ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN TURNOVER
AND LEADERSHIP AMIDST THE GREAT
RESHUFFLE

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INTRODUCTION

After the peak of the pandemic in 2021, the United States’ labor market experienced a surge in turnover referred to as The Great Resignation. Former employees reported that their top reasons for resigning were low pay, lack of advancement opportunities, feeling disrespected, and childcare issues.1 Although it’s true that many workers retired early or dropped out of the workforce entirely, many others were included in this category that were still working but transitioning their careers. For this reason, researchers have argued that it would be more accurate to call this period by another name: The Great Reshuffle.2

The Great Reshuffle was partially characterized by a shift in employee priorities. In addition to extrinsic motivators such as increased pay, many workers renewed their focus on personal and career goals, long-term objectives, and quality of life. The extended disruption and uncertainty caused by the pandemic gave workers time to reconsider their priorities, and employers offering intrinsic motivators such as work/life balance, professional growth, and flexibility after the peak of the pandemic were in high demand.

Studies on the working conditions of academic librarianship—including turnover, job satisfaction, and burnout—were on the rise even before the pandemic. Open library positions were even described as precarious and unstable by a job seeker.3 Contract work is standard in library subfields, and it is not uncommon to receive more than 50 applications for entry-level positions. Despite, or perhaps partly due to this precarity, there is evidence that libraries were not immune to the Great Reshuffle. Library workers cited low compensation, morale, and burnout as reasons for quitting during that time period.4 But there are currently no empirical studies that examine turnover intention in the wake of COVID-19 and the Great Reshuffle.

Pre-pandemic literature found that dissatisfaction with supervisors and library administration significantly impacted academic librarian turnover.5 Other factors that contributed to turnover, including morale and culture, were tied to leadership as well. This contributed paper will report the preliminary findings of a survey that explored turnover intentions of academic librarians, investigate the impact of leadership on turnover intention, and provide recommendations for library leadership to improve retention.

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METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants in the study were recruited through several national and state-wide library listservs. Participation was limited to academic librarians who had been working in a United States-based library for at least the previous nine months. From the potential participants, 344 attempted the survey, with 308 agreeing to continue after reviewing the informed consent information. Out of those, 261 participants completed both the Turnover Intention Scale and the Library Leadership Survey and were included in the data analysis.

Most participants worked at a four-year college or university library (83.9%, n = 219), while the remaining participants worked at a community college library (9.2%, n = 24), another type of institution (0.8%, n = 2), or chose not to disclose (6.1%, n = 16). When asked to describe their position in the library, over half of the participants identified themselves as librarians (59.8%, n = 156), 21.8% (n = 57) identified as department heads, 8.8% (n = 23) identified as administrators, 4.2% (n = 11) described themselves as having another type of position such as archivist, coordinator, or a librarian with supervisory duties, and 5.4% (n = 14) chose not to disclose.

A majority of the participants identified as women (78.9%, n = 206), while 10.7% (n = 28) identified as men, 2.8% (n = 7) identified as non-binary, non-conforming, or a gender that was not listed, and 7.7% (n = 20) choosing not to disclose.

Materials

The authors incorporated two scales into a survey to learn about academic librarian commitment to their current workplace and their perception of library leadership, particularly after implementation of institutional responses to COVID-19. Turnover intention was measured using the six question Turnover Intention Scale (TIS-6) (Roodt, 2004). The TIS-6 is a valid and reliable measure of turnover intention and predicting employee turnover. Survey participants were asked to reflect upon the prior nine months of employment when considering the TIS-6 questions and their intention to stay within their organization.

To learn more about how participants rated their supervisors, the authors used the Martin Library Leadership Survey. The Martin Library Leadership Survey, another valid and reliable measure, asks participants to rate their library leader’s vision, interpersonal skills, and competence based on a series of twelve statements. Participants were asked specifically about their current direct supervisor when answering. The authors of this paper also used the demographic questions from Martin. Additional multiple choice and open-ended questions asked about retention factors related to library leadership and to their library’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESULTS

Turnover Intention Results

Turnover intention was measured using the six item Turnover Intention Scale (TIS-6). Four of the six questions ask participants how often they have different feelings about their job, such as desire to leave or frustration over opportunities, on a scale from (1) never to (5) always. When asked how often in the past nine months they had considered leaving their jobs, 44.4% of participants reported they considered it (3) about half the time or more (M = 2.63, SD = 1.11, n = 261). The other two questions on the TIS-6 measure job satisfaction and their likelihood of leaving. When asked how likely they would be to accept another job if they were offered the same salary and compensation, 37.2% of participants reported they were likely or very likely to leave (M = 2.93, SD = 1.37, n = 261).

Library Leadership Survey Results

Library leadership was measured using the Martin Library Leadership Survey. Overall turnover intention (M = 2.72, SD = .71) had a significant negative correlation with how the participants rated their supervisor on the
library leadership survey ($M = 4.14, SD = 1.16$), $r(259) = -.45, p < .001$. This meant that participants who were more likely to report turnover intention also tended to rate their direct supervisor’s leadership skills poorly.

The Martin Library Leadership Survey divides leadership into three main components: Professional and Managerial Competence, Building and Maintaining Relationships, and Creating and Managing Organizational Meaning. The top three factors participants were most dissatisfied with were related to Creating and Managing Organizational Meaning. All three questions related to this component asked how well their supervisor communicates and implements the library’s vision. In the entire survey, the question participants were most dissatisfied with was their supervisor’s ability to explain how the library’s work supported the library’s vision ($M = 3.44, SD = 1.79$). This was followed by their supervisor’s ability to make decisions that align with the vision of the library ($M = 3.52, SD = 1.66$). Questions with a higher mean were of less concern to participants, while questions with a lower mean were of greater concern.

Supervisor ability to build and maintain relationships was also a concern. Martin’s Library Leadership Survey includes five questions for the component Building and Maintaining Relationships. These questions relate to traits like empathy, compassion, and listening skills. Participants rated all of these questions as their fourth through eighth highest concerns, falling after the three questions that related to creating and managing organizational meaning. The participants fourth highest concern was how well their library supervisor used empathy when dealing with others ($M = 4.11, SD = 1.64$). Their fifth highest concern was how well their supervisor related to others ($M = 4.16, SD = 1.56$).

Participants were least concerned with aspects of their supervisor that involved Professional and Managerial Confidence. The four questions in this component were related to how well their supervisor could perform the job of a librarian and how knowledgeable they were about librarianship. These questions ranked as the ninth through thirteenth highest concerns.

Retention Factors

The survey asked five additional questions, including three open-ended questions that asked participants to reflect on different factors that influenced their intentions on staying in their current position. This section discusses those responses.

Library Leadership Team Factors

The survey asked participants: “What factors related to your library’s leadership team influence your feelings about staying at your current workplace?” Of the 261 participants, 220 shared individual responses that ranged from high praise to strongly negative responses, indicating that the leadership team indeed contributed to their feelings about staying or leaving their current workplace. Grouped by sentiment, 87 responses were positive (40%), 60 were negative (27%), 43 were neutral, other, or undetermined (20%), and the remaining 30 (14%) mixed both positive and negative factors. Responses were also coded thematically for further analysis.

Library leadership team factors that positively influenced participants’ intentions to stay within a position focused on qualities that centered the participant’s needs to effectively do their work. In contrast, negative factors associated with library leadership teams that affected participants’ intentions to stay within a position focused on big picture items that connect the work of an individual to the rest of the organization. The strongest factors that surfaced related to support and empowerment, vision/mission/direction, autonomy, communication and transparency, and leadership skills.

Support and Empowerment (15%)

Related to Building and Maintaining Relationships, support and empowerment from library leadership was the strongest factor in participants’ decisions to stay with an organization. Participants directly tied this factor to retention. “They are empowering, understanding, and willing to help us develop. This keeps me here.” Other participants mentioned specific areas of support: “They are pretty supportive regarding providing the resources
and amenities for us, as well as advocating for our needs to others when applicable," while another stated that “I am urged to pursue my career goals. I am supported in doing what I want to do. I am empowered to work to my strengths.” Some participants who did not feel supported questioned the management skills of their leaders, as one participant said: “Lack of support and recognition from leadership. Feels like she is good at the university level admin issues, but is not a good manager.”

**Vision/Mission/Direction (13%)**

Participants associated a clearly defined vision, mission, or even direction for the organization with good leadership, which matches with Martin's Creating and Managing Organizational Meaning component. Most responses that mentioned this factor connected it with additional ones. For example, a participant expressed appreciation by saying: “My local leadership team (i.e. my supervisor) is a mostly-positive influence on my staying--they are flexible and both practical enough for us to get actual work done while still visionary enough for us to set good goals for growth.” More participants, though, criticized a lack of clear vision. Without one, they struggled to connect their work with library or department priorities, or to see how they supported the rest of the college or university community.

One participant who bluntly connected good leadership with vision stated “We lack good leadership throughout. There is little vision.” Participants described how this lack influenced the workplace. “No vision for the organization moving forward and no clear plan to create one. This, coupled, with staffing challenges, creates a feeling of instability with no end in sight.” Another participant softened their critique somewhat, though made the disconnect clear: “Our Library director, while a nice man, does not seem to lead the library well nor advocate for his staff. We have no library vision or mission, which makes many of our initiatives feel adrift.” Some participants connected a lack of vision to a lack of innovation within the organization, describing how inefficiencies and underutilization impact turnover intentions. In the words of one participant, “lack of vision, lack of initiative or innovation, make me want to leave.”

**Autonomy (13%)**

Another factor that participants look for from library leadership teams is autonomy, indicating the importance placed on the ability to make decisions independently. This factor is nearly the inverse of Martin's Professional and Managerial Competence component; rather than valuing the librarian abilities of their leaders, participants wanted to be recognized as competent librarians by leadership. Participants highly valued the sense that they are best suited to know how to conduct their work responsibilities. Autonomy also has a role in building trust. “My direct supervisor trusts my judgment, and champions my ideas, I have a very high level of trust for them.” Another dimension of autonomy was to be trusted to know when help is needed. “My supervisor trusts me to do my job as I see fit, but is also ready to jump in with advice if asked.” Yet another participant stressed the importance of autonomy as a retention factor, saying “The autonomy I am given to build a program that meets the campus needs and my personal goals is the primary influencer to staying where I am.” However, a number of participants mentioned the lack of autonomy seen within their organizations, calling out leadership that displayed behaviors including “micromanagement at the top level, no direction/guidance from direct supervisor.”

**Communication and Transparency (10%)**

Combining elements from two of Martin's components, Creating and Managing Organizational Meaning and Building and Maintaining Relationships, communication and transparency were expected from leadership. Participants appreciated leaders who practiced transparency, often positively linking it with other leadership factors, such as “The ability to be transparent and collaborative” and “equity, transparency, involvement in decision-making, experience, trust, honesty.”

Leaders who did not actively communicate with their employees missed opportunities to tie work into the vision or mission of the library. Often employees spent time second guessing or looking for meaning through other channels or available information. A participant described what happens within their library due to lead-
ership that is “secretive about plans and new positions. We piece together what vision might be based on new positions created.” Another suggested information sharing needed improvement, noting “The poor communication of leadership, not that there isn’t communication, but it’s poorly executed and often too late.”

**Leadership Skills (8%)**

Leadership skills, an umbrella term used by respondents that most often related to decision making, differs from Martin’s Professional and Managerial Competence component, which doesn’t focus on leadership’s management skills. Unlike other factors mentioned by participants, responses describing the lack of this skill were not countered by others who shared positive examples. The skill to lead was described only in situations in which it was missing. Participants described poor library leadership exhibited by those in charge, sharing how this looked in their library. Some indicated a need for leaders to have strong decision making skills, venting “a little frustrated with their inability to tackle difficult decisions that might upset people” or simply “they can’t make a decision.” Leaders are expected to make decisions so librarians can put their efforts into their work rather than worrying about what is happening, or not happening, at higher levels. Lack of demonstrable leadership skills or lack of taking action influenced those in the library who were left to work within those constraints. “There is so much potential in our academic library and it is disheartening to see all of this being squandered because of poor leadership from both our library director and assistant director.” Others more broadly indicated their discontent, describing the harm that occurred within a leadership vacuum. “They don’t lead, especially the dean. Bullying is rampant as is discrimination and harassment.”

**Factors Outside Library Leadership**

The survey asked “What other factors beyond leadership influence your feelings about staying at your current workplace?” Participants selected all that applied: compensation and benefits, work environment, job duties, personal needs, and other. Many participants selected more than one factor that influenced their feelings regarding continuing with their job; the factor selected most was compensation and benefits, followed by work environment, job duties and personal needs (see table 1).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Factors Beyond Leadership that Influenced Feelings about Staying</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factors</td>
<td>Count</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compensation and Benefits</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Environment</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Duties</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Needs</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>62</td>
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Of the 62 participants who selected “Other” as an option, either in addition to or as their only response to this question, all but one expanded on their answer by giving context in an open text box. Grouping responses by sentiment, 16 out of 61 responses were positive (26%), 13 were negative (21%), 31 were neutral or undetermined (50%), and the remaining 1 (2%) mixed both positive and negative factors.

Outside of leadership team factors, participants indicated they are staying in their position primarily due to personal factors, including location/proximity to family (14), or close to retirement (3). Additional responses worth noting are flexibility (5), leadership beyond the library (4), tenure considerations (4), and colleagues (3).
Impact of Pandemic Responses

The survey also asked “Did your library’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., return to work policies, clarity of COVID-19 reporting, masking policies) influence your feelings about staying at your current workplace?” Participants responded Yes or No; 229 answered this question (see table 2). Those who answered “Yes” were asked one more open-ended question: “How did your library’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic influence your feelings about staying at your current workplace?” Of the 103 participants who answered yes, 100 responded to this question. These responses were coded thematically, and five themes were identified: flexible work arrangements, administrations’ response to the pandemic, inequitable treatment of employees, feelings of safety, and return to work policies.

<table>
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<th>TABLE 2</th>
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<tr>
<th>Did Library’s Response to COVID-19 Pandemic Influence Feelings about Staying?</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>% of Survey Respondents, n=229</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>44.98%</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>55.02%</td>
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**Flexible Work Arrangements (45%)**

Remote and flexible work arrangements were the top COVID-19 response that influenced workers’ decisions to stay at their institutions. Within this category, the most commonly expressed sentiment (27) was gratitude and gratefulness for remote work options during and after the initial months of the pandemic. “Things became a bit more flexible in terms of work location and hours, so I am happy to continue working at my current workplace.” An additional four participants explained how flexible work arrangements are desirable to those with children and dependents, noting that it reduces a significant stressor in their lives.

However, eleven participants also indicated that a lack of flexibility or no longer having the option to work remotely influenced their desire to leave. As one participant stated, “The response was great, but what I learned is that I love to work from home. A return to campus means there are fewer opportunities to do that, so I would leave my position if I had the opportunity to work from home more frequently and/or had a ten month contract (instead of 12).”

Within these responses, several also noted a bias toward in-person work and lack of respect in relation to productivity and remote work arrangements. “…We burned ourselves out proving we could invent new systems without support, create collaborations, and be as productive and often more productive when allowed some flexibility in on-campus vs remote work, and they acted like we were kids lying about needing to stay home from school.”

**Administrations’ Response to the Pandemic (29%)**

This theme can be broken down into three categories: university response (10), library response (10), and leadership (9). The pros and cons for each were fairly evenly split but also vague about why they were pleased or displeased about leadership’s pandemic responses. For example, “I already had an absolutely terrible view of the leaders, but it got much worse due to their response to the pandemic.” Aside from this generally fatalistic view of leadership, some participants mentioned absentee or neglectful leadership and slow responses as reasons for their negative views of leadership during the pandemic. Demonstrating how timely and decisive action by leadership was valued, one participant said “The library was prepared for the COVID-19 shutdown well ahead of other areas on campus. We seem to be the leaders when it comes to being prepared!”

**Inequitable Treatment of Employees (24%)**

The pandemic brought to light a number of inequities in the labor market, including those who are considered “essential” workers. Participants commented about unequal treatment between library and university faculty,
and between library units and departments. Within this category was also inconsistent enforcement of remote work and return to work policies. “I don't agree with their return-to-work policies, which are unequally applied and enforced (policy is one thing, but it totally depends on who your supervisor is regarding how it is actually enforced); I wish there was more room for flexibility in my non-public facing role.)”

Two comments complained there was no flexibility to return to work if they wanted to do so. “The inequity of building access and glacial pace of opening the building to staff was further hampered by a non-collaborative culture where departments view each other with suspicion.” Participants also commented that those who were required to work were not adequately rewarded or compensated for such work during the peak of the pandemic. Six comments specifically referenced that such inequities contributed to low morale and burnout in the library.

**Feelings of Safety (20%)**

The majority of participants commented about how they felt safe, valued, and that their safety was a priority (15), indicating that personal feelings of safety were very important to staying in their current position. A subset of these responses also mentioned feeling like their personal safety mattered more than services or collections, which also translated to their considerations for staying. “I do not think I would consider applying to places where leadership did not value the safety of their employees over services.” Of course, these feelings are subject to change if the actions or requirements of their employer no longer align with their risk tolerance. “When they seemed to prioritize my health and wellbeing, I felt more inclined to stay. When it seemed like other priorities superseded my health and wellbeing, it made me more inclined to leave.”

**Return to Work Policies (15%)**

Finally, return to work policies were a significant contributor to turnover intention. Thirteen of the responses mentioned that institutions were far too quick to try and leave the pandemic behind. “Mostly positive during and immediately after the pandemic but started to push for a return to pre-pandemic work environment/ a lack of recognition that things have changed and status quo cannot be maintained.” It was important to these workers that their leadership recognized the trauma they have been through. Also, things may never be the same as they were before and, in some instances, people don't want it to be. “The strong push to return to normal and not favoring remote work has me looking for remote jobs over compensation.”

**RETENTION RECOMMENDATIONS**

Retention is affected by a number of factors during times of turmoil, such as during the COVID-19 crisis and the related Great Reshuffle. Preliminary results found that those factors within the control of library leadership do not greatly differ during crises as compared to other times. Leaders should recognize that during upheaval, continued or increased emphasis on creating organizational meaning, building and maintaining relationships, and exhibiting leadership skills will impact retention. In most cases, participants who described negative factors indicated more than one concern related to their leadership team. Many mentioned several factors at play within their library, potentially indicating an interconnectedness between factors that drive participants to seek another workplace. With this in mind, leaders may want to apply multiple recommendations to improve retention. Recommendations are grouped according to the strongest factors that emerged from the responses: empowerment, support and autonomy; flexible and remote work; communication and transparency; and leadership skills.

**Empowerment, Support, and Autonomy**

Participants in this study desired support to do their jobs effectively. Meet regularly with employees to discuss their needs, and communicate clearly about what the library and library leadership can reasonably do to help librarians do their jobs more effectively. Their needs will likely change, so check in at regular intervals and be flexible.
Library leaders can also empower their staff by encouraging them to pursue passion projects connected to the mission and vision of the library and providing the resources. Give librarians a voice in determining when and how their work is done to provide a level of autonomy that encourages workplace engagement. Give librarians a voice in determining their workplace priorities and to review position descriptions regularly to adjust as needed.

In times of crisis, empowerment, support, and autonomy will necessarily look different in response to the situation. Invite librarians to participate in decisions related to how, when, and where work is performed.

**Flexible and Remote Work**

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for greater flexibility at work. Focusing too much on “returning to normal” or maintaining the status quo may be damaging to employees, as what was “normal,” was not always in employees’ best interests. Reassess the needs of the library’s on-site services.

Many workers also prefer flexible and remote work arrangements, even during non-crisis times. Library leaders should investigate increasing their flexible and remote options to make positions more desirable, even if they are project-based, and consider flexible hours and locations for employees. As more workers are working remotely, provide training and awareness of the impact of proximity bias, in which supervisors unintentionally favor on-site workers. Be open to shift priorities and consider maintaining a wish list of projects that could be completed off site in the event of another crisis.

**Communication and Transparency**

Leaders are expected to provide honest, timely and open communication about items that affect the workplace and its employees. Channels for distributing information are necessary to keep employees at all levels engaged and to communicate priorities for the overall library and institution. Library leaders should establish a timely, regular two-way path of communication for all employees, including opportunities for all to ask questions and give constructive feedback. Communications should prioritize transparency in decision-making; while not everyone will like decisions, they can understand why they were made and respect them.

In times of crisis, the related factors of communication and transparency are especially important. During a crisis, people look to leadership. Set the tone for how others respond by being present. At all times, employees deserve to have a defined sense of what guides an organization and to see their work valued and represented within it.

**Leadership Skills**

Leaders make decisions, even, or perhaps especially, when the choices are uncomfortable or unpopular. Make decisions in a timely manner and promote an atmosphere of encouragement and safety. Seek a mentor within librarianship or higher education who will provide concrete assistance in strengthening these skills. Provide, update, or create guiding statements that provide a shared vision, mission, or direction for the library; engage the entire library in discussing and updating these documents on a regularly scheduled cycle. Align priorities and goals with guiding documents, and collaborate with units and departments to develop manageable goals that match the library’s values.

Provide opportunities for all to give feedback without fear of retaliation. Increase encouragement by demonstrating employee appreciation and communicating their worth, both internally and externally.

Leaders set the tone for the library. During a crisis or in times of uncertainty, employees look to their leaders for how they should react. Be aware of that impact and maintain a connection with your staff. Openly address concerns about personal safety, and be flexible in accommodating varying comfort levels. Most importantly, clearly communicate how leadership values and protects employees. When you advocate for them, let them know and celebrate every victory. When compromises need to be made, be transparent about the decisions and why they need to happen.
LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Survey participation was limited to academic librarians in the United States who had been in their current position for at least nine months. The survey was distributed to various communities on ALA Connect, which likely skewed the participants to those who are current ALA members. It is also important to note that this was a self-selecting population, which would have impacted who chose to respond to a survey on turnover intentions and leadership factors.

The Martin Library Leadership Survey measured library leadership as it relates to professional competence, building and maintaining relationships, and creating and managing organizational meaning. Future studies may want to look specifically at additional factors related to managerial competence such as good decision making, good communication skills, and ability to team-build and foster collaboration.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how leadership factors influenced the turnover intentions of academic librarians in the aftermath of COVID-19. The preliminary results found that 44% of respondents had considered leaving their positions in the last nine months, and 37.2% of participants said they would be likely or very likely to leave if offered a position with the same salary and compensation. This supports previous research findings where factors beyond compensation were reported as high contributors to turnover.

Also, participants who had higher turnover intention tended to think poorly about the leadership skills of their direct supervisors. They were most dissatisfied with their supervisor’s ability to explain how the library’s work supported the library’s vision and their ability to make decisions that aligned with the vision of the library. High areas of concern included leadership’s empathy when dealing with others and how well their supervisor related to others. Specific items that contributed to turnover intention included not providing vision, mission or direction; not demonstrating leadership skills; and not clearly communicating with their employees. However, the areas of least concern were those involving Professional and Managerial Confidence. Library leadership that offers support and empowerment, autonomy, and flexible work options positively influenced their workforce to stay.

Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr coined the phrase, “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” After having an odd sense of deja vu while writing the recommendations for this conclusion, the authors looked back on their proceedings from ACRL 2019. In those proceedings, the authors reported the results of a study that identified library administration and direct supervisors as two of the five primary factors that contributed to academic librarian turnover. In their conclusion they wrote, “While many of the factors included in this survey may be out of library administrators’ control, those who seek to improve the retention of employees might consider strategies such as better work-life balance, allowing for greater autonomy, and transparent communication.” So while the world may have changed, the recommendations have not. Leaders should focus on the fundamentals, particularly articulating vision and practicing open and transparent communication, to improve or maintain how librarians perceive leadership and to have an impact on the retention of your workforce.

NOTES


