



*Evidence Summary*

**Retention Initiatives are Employed in Academic Libraries, Although not Necessarily for this Purpose**

**A Review of:**

Strothmann, M., & Ohler, L. A. (2011). Retaining academic librarians: By chance or by design? *Library Management*, 32(3), 191-208. doi: [10.1108/01435121111112907](https://doi.org/10.1108/01435121111112907)

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**Abstract**

**Objective** – To study methods that support retention of academic librarians.

**Design** – Exploratory research using an online survey; non-random sample.

**Setting** – Academic libraries, nearly all located within the U.S. (97.2%).

**Subjects** – A total of 895 professional academic librarians.

**Methods** – The researchers sent an online survey link to professional electronic mail lists and directly to heads of Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member libraries. The 23-item survey was available from February 19, 2007, through March 9, 2007, and contained questions about the professional experience of respondents, their libraries, and their universities. Subjects were asked to identify retention activities that were currently offered at their workplaces (both library-specific and university-wide) and to rate their satisfaction for each available initiative. The list contained fifteen initiatives based on the researchers' literature review.

**Main Results** – Almost half (46.3%) of respondents were 50 or older and 7.5% under 30 years old, leaving 46.2% between the ages of 30-50 years old (although this percentage is not explicitly stated in the paper except in a table). Nearly half of the subjects were in the first ten years of their careers. 80.2% had held between one and four professional positions in their careers, and even when length of professional experience was factored out, age had no effect on the number of positions held. Most job turnover within the past three years (3 or fewer open positions) was in public service, while other areas of the library (i.e., technical services, systems, and administration) reported zero open positions. Only 11.3% of respondents noted that their libraries have deliberate, formal retention programs in place. Despite this, there are several library- and university-based initiatives that can be considered to help with retention. The most reported available library-based retention initiative was the provision of funding to attend conferences (86.8%). Librarians also frequently reported flexible schedules, support and funding for professional development and access to leadership programs. University-based retention programs included continuing education funding, new employee orientations, faculty status, and the chance to teach credit-bearing courses. Only 22.2% of subjects reported formal mentoring programs as a retention strategy. Librarians were very or somewhat satisfied with schedule flexibility (79.6%). They were generally satisfied with other initiatives reported. In response to 22 five-point Likert scale descriptions of positive library work environments, subjects most agreed with statements that allowed librarians to have control of their professional duties, that allowed for personal or family obligations, and that supported professional development. Librarians agreed less often regarding statements about salaries, research support, and opportunities for advancement.

**Conclusion** – Academic librarians are involved in and are benefitting from some library and

university-based retention initiatives, even though retention may not be the primary strategic goal.

### **Commentary**

This study examines librarians' views on retention efforts in academia. As an exploratory study, the authors should be commended for attempting to fill a gap in the evidence concerning retention of academic librarians. The researchers make limitations clear to the reader, including the fact that as an exploratory study, the potential list of strategies may not be exhaustive. Although choosing specific heads of libraries to fill out the form was important in order to get some management perspective, they cautioned readers against generalizing from the results to the entire library population. However, it is interesting that the authors decided to survey heads of ARL libraries while invitations to librarians were from academic libraries of all sizes. The authors note that there were substantial differences between the responses of administrators compared with librarians, but it is difficult to know if these differences were more between larger research libraries and smaller libraries, as opposed to differences between administrators and staff.

Although the methods are clearly described and easy to follow, inclusion of the actual survey used would have enhanced transparency and reproducibility. Calculation of a response rate is not possible because there is a lack of information about how many surveys were actually distributed. Although sometimes difficult with Web-based surveys, information about how many library directors were approached or how many librarians subscribed to the professional electronic mail lists could provide some context around response rate.

There is a potential problem that is not mentioned in the paper that could skew results. 895 professional academic librarians answered

the survey, but it is unclear how many were from the same libraries. In other words, if more than one librarian answered questions about retention strategies employed in their libraries, it could make one particular retention strategy seem to be more popular than another, even though it is only one library's activity. It does not affect data regarding respondents' opinions about a particular retention strategy, but readers should be aware that the most reported retention initiative numbers may be distorted.

It would have been interesting to read more about generational issues and retention. The authors discussed that almost half of the respondents were 50 or older ("baby boomer") and that only 7.5% were under 30 ("millennial"). However, the authors do not consider that 46.2% were between the ages of 30 and 50 ("generation X"). Perhaps it's this reviewer's particular bias toward that generation, but it would have been beneficial to see more discussion on these issues. It would be interesting to conduct the survey

again, since economic conditions were arguably not as bad in 2007 as those to follow in 2008/09 onwards. "Millennials" are now in similar, if not worse, economic conditions than "Gen Xers" were when first looking for professional employment. Because some of the literature included in this section is somewhat dated, it would be a valuable study to explore in further detail.

Some degree of turnover is healthy in academic environments in order to bring about innovation and change. Limited turnover can also negatively affect opportunities for promotion. The challenge for administrators is to establish a balance between staff retention and turnover. This paper is a good first effort in understanding retention initiatives, and should be read by academic librarians who hold management or administrative positions in order to better inform themselves of important human resource issues.