

Demographic Trends in the ARL Library Professional Population: An Overview

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In the following articles, Stanley Wilder explores a series of trends shaping the professional population of Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member institutions. For 30 years, research libraries have been talking about the “greying of the profession” and the inevitable mass turnover in professional staff that was sure to result from this demographic trend. But year after year, that mass retirement had not played out. By digging into the ARL Salary Survey data, Wilder makes significant observations of how the demographic trends are unfolding and how geopolitical and economic forces outside of the boundaries of the profession itself, namely the economic collapse of 2008–2009, encouraged many library professionals to delay retirement. Wilder’s research shows that this mass trend towards delayed retirements significantly distorted the distribution of professionals by age, away from a natural distribution curve to one that was highly shifted towards the higher end of the age spectrum. But the logical end point of that distorted distribution curve has finally been reached, and the mass wave of retirements is even more momentous as a result.

Simultaneously, Wilder’s research underscores a harsh reality: research libraries have dramatically reduced the overall size of their staff since the beginning of the Great Recession, which has resulted in far fewer positions available to younger colleagues than has been true historically. So while the waves of mass retirement are happening, this is a moment in time when there are far fewer positions available overall than even a decade ago.

This is particularly troubling for a profession that has been discussing the need for dramatic demographic shifts to ensure that the profession reflects the demographics of its larger community. As Wilder’s research makes clear, the profession as a whole and the members of

ARL in particular have barely moved the needle in terms of hiring and retaining members of underrepresented groups.

While there are some signs of improvement in terms of the salaries of members of underrepresented communities now being in line with those of their colleagues of Northern European ancestry both in the United States and Canada, Wilder makes a compelling case that overall the percentage of underrepresented groups in the profession has improved only a scant number of percentage points in the last three decades. And

though there are regional variations, such as research libraries in the Western United States and Canada having a significantly higher percentage of members of underrepresented communities than their peer institutions in other regions of the US and Canada, those percentages are still far below the levels of the population of the Western regions of both countries.

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Wilder’s articles serve as a powerful illumination of the demographic shifts taking place in the research library profession, where progress has been made towards realizing long-standing goals vis-à-vis diversity and inclusion, the closing of the income gap across racial and ethnic lines, and the lopsided nature of the age distribution curve...and the inevitable major correction that has already begun as older librarians reach a natural age limit on how long they can continue working. The insights that Wilder’s research shines on these and other demographic realities both serves to elucidate these complex demographic trends while also serving as a call to action for leaders in the profession by identifying where they should put their energies in addressing the

emerging needs of their organizations and addressing disparities in the profession as a whole.

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To cite this article: Steven Mandeville-Gamble. “Demographic Trends in the ARL Library Professional Population: An Overview.” *Research Library Issues*, no. 295 (2018): 3–5. <https://doi.org/10.29242/rli.295.1>.