

# Leadership Dynamics in the Libraries of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities, 1947–2004

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Employee turnover is an important measure of the vitality of an organization or a profession. Academic libraries would benefit significantly from an improved understanding of the turnover process and an expanded documentation of turnover patterns across the field. Turnover research has generally focused on the industrial sector, but is now expanding to include service organizations and professional occupations. Academic libraries, however, with the exception of a recent longitudinal turnover study of Association of Research Libraries directors, and a late 1980s study of professional staff turnover in these same institutions, have not been the settings for systematic investigations of turnover trends and causes.

Workforce planning has never been a strength of the American library profession in general, or higher education librarianship in particular. The field has rarely secured a dependable assessment and projection of supply and demand for professional positions. Data collected has not provided effective insights into the geography of future needs, the diversity among types of libraries, and the changing nature of job assignments

and specializations. As a result, national, professional, and institutional strategies have not been developed to guide the preparation, advancement, and replacement of librarians. This is critical to the future vitality and impact of the profession and to the overall health of the information economy in the United States.

The objectives of this study are to document the levels and patterns of turnover in library director positions in the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) for the period 1947–2004, document tenure in these leadership assignments, document where these library directors come from, and where they go when they leave. The results are compared with benchmarks from other professions and with the ARL turnover study results. The information about pre and post library director activities will help to understand the career paths of this important academic library administrative group.

There is a rich literature on the history, current status and future development of the HBCU institutions, but their libraries have received only modest discussion and documentation in the publications of

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academic librarianship. A recent Mellon Foundation funded initiative to promote growth and collaboration across the HBCU libraries will generate a better understanding in the profession of their role and impact. A recent "Reference Handbook" on the HBCUs by Cynthia Jackson and Eleanor Nunn provides a detailed account of the development and current state of this distinctive segment of American higher education. They report that these colleges and universities for over 160 years have served as "the educational, intellectual, political, cultural, and social centers of African American communities in the United States, especially in the Southeast." HBCUs can be defined as private and public two-year, four-year, graduate, and professional degree institutions that were established specifically for the postsecondary education of people of African ancestry in the United States. Jackson and Nunn identify 103 HBCUs currently operating, approximately seventy-five percent established between 1865 and 1899, and over ninety percent located in the South. As they document from the research about HBCUs, two realities drove the founding of these institutions. In the South, primarily, but also in other parts of the U.S., state laws prohibited blacks from attending established historically white colleges and universities. In the North, blacks were denied access to white institutions due to customs, practices, and traditions.

The libraries at these institutions have been characterized by very inconsistent levels of development and support, depending on the type of degree programs, their private or public or land-grant status, their year of organization, faculty and presidential leadership, and technology development, among many factors.

Turnover is a dynamic concept, and can be broadly defined as the degree of individual movement across the membership boundaries of an organization. In the work environment, it is the termination of employees and the hiring of new staff to replace them. It is important to distinguish between voluntary or employee-initiated and involuntary or employer-initiated turnover. Another important distinction is drawn between avoidable and unavoidable separations, the former relating to conditions over which the employer has some control. Turnover is a complex phenomenon, requiring a systematic concern for many variables within both the organization and its environment. It is clearly associated with the concepts of employee-organization linkages and organizational commitment. The quality

and extent of these bonds are important elements in understanding work behavior and, in particular, the turnover decision.

This study of the library director turnover at HBCU institutions was carried out in the fall of 2004, with the distribution of a survey to the directors of the 103 HBCU libraries. The survey consisted of a cover letter outlining the objectives of the study and forms for recording information about individual library director turnover as possible back to 1947. The previous position, the date of appointment, the date of departure, the reason for leaving, and the post-departure position of each library director was requested. A total of 51 libraries were able to provide data for the study. It should be noted that a significant number of additional institutions expressed interest in the project, and but did not have access to reliable sources to provide the requested information.

A variety of measures have been developed to help describe levels and patterns of turnover. These formulas vary significantly in their precision, ease of computation, and control for variables. The crude separation rate is the most frequently used measure of turnover in the literature. The separation rate equals the number of employees leaving during a period divided by the average number of employees during that period. The rate is usually multiplied by 100 and expressed as a percentage. The separation rate is easy to compute and understand, indicates the volume of turnover taking place, and allows for useful comparisons with other types of organizations and national or regional averages.

The crude separation rates for the 51 HBCU libraries are provided below with an analysis over five year periods (note that not all institutions were able to provide data for the entire period):

1998–2004: 10.32%			
1948–1952	7.77	1973–1977	15.30
1953–1957	4.62	1978–1982	13.33
1958–1962	11.43	1983–1987	12.22
1963–1967	18.75	1988–1992	8.88
1968–1972	10.00	1993–1997	14.44

The comparable data from the ARL library director study through 2002 is provided in the following table.

1998-2002: 11.8%			
1948-1952	5.98%	1973-1977	12.18%
1953-1957	6.04%	1978-1982	7.64%
1958-1962	5.30%	1983-1982	8.72%
1963-1967	7.10%	1988-1992	7.64%
1968-1972	11.38%	1993-1997	8.18%

These results suggest a lower level of stability among the library directors in HBCU institutions than ARL institutions, but not when compared with benchmark statistics summarized below from the turnover literature for other employee groups:

professional/technical workers	13 percent
clerical	18 percent
white collar workers	19 percent
manufacturing industries	54 percent
mining industries	38 percent
communications industries	22 percent
service organizations	21 percent
government organizations	23 percent

Another important and complementary measure of turnover is the average length of service (leavers). It is the median length of service in the organization of all employees who turnover during a period. This formula is also easy to compute and understand, and indicates where, in terms of tenure, turnover is taking place in the organization.

The length of service (leavers) in years for the 51 HBCU libraries is provided below, again with an analysis by five year periods:

1998-2004: 7.6			
1948-1952	4.0	1973-1977	7.0
1953-1957	2.7	1978-1982	8.5
1958-1962	5.8	1983-1987	6.7
1963-1967	4.8	1988-1992	6.3
1968-1972	13.2	1993-1997	7.3

The comparable data from the ARL library director study through 2002 is provided in the following table:

1998-2002: 11.7			
1948-1952	13.6	1973-1977	9.3
1953-1957	13.1	1978-1982	12.2
1958-1962	15.1	1983-1987	10.0
1963-1967	13.5	1988-1992	12.6
1968-1972	12.8	1993-1997	10.6

Information was also gathered about the reasons the HBCU library directors left their positions:

Retirement	36.1%
HBCU Director	11.5%
Non-HBCU Director	6.6%
Library Position (same)	9.8%
Library Position (other)	11.5%
Faculty/Admin Position	9.8%
Death	9.8%
Dismissal	3.4%
Education	1.5%

The comparable data from the ARL library director study is provided below:

	1948-1997	1998-2002
Retirement	41.0%	67.7%
ARL Director	26.6%	13.6%
Non-ARL Director	9.7%	3.4%
Library Position (same institution)	7.7%	8.5%
Faculty Position	12.6%	3.4%
Death	2.4%	3.4%

Information was also gathered about the source of new directors in HBCU libraries:

HBCU Director	14.5%
HBCU Librarian	48.4%
Non-HBCU Director	4.8%
Non-HBCU Librarian	19.4%
Faculty	12.9%

The comparable data from the ARL library director study is provided below:

	1948–1997	1998–2002
ARL Director	20.2%	15.5%
ARL Assoc/Asst	54.9%	60.3%
Non-ARL Director Or Assoc/Asst	17.4%	19.0%
Faculty	7.5%	5.2%

An analysis of turnover patterns by institutional variables, such as: public or private status, geographic region, size of staff, size of collection and size of budget, for example, did not show any significant trends in either the ARL or HBCU study. Similarly, an analysis of turnover patterns by individual characteristics, such as: gender, age, academic credentials, career path, previous position and new position, for example, did not show any significant trends. It is important, however to look at the percentage of female library directors over time from the reporting HBCU institutions:

1948	83.3%	1977	66.6%
1952	84.6%	1982	77.7%
1957	84.6%	1987	61.1%
1962	85.7%	1992	70.5%
1967	68.8%	1997	78.9%
1972	73.3%	2002	84.2%

Comparable data from the ARL study illustrate different trends in gender distribution:

1948	12.7%	1977	14.0%
1952	8.7%	1982	22.4%
1957	6.5%	1987	25.9%
1962	8.4%	1992	38.7%
1967	5.7%	1997	45.2%
1972	4.6%	2002	52.1%

This study of the turnover trends among library directors at HBCU institutions points to several preliminary conclusions:

- The turnover rates over the period 1948–2004 have generally been consistent with the ARL director patterns, though significantly higher during the 30-year period 1970–2000.

- The average length of service is on average significantly lower than the ARL director experience, though the range is much wider, with some institutions experiencing frequent turnover while others had directors with unusually long tenure at one institution.

- The reasons for leaving are generally comparable, with the highest level retiring and the next group moving to directorships at other libraries.

- The sources for HBCU library directors are also consistent with ARL director movement, with a comparable percentage moving from another HBCU directorship or from a position at another HBCU library.

- The HBCU directorships have consistently been dominated by women throughout the study period in significant contrast to the ARL experience.

The study also raises some important questions for future investigation:

- What is the impact of institutional characteristics on turnover?

- What is the impact of personal characteristics on turnover?

- What is the role of acting/interim directors and how are vacancies being managed?

- How is the age distribution of directors changing and what will be the impact on future retirement trends?

- Will HBCU library directors continue to be the primary source of new directors?

- Are there selected institutions that are incubators for future HBCU academic library leadership?

- What has been the impact of a high percentage of female library directors on turnover patterns?

- What are the REAL reasons directors leave their positions?