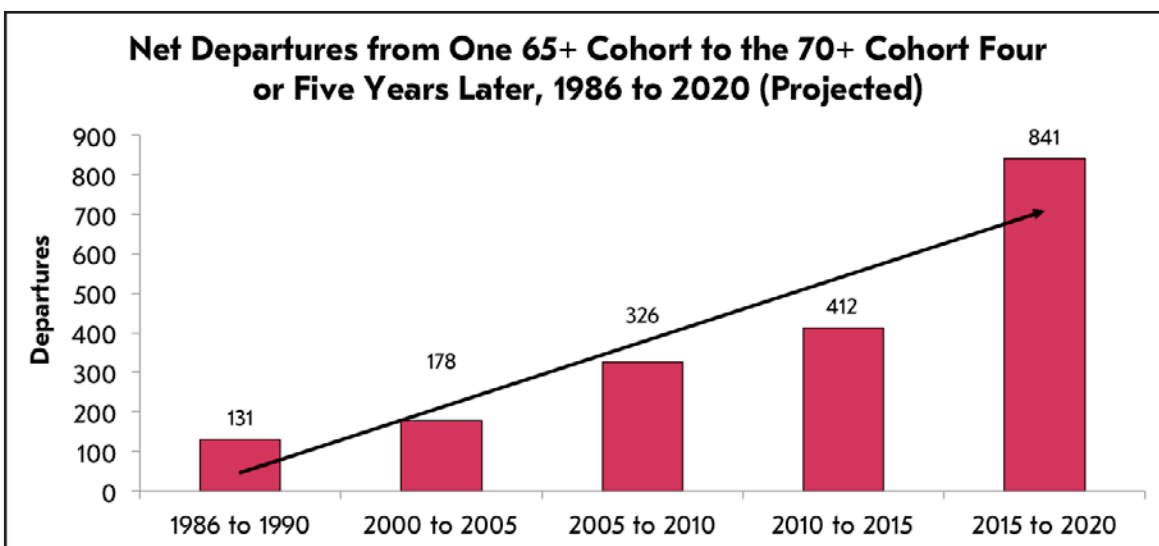


Figure 3

Given the imminent surge of retirements from the oldest age cohort, it is worth asking whether the vacancies that result will be filled on a one-to-one basis. Money for positions is precious and often fraught politically, but here again, the data are clear in support of replacement

hiring of professionals. Collectively, ARL libraries have increased—not decreased—the employment of professionals, even through the recession of 2008. (See Figure 4.) The demographic data don’t speak directly to replacement decisions at the individual level, but in the ARL Statistics, the median number of professionals has grown at a rate of about 1% per year since 1985.³

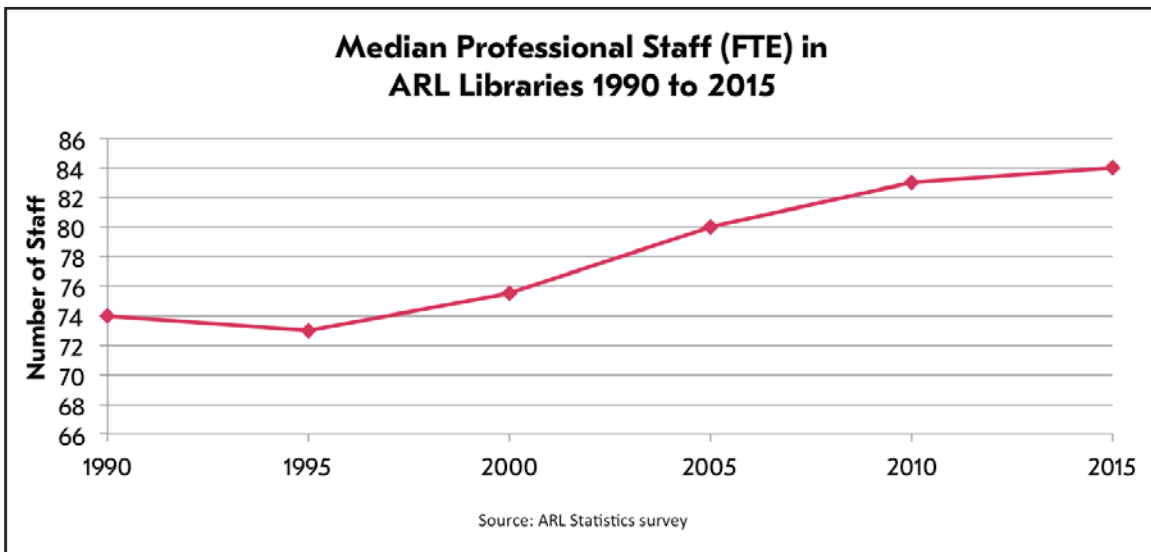


Figure 4

In sum, while hiring was low in 2015, it would not have been were it not for an unexpected surge in delayed retirements. Looking forward, the combination of high numbers of individuals aged 65+, the low likelihood that they will work past 70, and the strong tendency on the part of libraries to fill professional vacancies means that the 2015–2020 period is almost certain to require more hiring than any time since 1985. This is a great time to be looking for a job in an ARL library.

Continued Rise of Nontraditional Professional Jobs

It is one thing for a library to fill vacated professional positions on a one-to-one basis, but quite another for those positions to be refilled in the same jobs that produced the vacancies. Libraries normally use vacant positions to do just that—a vacancy in cataloging, for example, is usually used to recruit another cataloger. But each vacancy is also

an opportunity to address new needs that can help the library adapt to changes on campus and the broader external environment.

New hires are the best indication we have as to current demand for various kinds of professional expertise. In 2015, the ARL Salary Survey included 21 job categories, but hiring is by no means evenly distributed among those categories. Figure 5 compares the six job categories that had the most new hires in 1986 and 2015. Though the top six categories were different in 1986 and 2015, in both years employees in these categories accounted for over 70% of all new hires.

Figure 5 illustrates that tracking job categories across years in the ARL demographic data is inherently messy, as these categories have evolved rapidly in an effort to keep pace with emerging staffing needs. For that matter, most of the changes in job categories have been driven by the explosive growth in nontraditional library professional jobs. I define nontraditional jobs to be those for which the primary expertise requirement lies in fields beyond librarianship, for example computing, financial, legal, human resources, and so on.

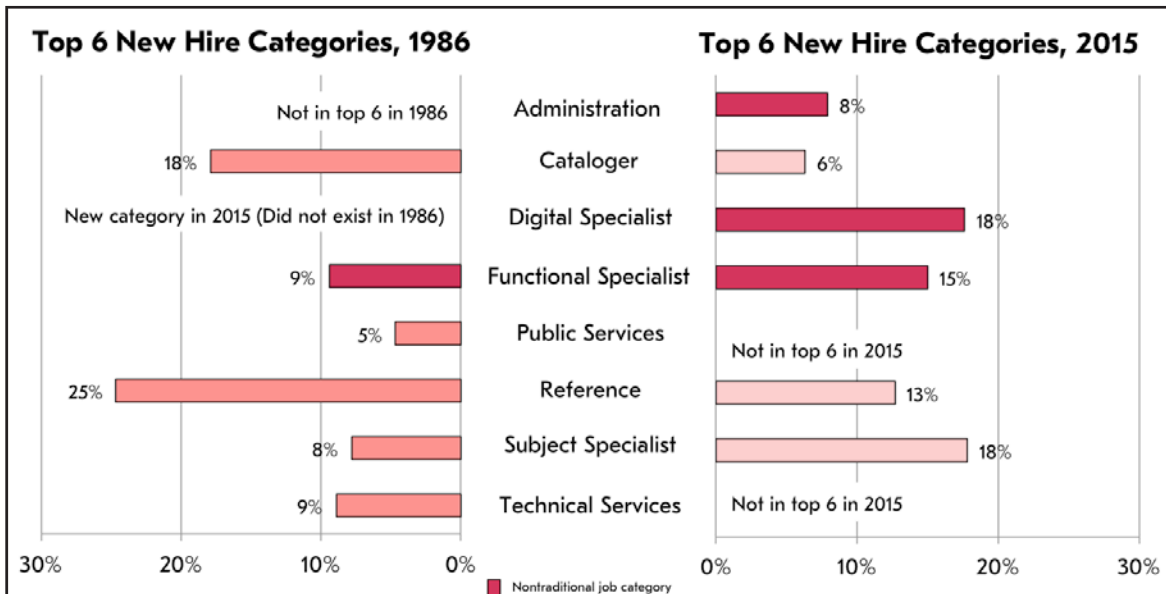


Figure 5

Thus defined, the 1986 list has only one nontraditional position, functional specialist, which accounted for only 9% of new hires that year. The comparable list for 2015 has nontraditional jobs in three of the top six job categories—digital specialist, functional specialist, and administration—comprising 41% of all new hires. Hiring for nontraditionals has grown consistently throughout the years, and in 2015 the data show no sign of this trend abating.

Nontraditionals among 2015 new hires are notable for being more male than traditionals (41% of nontraditional new hires were male vs. 28% of traditional new hires) and they're more likely to have no library degree (40% of nontraditional new hires do not have library degrees vs. only 8% of traditional new hires). It is interesting that while ARL libraries

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have added thousands of nontraditionals since 1986, these hires haven't altered ARL's gender mix, as always about 63% female. The hiring of nontraditionals has had a pronounced impact on credentialing for the profession, however, and has lowered the profile of library education in the process.

The emergence of nontraditional professionals is not an indication that demand for traditional library expertise is likely to disappear anytime soon. For example, we might be concerned about hiring for reference librarians, down from one in four hires in 1986 to just over one in ten in 2015. It is possible, however, that this decline is simply the result of a shift in focus for public service professionals, away from reference desks and towards work better captured by the subject specialist category. The total number of professionals in the reference and subject specialist job categories combined shows virtually no change in hiring priority between 1986 and 2015.

No such combination of job categories, however, can save cataloging from its decline as a hiring priority. If we allow for overlap in the functional duties of catalogers and technical services librarians, for

example, we still find a steep reduction in hiring, from 26% of new hires in 1986, to just 8% in 2015.

Such is the long, steep decline in cataloger hiring that we may be relieved to find that, as of 2015, it appears to have leveled off. Throughout the data series, hiring of catalogers lagged below the percent of catalogers in the larger population, meaning that vacancies in cataloging positions were not being filled with new hires on a one-to-one basis. This changed in 2015, when these two percentages matched exactly.

And yet the future of cataloging feels as tenuous as ever: As Figure 6 attests, 13% of ARL catalogers were aged 65+ in 2015, and, as Figure 8 shows, 30% were aged 60+.

| Job Categories with the Largest Percentage of Employees Aged 65+ in ARL Libraries, 2015 | | | |
|--|----------|-------------------|--|
| | N | Percentage | Number of professionals aged 65+ in 2015 likely to have retired by 2020 |
| Director | 114 | 39% | 44 |
| Head, Serials | 3 | 33% | 1 |
| Head, Law | 72 | 24% | 17 |
| Head, Rare books | 119 | 21% | 24 |
| Head, Acquisitions | 160 | 17% | 26 |
| Head, Medical | 64 | 17% | 10 |
| Head, Cataloging | 183 | 17% | 28 |
| Head, Branch | 385 | 16% | 57 |
| Cataloger | 659 | 13% | 80 |
| Head, Reference | 176 | 13% | 20 |
| Head, Other | 646 | 10% | 61 |
| Head, Circulation | 157 | 10% | 15 |

Figure 6

For the one-to-one replacement in 2015 to continue, unusually high levels of retirements will mean that libraries are likely to have difficulty replacing cataloging expertise in the near term.

Present and Near-Term Demand for Job Categories

The case of cataloging presented above is an illustration of how the demographic data can help estimate current and near-term demand for each of the ARL job categories. The strength of current demand

for job categories can be measured by comparing a job’s percentage of new hires to its percentage of the overall population. For example, if a job’s percent of new hires were significantly lower than its percent of population, we’d conclude that demand for that specialization is weak. Figure 7 presents the 21 job categories from 2015, sorted from high demand to low.

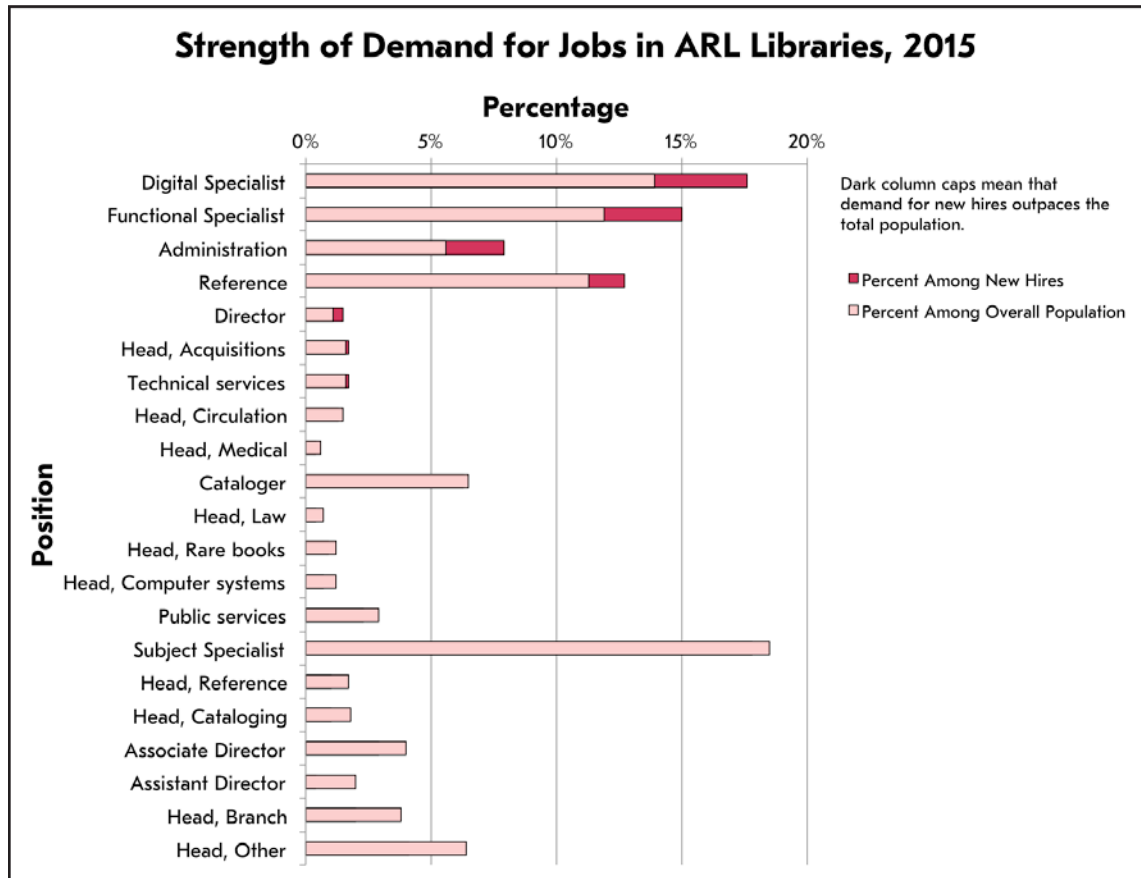


Figure 7

Prospects for near-term demand for each job category can be inferred from the relative concentration of individuals in the retirement-prone 60+ age cohort. Figure 8 presents the jobs with either an unusually high or an unusually low percentage of individuals in the 60+ age cohort.

| Job Categories with the Largest Percentage of Oldest and Youngest Professionals in ARL Libraries, 2015 | | | |
|---|------------------|---|-----------------------|
| Job categories with the Largest Percentage of Professionals Age 60+ | | Job categories with the Largest Percentage of Professionals Under Age 30 | |
| | % Age 60+ | | % Under Age 30 |
| Director | 54.6% | Public services | 8.2% |
| Head, Law | 45.4% | Functional Specialist | 7.1% |
| Head, Medical | 43.4% | Digital Specialist | 7.1% |
| Head, Cataloging | 37.4% | Reference | 6.0% |
| Head, Rare books | 37.3% | Technical services | 5.0% |
| Head, Branch | 34.1% | Subject Specialist | 4.0% |
| Head, Serials | 33.3% | | |
| Associate Director | 32.4% | | |
| Head, Reference | 31.5% | | |
| Head, Acquisitions | 30.9% | | |
| Cataloger | 30.4% | | |

Figure 8

The Special Case of Library Leadership

It is striking that all but one of the job categories in Figure 6 are administrative or managerial. 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. For everyone who aspires to such positions, there will likely never be a better time to apply. As for the profession at large, the impact of the incoming generation of library leaders will be unusually strong and long lasting.

New Hires and the MLS Degree

Positions in the traditional job categories generally require a formal library education, and those hired for these positions are only slightly less likely than in years past to have no library degree. There are serious causes for concern for library education, however. The emergence of significant numbers of nontraditional professionals, 71% of whom have no library credential, has reduced the overall percentage of ARL professionals with a library degree from 92% in 1986 to 83% in 2015. The overall percentage of ARL professionals with a library degree is

likely to decline further over the coming years.

An additional cause for concern relates to compensation, where those with no library degree actually enjoy an advantage. Among 2015 new hires, 59% of those with no library degree were hired for salaries of \$60,000 or higher, compared with 51% of those with a library credential.

Professional Hiring in the Context of Overall Library Staffing

Nearly everything in the preceding analysis concerns ARL professionals in isolation. Professionals certainly play an outsized role in designing and delivering library services, but they accounted for only 39% of the ARL library workforce in 2015. Such is the interdependence of library work that it's not possible to fully understand professional staffing, to say nothing of library staffing generally, without reference to support staff and student assistants.

Analysis of student and support staff proves difficult in practice, however. The paucity of data relating to these groups stands in stark contrast to the richness of that for professionals. Student and support staff are nearly invisible in library data sets generally, although recent initiatives show signs of improvement.⁴

The ARL Statistics data do track student and support staff full-time equivalents (FTE) and expenditures, and the FTE figures provide a vivid illustration of how staffing dynamics among these groups warrant deeper understanding. For example, it is significant that overall library staffing, as measured by median FTE, has been in gradual decline since 1990, and in sharp decline since 2005. (See Figure 9.) Research library work is becoming sharply less labor intensive, and there is little reason to

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expect this trend will reverse itself anytime soon.

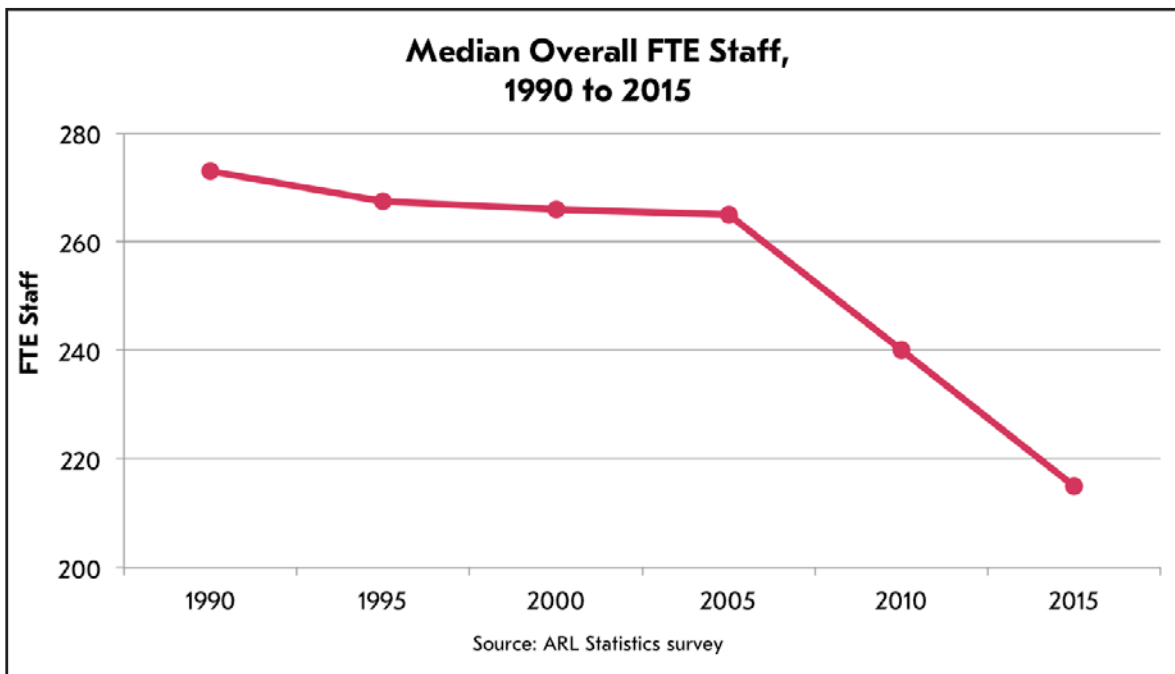


Figure 9

The data on library staff collected by the US Current Population Survey (CPS) appear to reflect this trend as well. The CPS produces annual, unpublished data relating the number, age, and sex of library professionals and support staff. This data is significantly different from the ARL data in that it is based on sampling, not self-report, and includes individuals working in all types of libraries. The CPS data has nonetheless mirrored ARL's as to age for decades, but the estimated number of individuals in both the professional and support staff occupations has been volatile, perhaps not surprising given the small size of the library profession.

So while the ARL data has the number of professionals increasing, the CPS data has it declining precipitously. Another significant difference between the two sets is that professionals outnumber support staff by at least four to one in the CPS data. Whatever these discrepancies may mean for its reliability, it is remarkable that the 2015 CPS data set has the number of individuals in both the professional and support staff occupation categories dropping by about 15% in just one year, reaching

historic lows. (See Figure 10.)

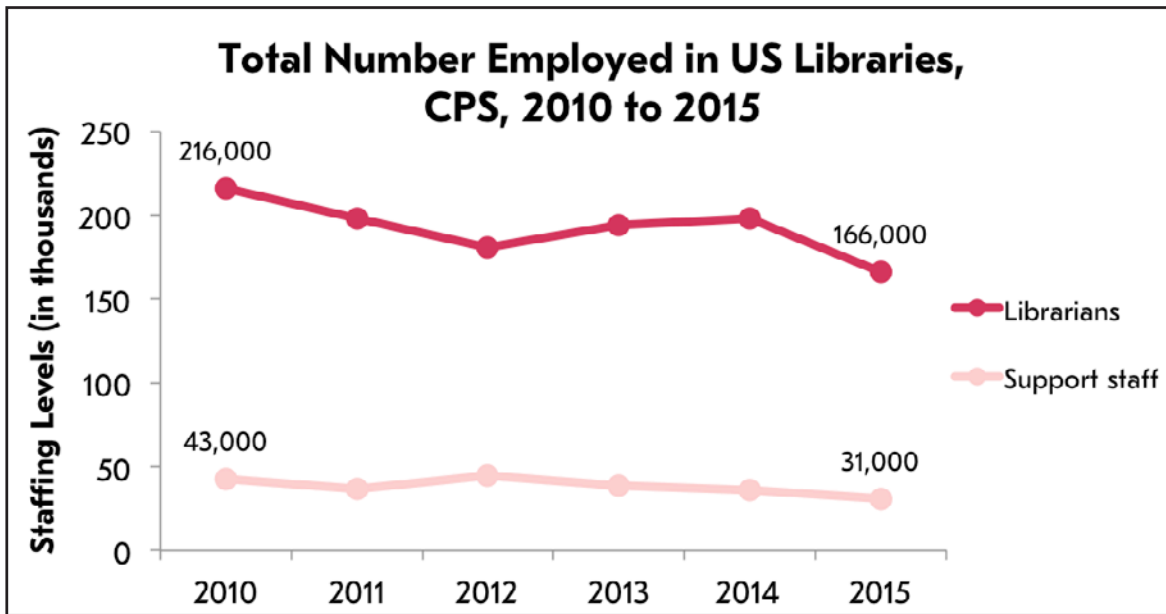


Figure 10

Overall staffing is declining because lower-skill work is disappearing. I wrote about this phenomenon in a short piece based on the 2010 ARL Statistics, but it merits revisiting for having accelerated dramatically since then.⁵ Figure 11 illustrates that the decline in overall median FTE owes entirely to the student and support staff categories.

Median student staffing is down 33% since 2000, with about one-third of that decline occurring in just the 2010–2015 period. The 27% decline among support staff in that period is only slightly less dramatic.

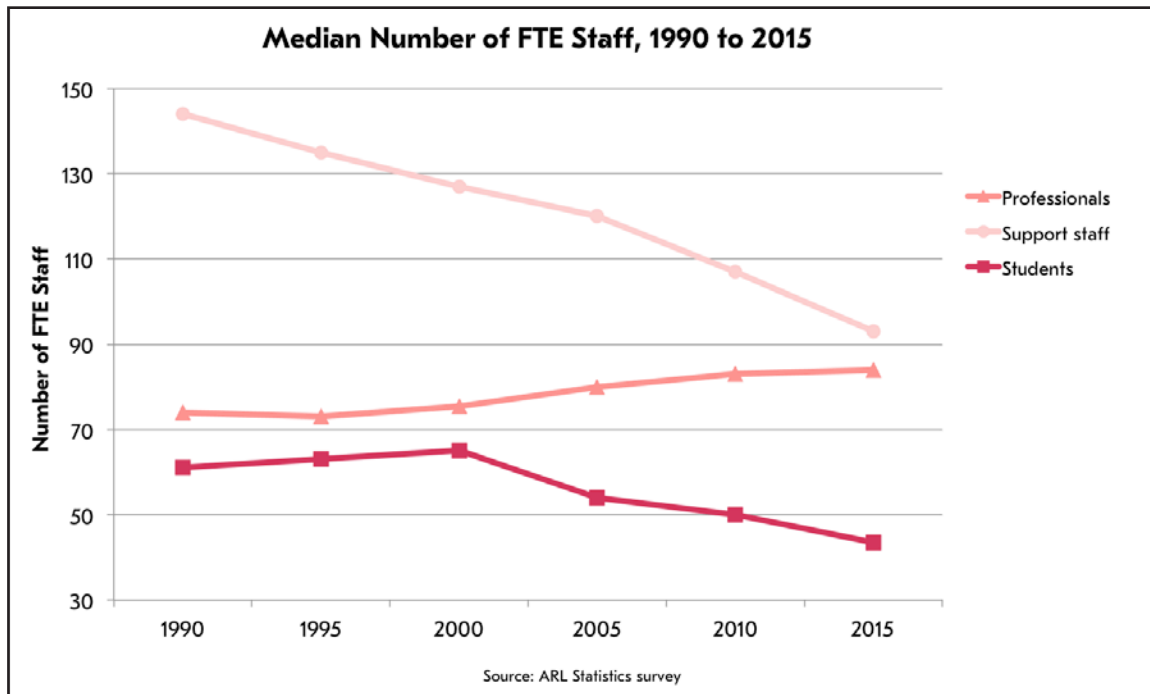


Figure 11

This is the context for understanding the steady increase in professional staffing reflected in Figure 4. Since 2000, the student and support staff share of total staffing declined from 72% to 62%. Put another way, in 1990, a typical ARL library had twice as many support staff as professionals. By 2015 support staff held only an 11% advantage. If this trend continues, in the next few years we will see professionals outnumber support staff for the first time.

The underlying narrative places research library staffing squarely in the mainstream of global labor force trends, wherein lower-skill, repetitive, piece-work oriented tasks are disappearing, replaced by networks and technologies. To this, research librarianship can add the nearly wholesale migration of scholarship from print to digital formats. The impact of these environmental changes on the library workforce cannot be overstated. Lower-skill tasks are indeed disappearing, and they will never come back.

In their place, the emerging library workforce will be smaller, younger, with higher levels of more diverse skills. It will draw from a broader

spectrum of credentialing, and enjoy better compensation, a reflection of the broader market for the skills they bring. The period of 2015–2020 will prove a watershed moment for research library staffing, and will herald the start of the next generation of library professionals.

Endnotes

- ¹ The primary data source for this study is the demographic portion of the 2015 ARL Salary Survey, an unpublished data series collected by ARL. The Salary Survey includes data for all professionals working in university ARL member libraries in the US and Canada. The data tables used for the analysis presented in this article are available for download at <http://www.arl.org/storage/2017-10-03-rli-wilder-data.xls>.
- ² Stanley Wilder, “Delayed Retirements and the Youth Movement among ARL Library Professionals,” Workforce Trends in Research Libraries series, March 2017, <http://www.arl.org/workforce-trends>.
- ³ Association of Research Libraries, ARL Statistics Analytics, accessed September 29, 2017, <https://www.arlstatistics.org/analytics>.
- ⁴ Roger C. Schonfeld and Liam Sweeney, *Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity: Members of the Association of Research Libraries: Employee Demographics and Director Perspectives*, August 30, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.304524>.
- ⁵ Stanley Wilder, “The End of Lower Skill Employment in Research Libraries,” BackTalk, *Library Journal*, June 24, 2013, <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2013/06/opinion/backtalk/the-end-of-lower-skill-employment-in-research-libraries-backtalk/>

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