2024

Not All Staying is the Same: Unpacking Retention and Turnover in Academic Libraries

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In The Library With The Lead Pipe
An open access, open peer reviewed journal

2024
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APR

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NOT ALL STAYING IS THE SAME: UNPACKING RETENTION AND TURNOVER IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

***In Brief**: Although the academic libraries profession recognizes that retention is a complex and important*

issue, especially for advancing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and supporting BIPOC librarians, the library literature largely avoids defining or providing a measurement for retention at all. In this paper we propose an original nuanced definition of retention. We draw from existing research on workplace dynamics and library culture and our qualitative exploration of academic librarians who have left jobs before they intended. Our research investigated what it was like for them to stay at those jobs after they realized they didn't want to stay long-term. We argue that structural aspects of the academic library profession (such as emotional investment in the profession, geographic challenges, and role specialization) can lead to librarians staying with organizations longer than they would otherwise, and that this involuntary staying is not functional retention. We explore the distinction between involuntarily staying and voluntarily staying at an organization, as well as the coping strategies library employees may engage in when they involuntarily stay. Finally, we make the argument that functional retention is a relationship between the organization and the individual employee in which both sides are positively contributing to the workplace culture.

By: Samantha Guss, Sojourna Cunningham, Jennifer Stout

A note on language

The authors applied the language of the American Psychological Association's Journal Article Reporting Standards for Race, Ethnicity, and Culture (JARS–REC) (American Psychological Association, 2023). We are writing from a North American context and acknowledge the ways that race is defined differently based upon national and cultural contexts. The language and understanding of race are not universal and terms and language usage evolve as norms and practices evolve. We chose to use the terms "Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)" and "underrepresented racial and ethnic groups." Our participants self-identified their race and ethnicity but in an attempt to maintain strict confidentiality, we made the choice to identify the race of the participants using the terminology of BIPOC and only identified the race of the interviewee when making explicit points about race, ethnicity, and culture.

Introduction

In this paper, we propose a nuanced definition of retention of librarians that distinguishes between functional and dysfunctional retention. We do this by integrating existing research on workplace dynamics and library culture with a qualitative exploration of academic librarians who have left jobs before they intended and what it was like for them to stay at those jobs after they realized they didn't want to stay long-term. As a result of this exploration, we argue that structural aspects of the academic library profession (such as emotional investment in the profession, geographic challenges, and role specialization) can lead to librarians staying with organizations longer than they would otherwise and that this "involuntary staying" is not functional retention.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) have been interested in strengthening recruitment and retention of academic librarians from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups since at least the early 1990s, and in the early 2000s named this issue a priority for the library profession (Neely & Peterson, 2007). Institutions and professional organizations responded by increasing the number of scholarships, training programs, and postgraduate residency programs aimed at supporting new graduates in finding entry-level positions (Boyd et al., 2017). However, for all of the discourse on "recruitment and retention," a majority of the emphasis has been on recruitment, which is easier to quantify, with little study of how retention functions in an academic library environment (Bugg, 2016). The profession has focused on recruiting more librarians from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, but we have not prioritized supporting them to stay (Hathcock, 2015). As a result, the numbers of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) librarians has stagnated or in some cases, actually decreased (ALA Office of Research and Statistics, 2017; American Library Association, 2012; Barrientos et al., 2019). Recruitment and retention are both critical to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in academic libraries, and failing to improve retention has and will continue to derail these initiatives (Hodge et al., 2021).

As we looked deeper into the literature on retention in academic libraries, we recognized that the concepts of recruitment and retention have become intertwined, with recruitment as the primary focus of the literature, leaving retention insufficiently studied and defined. Research that addresses retention tends to focus on proposed strategies, such as stay interviews (structured interviews aimed at strengthening employee and employer relationships) and mentorship programs (SHRM, n.d.-a). At the same time, there is no agreed-upon definition of retention that would allow us to assess these strategies. ACRL recently published

a toolkit for library worker retention that defines retention as "the ability of an organization to reduce turnover among employees and keep employees for as long as possible" (Nevius, 2023). While this definition is a good starting point for discussion, it is vague and immediately raises questions, namely whether keeping employees "for as long as possible" is truly an appropriate goal for academic libraries.

As academic libraries attempt to define and assess retention, we should recognize that involuntary staying can be just as negative an outcome for the individual and the organization as leaving, setting the stage for legacy toxicity, which persists even through leadership changes (Kendrick, 2023). At the same time, trying to understand these dynamics will help us design policies and programs to encourage work environments that are conducive to individual and organizational goals, and propagate structural solutions across the profession. We argue that functional retention is a positive, engaged relationship between the employee and the organization, where both are contributing to a workplace that is positive, safe, and harmonious.

Toward A Definition of Retention

Most studies on retention within academic library literature reflect "retention management," defined as strategic initiatives aimed at reducing turnover within institutions, where turnover is defined as employees leaving the organization (SHRM, n.d.-b, 2023). These studies touch on many types of initiatives, including strategies to retain librarians in their current positions (Musser, 2001; Strothmann & Ohler, 2011) and factors that encourage retention such as onboarding (Chapman, 2009; Hall-Ellis, 2014). More specifically, researchers have examined mentoring of librarians from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups (Olivas & Ma, 2009); professional development for librarians from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups (Acree et al., 2001); and inquiry into why librarians leave positions (Heady et al., 2020).

There is clear recognition in the library literature that retention is important and complex, yet we were unable to find a solid definition or agreed-upon understanding of what it means to successfully retain someone prior to ACRL's definition, which only came online in mid-2023 (Nevius, 2023). Some researchers have acknowledged the complications inherent in retention efforts. Both Bugg (2016) and Musser (2001) state that retention requires long term communication and commitment from multiple actors across the academic libraries profession, not just by individual institutions. Consequently, the profession tends to focus its efforts on recruitment and programs like mentorship to attempt to retain employees and does not address bigger and more complex issues

such as workplace culture and environment, job satisfaction, bullying, toxicity, racism, and low morale (Alajmi & Alasousi, 2018; Dewitt-Miller & Crawford, 2020; Freedman & Vreven, 2016; Kendrick, 2017; Kendrick & Damasco, 2019).

Within human resources management (HRM) literature, the definition of retention varies depending on the field in question. In a 2015 scoping review, Al-Emadi and colleagues acknowledge the variety of ways retention is defined within HRM and present a working definition of retention as "initiatives taken by management to keep employees from leaving the organization, such as rewarding employees for performing their jobs effectively, ensuring harmonious working relations between employees and managers, and maintaining a safe, healthy work environment" (Al-Emadi et al., 2015, p. 8). This definition also reflects "retention management" as described above, but is helpful in that it explains retention as an action that an organization takes (rather than a passive state that employees are in) and underscores the importance of the workplace environment and relationships between employees and managers. At the same time, this definition limits potential assessment for academic libraries.

Why Do Librarians Stay?

There are many reasons academic librarians remain with organizations where they are generally satisfied and feel that their personal and professional needs are being met; these reasons have been explored in the Library and Information Science (LIS) literature (Alajmi & Alasousi, 2018; Kawasaki, 2006), as well as the HRM literature (SHRM, 2023). However, we were interested in reasons why academic librarians may stay in organizations when they are not happy.

The research describing the academic librarian job market generally concludes that academic library jobs are difficult to obtain. Tewell points out that historically, the librarianship job narrative has moved between a model of "job scarcity" and a "recruitment crisis" but ultimately, entry level jobs are considered highly competitive (2012, p. 408). Other researchers have examined the perceived necessity of additional educational requirements to be considered competitive for an academic librarian position (Ferguson, 2016), the precariousness of academic librarian positions (Henninger et al., 2020), and the experiences of part time librarians looking for full time employment (Wilkinson, 2015). Ultimately, the research demonstrates that there is a perception of job scarcity within the academic libraries profession, meaning that transitioning to a new job is not as straightforward as in some other fields and may be a significant reason some librarians stay at their current jobs.

Many librarians are bound geographically to their libraries and workplaces (Kendrick, 2021; Ortega, 2017). Library workers who have familial and/or care-taking obligations cannot easily move to a new location for a new position, and may be subject to a limited job market in their current location. Many positions in academic libraries are highly specialized and draw from a national candidate pool, so even if there are several academic libraries available, there is no guarantee that an appropriate position will become available or that any individual can count on being hired. Likewise, career advancement can often require changing organizations or moving away from a home location, especially given that many academic libraries have flat organizational structures and very small staffs (Ortega, 2017). Academic librarians are also subject to the "two-body problem," where dual-career couples must navigate job markets in a way that accommodates both careers (Fisher, 2015).

Petersen (2023) reinforces this quandary, writing about career paths that force workers to leave their bases of support to maintain their specialized livelihoods and the resulting challenges workers face in creating new support networks as adults. She describes this situation as a type of "job lock," a term often applied to situations where employees are stuck at jobs because of non-portable benefits (like health insurance in the U.S.) but has also been used to describe other situations where employees feel unable to leave jobs (Huysse-Gaytandjieva et al., 2013, p. 588). Ritter (2023) also discusses the costs of transient careers often required of higher education workers and coins the term "academic stranger," referring to a mobile-by-default mentality that encourages workers to accept work conditions that are socially destabilizing. Pho and Fife (2023) point to a similar narrative in academic libraries that mobility and the resulting emotional connections and disconnections are expected as librarians move from place to place to support their professional needs. Consequently, it's natural for academic librarians to build their lives around their jobs and the people at those jobs, which can make it hard to leave an unsatisfying position.

Spencer (2022) describes this phenomenon as professional "hypermobility" or "nomadism" and emphasizes that it has positive and negative aspects, but needs to be more transparent to those considering entering the academic libraries field. Petersen argues that in fields "where jobs are scarce, [geographic] mobility is a privilege" that creates inequality in the job market and reinforces the idea that holding any job is lucky: "you take what you get and the expected posture is gratitude" (2023).

Another reason why librarians might be hesitant to leave is because they feel deeply emotionally connected to their job. Ettarh's work on "vocational awe" in the library profession, described as "the set of

ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique," sheds light on why librarians may stay in jobs that exploit them (2018). Similarly, Petersen (2022) describes library jobs as "passion jobs," which she identifies as "prime for exploitation," because they are often feminized and devalued. She describes how many nonprofit organizations, including libraries, work with as few staff as possible and don't always fill vacant positions; as a result, individuals may feel guilty for leaving because of likely consequences for their coworkers and/or patrons.

What Pushes Librarians to Leave?

Over the past decade, there has been a fair amount of focus on determining why academic librarians leave their organizations; specifically related to bullying, toxicity, and low morale in academic libraries (for example, Freedman & Vreven, 2016; Heady et al., 2020; Kendrick, 2017, 2021; Ortega, 2017). Although most of these studies assess librarians after they've left a job, this body of research offers insight into why a librarian might move toward involuntary staying.

Kendrick discusses the concept of a "trigger event," which is described as "an unexpected negative event or a relationship that developed in an unexpected and negative manner" (Kendrick, 2017, p. 851). Participants in her study "perceived trigger events as the beginning of a long-term abuse cycle" (p. 853). Most employees don't leave their job immediately after a trigger event occurs, if ever, but are forced to reevaluate their understanding of the organization and their role there. It is this mindset shift that we will describe as moving toward involuntary staying.

Ortega's (2017) definition of toxic leadership, characterized by "egregious actions" and "causing considerable and long-lasting damage," can help us understand traits of toxic workplaces where employees no longer want to stay (p. 35). Ortega's and Kendrick's (2017) studies both support the idea that toxicity becomes an ingrained part of the organizational culture. When employees leave toxic library workplaces, they are not leaving because of one bad day or even one bad leader, but because of a pattern and culture of toxicity. Research from Heady, et al. (2020) reinforces that when academic librarians leave, they are "not fleeing their positions, they are fleeing work environments they feel are toxic" (p. 591) and that morale, culture, library administration, and direct supervisors were the top factors in their decisions to leave (p. 585–586).

Understanding Turnover

As we attempt to better understand retention, it's helpful to begin with a framework for understanding turnover, commonly defined

in the HRM field as the "movement of employees out of the organization" (SHRM, n.d.-b). There are different types of turnover, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Turnover Classification Scheme

Reproduced by permission of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) *Retaining talent: A guide to analyzing and managing employee turnover* by D. G. Allen, 2008, p. 2 (https://blog.shrm.org/sites/default/files/reports/Retaining%20Talent-%20A%20Guide%20(Q1).pdf). (Alexandria, VA: Society for Human Resource Management). © 2018 by SHRM. All rights reserved."

Allen divides turnover into involuntary (i.e. an employee is fired or otherwise dismissed at the organization's discretion) and voluntary (i.e. an employee leaves the organization because they want to). Even considering only voluntary turnover, there are many varied reasons that would require different kinds of attention from an organization. If turnover is measured simply as the total number of workers who left the organization in a set period of time (SHRM, n.d.-b), it's easy to see why an organization would struggle to understand if they had a retention problem or not, or what they might be able to do about it. Therefore, "reducing turnover" is too simplistic a goal (Nevius, 2023).

The opposite of turnover is staying in an organization, which we argue is not the same thing as true retention. Staying doesn't automatically mean that an employee is content or that retention initiatives are working. Turnover may reasonably be defined as failed retention, but retention should not be simply the absence of turnover.

Understanding Retention through Staying

Based on Allen's 2008 classification of turnover, we can also classify

different categories of staying, defined as the opposite of turnover, or an employee who has not left the organization. We use the terms voluntary and involuntary to describe staying, similar to Allen's approach, but in the case of staying, it's important to note that voluntary staying and involuntary staying are mindsets and, unlike turnover, are not simply classifications of an event. Voluntary staying is a state of mind where an employee is generally satisfied and engaged to the point that they are not looking for other positions or needing coping strategies to survive their current work life. Generally, employees join organizations (i.e. begin new positions) voluntarily staying.

Figure 2: Voluntary and Involuntary Staying

When an employee becomes dissatisfied, disengaged, and starts to use coping strategies to survive their work life, they have moved from voluntarily staying to involuntarily staying. This does not mean that they will necessarily begin looking for another job right away, or ever. While the employee may be experiencing job-lock at the same time (when external factors such as non-portable health benefits prevent someone from leaving their job), involuntary staying describes their mindset and feelings about the job. In our study, we interviewed librarians who had experienced this involuntarily staying state at a previous job.

Our qualitative research described in this paper sought to explore the moments or events that caused librarians to leave jobs before they intended and their experiences once they decided to leave. Given how difficult it is to switch jobs in our field, what was it that tipped the scales for them, making staying untenable? What were their experiences and what could we learn from them about how to define and improve retention of librarians in the future? Through this exploration, we learned about these original questions, but also about the interplay between library culture, management, leaving and staying, and turnover and retention.

Methods

The qualitative data was gathered through 10 semi-structured interviews of academic librarians who left jobs sooner than they'd planned, for job-related reasons as opposed to personal reasons, such as moving to be closer to family. Using an interview guide (See Appendix A), we sought to learn about the interviewees' experiences as they realized that they could no longer stay at their job and what happened before and after that realization. While we suspected that these experiences would be a little different for everyone, we hoped to expand our general understanding of times when employees were not retained by their organization (that is, when retention failed) and the effects on the individual and the organization in the time period between an employee realizing they wanted to leave and actually leaving.

The interviews, lasting approximately one hour each, were conducted between January 2021–June 2021. Participants were drawn from a pool of 57 responses to a screening survey seeking participants who had left a job before they had planned to. From our pool of respondents, we selected seven participants who identified as BIPOC (a sample that included participants identifying as non-Black POC, but none who identified as indigenous) and three participants who identified as white, using a random number generator to select participants from each strata (see Appendix B). We intentionally oversampled BIPOC librarians, to center their voices as we explored themes related to race and white supremacy culture, and acknowledging that people from historically marginalized groups are often positioned to have unique insight into dominant cultures. Our screening survey did not specify whether respondents should be managers or non-managers themselves, and we learned during our interviews that both were represented in our sample.

Our overall sample size of 10 interviews was relatively small. This was partially for practical reasons, but also because our research team agreed after our 10 interviews that we'd reached sufficient saturation; that is, we believed additional interviews would not yield new themes (Strauss & Corbin, 2014, p. 148).

Interviews were conducted via Zoom by two researchers and audio-recorded with participants' permission. Interview audio was transcribed using Descript and copyedited and de-identified by the researchers. Consistent with our consent agreement, participants are identified in our writing only by an assigned code number (e.g. "Interviewee 7"), their self-identified gender pronouns, and whether they self-identified as BIPOC or white.

Each transcription was coded by at least two researchers using

grounded theory methodology, per Strauss and Corbin (2014), meaning that a codebook was developed during analysis based on recurring themes across interviews. In addition to exploring our research questions, a secondary goal was to provide space for participants to share their experiences, which many had never shared before, and to have these experiences heard and validated as legitimate (see Cunningham et al., 2023).

Results

The majority of our interviewees started out their positions in a state of voluntary staying: they expressed positive feelings about their jobs at the start and described minimal or no red flags during interviews. They discussed things like specific job duties or opportunities that appealed to them, positive feelings about compensation, and a feeling that they could "have a career there" (Interviewee 2).

Over time, interviewees either experienced "trigger events" ("an unexpected negative event or a relationship that developed in an unexpected and negative manner," as described by Kendrick, 2017, p. 851) or general increasing awareness of things being "off," specifically related to organizational culture. These trigger events and off feelings led our interviewees to move from a state of voluntarily staying to involuntarily staying.

One example of this was Interviewee 9, who was happily in her job for four years when a radical restructuring of the library departments occurred with no warning. Interviewee 9 noted that after this restructuring occurred, she and her colleagues began engaging in "checked out" behavior.

> *Oh yeah. We all checked out for sure…Well, one thing you saw was people left immediately at five [and] people didn't come in early. There was not as much engagement just on the social level. Like before this[–]and this is gonna sound like some kind of weird, perfect land[–but] we went to eat lunch together all at the same time in the lunchroom. And people had a good social relationship. After [the restructuring,] people would avoid each other.*

A few months after the initial restructuring, Interviewee 9 had a defining moment in which she received explicit discouragement from her new supervisor:

> *I was a high achiever. I seemed to be moving forward. And my boss turned to me, my new boss, in a meeting with other people there and said, "there are people in this*

> *organization that think that they are moving forward and they will never move forward under me," while staring at me very directly. So, I mean, I didn't have a career there anymore, so.*

This was the final straw for Interviewee 9 and she began looking for a new job immediately. This example highlights that "involuntarily staying" is more of a frame of mind than a specific period of time and also that an employee can be involuntarily staying while not actively looking for another job. In the case of Interviewee 9, she went from happy in her job to one of many "checked out" people and finally to actively looking for a new job once it became clear that she was on her new supervisor's "shit list."

Interviewee 5 presents a contrasting example in which the Interviewee stayed in his position for a longer period of time:

> *I had trigger events, yes. Now having said that, it still took me five years to leave that job. And there's a lot of factors in that.*

Interviewee 5 described two trigger events in which he clashed with library leadership and was written up. He was at the job for a total of five years, but notes that his job search was "four years long," indicating a very long period of involuntarily staying. Ultimately, he left without a job offer when he recognized that his health was suffering:

> *When I finally left that institution, I left without having a job offer at all. So it was important that I needed to get out of there and it was tak[ing] tolls on my health and everything else. My coping mechanisms had went [sic] from healthy to unhealthy, so it was time to go.*

A third example is from Interviewee 1 who was on a three-year contract with her institution and noted, "I can live through anything for three years." However, this interviewee experienced a trigger event where her boss changed a positive work review to a negative one after she refused to provide him with personal information. She realized that she could not stay, but was also conflicted about leaving colleagues and patrons:

> *I just felt like that just killed it. Like there was no resurrecting that relationship. After that, I worked out the rest of that contract because [...] you know, I did like the students, we were very close to several of them and my colleagues and I didn't want to leave them in the lurch because [if] I left, someone else would pick up the slack*

> *and there wasn't enough of them to go around in the first place. So I was very mindful of that, but that was the event where I'm like, you know, can this marriage be saved? No, that was it.*

As explained earlier, "involuntarily staying" is a mindset rather than a specific period of time. In our interviews, the time period between the interviewee realizing they could no longer stay in a job and them actually leaving ranged from nearly immediately to years. Their sense of immediacy also ranged from relatively casual to dire.

What all our interviewees had in common is that they moved from voluntarily staying to involuntarily staying and engaged in a range of coping mechanisms to survive once they realized that staying was untenable and until they were able to leave. This is congruent with Kendrick's stages of low morale when onset of coping strategies eventually follows trigger events and exposure to workplace abuse or neglect (Kendrick, 2021, p. 12).

Borrowing again from Allen (2008), we use the terms "functional" and "dysfunctional" to classify the coping mechanisms described by our interview participants. One important point of departure is that Allen's terminology views outcomes from the organization's perspective, while our study is interested in outcomes for the employee and the organization. Therefore, we classify coping strategies as functional, or, congruous with the health of the individual and the organization, or dysfunctional, or unhealthy for the individual and/or the organization (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Functional and Dysfunctional Coping Strategies

Some examples of functional coping strategies recounted by interviewees:

- Regularly validating yourself and your feelings:

> *[I'd say:] 'You're not crazy. You're not imagining this. They're treating you as poorly as you think they are.' And I think a lot of times some of these things flourish because people are made to feel like they're exaggerating or overly sensitive, and they don't have the support system to know that what they're feeling is entirely valid. (Interviewee 1)*

- Seeking perspective from outside the organization:

> *I would say you know, find your mentor, who are [sic] hopefully outside of your institution, because you know, if you're in a toxic workplace and your mentor is inside, if they've been there for a while, it can look like it's normal when it's really not normal. So you need someone on the outside to help you to kind of navigate bad experience[s]. (Interviewee 10)*

- Regularly reminding oneself that "it's not personal":

> *I [would tell someone in a similar situation] to remember that it is not personal... And the reason that it's important people know that is, one, it feels a lot worse if it feels personal. But the other thing is, that part of that feeling of personalness makes it harder for you to decide 'screw this, I'm going.' You know, you recognize that you are a cog in a capitalist machine. You can take your little cog-self somewhere else where they will pay you more. (Interviewee 9)*

- Prioritizing physical and mental health.
- Finding healthy ways to release anger and frustration.
- Finding validation and support from ally colleagues, especially among BIPOC colleagues.
- Setting and practicing strong boundaries around work and work interactions.

Examples of dysfunctional coping strategies described by interviewees:

- Warning new folks not to try too hard and to "stay in their lanes." This was practiced by both interviewees and their colleagues and was described by multiple interviewees as having both functional and dysfunctional aspects.

> *[I was told:] If you just do what everybody tells you to do and stay away from the riff-raff...and stay below the fray you'll do well [and] move up here. (Interviewee 5)*

> *[The advice I was given was:] 'Stay under the radar. Don't try to do too much.' (Interviewee 3)*

- Participating in a culture of resentment and grudge-holding.

> *[There were] existing tensions and grudges and resentment, that's been building over years and it's created such a hostile environment where you can't necessarily stay neutral. (Interviewee 3)*

- Disengaging with meaningful work or "checking out".

> *I just put the rest on autopilot, right. I stopped sharing ideas...I devoted myself to my job search. (Interviewee 6)*

- Creating or reinforcing organizational silos.

It's also important to note that the line between functional and dysfunctional coping strategies is thin and often not very meaningful without context. A coping mechanism that is functional in one scenario may be dysfunctional in another. Likewise, a coping mechanism that is functional from an individual's perspective may sometimes be counterproductive from an organizational perspective, or vice versa. Often interviewees described using functional and dysfunctional coping strategies simultaneously. Additionally, we are not arguing that all employees who engage in harmful behaviors are doing so because they have moved into a state of involuntary staying.

Discussion

The library literature has established that toxic leadership and organizational culture can cause or contribute to individuals leaving their organizations. Our study suggests that organizational culture also influences whether an employee is voluntarily or involuntarily staying at the organization, and whether their coping strategies are functional or dysfunctional. We can also see, just as all employees participate in organizational culture in some way, that employees' dysfunctional coping strategies can feed into and reinforce toxic culture, creating a feedback loop.

Further, academic librarianship as a profession has structural features, described earlier, that can prolong an employee's period of involuntary staying at an organization and therefore exacerbate the situation for all involved. Our findings about dysfunctional coping mechanisms complicate the ACRL Toolkit's definition of retention that includes a goal of keeping employees "for as long as possible" (Nevius, 2023). In some scenarios, keeping employees is not in the

best interest of the individual or the organization.

It's important to note, though, that this does not mean that leaders of an organization should force an employee to leave. While managers and leaders should proactively address any disruptive behaviors from employees (many of which we've described here as dysfunctional coping strategies), the onus is on the organization to confront toxic culture and not punish individual employees for the ways they try to survive toxic work environments. It should also be recognized that disruptive behavior lies on a continuum; there are certain actors in libraries who would label calling out racist or homophobic practices as disruptive. This can be particularly fraught for employees who are expected to be "library nice," a framework describing a highly "racialized and gendered form of workplace oppression," where being perceived as nice is "more important than [their] knowledge, skill, or effectiveness" (Kendrick, 2021, p. 18).

Instead, we propose that retention in academic libraries is about building and maintaining a relationship between the organization and its employees that supports employees to voluntarily stay**.** Retention studies and strategies should take into account the different varieties of turnover and staying to help organizations honestly assess how they are building cultures that encourage employees to voluntarily stay, with the active acknowledgement that those from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups are often structurally situated to be the most negatively impacted by toxic library culture. Initiatives to improve retention should center employees' well-being and agency, recognizing that employees and organizations both have much to gain from improving functional retention, but responsibility for bringing retention forward as an organizational focus area ultimately lies with library leaders.

Functional retention requires good leadership, but is also dependent on building and solidifying a culture of accountability, transparency, open discussion, anti-racism, vulnerability, safety, and courtesy that is resilient to legacy toxicity and where most or all librarians are staying voluntarily. While leaders can set the stage for this kind of culture, all employees have an influence on the culture and responsibility for its success. To reiterate, functional retention is a positive relationship between the employee and the organization, with both sides contributing to a workplace that is positive, emotionally and physically safe, and harmonious.

Recommendations for organizations:

- Engage in a regular cycle of assessment.
- Be proactive about retention. Recognize that functional retention is built through consistent, deliberate actions.
- Seek to understand turnover at your organization. This is

important even in job markets where employers have the upper hand over job-seekers (as is true for many academic librarian positions).

- Seek to understand retention at your organization. When measuring retention, aim to learn whether your employees are staying voluntarily or involuntarily.
  - Strategies such as "stay interviews" (a corollary to exit interviews) and "intent to stay" instruments (developed in the field of nursing) may be useful, but it isn't clear how often either have been deployed in academic libraries thus far and how effective they will be in this environment (Kosmoski & Calkin, 1986; Nevius, 2023).
  - Recognize that not all employees may feel safe answering truthfully.
  - Ask employees what could improve their experience and listen to their answers.
  - Use their answers to design or transform your retention strategies.

Reflections & Future Directions

We were able to learn a lot about these issues from our literature review, interviews, and analysis, and we hope that our research opens many doors for future study.

Our small sample size, though appropriate for qualitative inquiry, means that we can't say anything meaningful about differences between demographic groups (e.g. whether BIPOC librarians might experience longer periods of involuntary staying), the potential impacts of other intersecting identities beyond race, or whether our findings are truly generalizable. It would be desirable in the future to have quantitative evidence and a representative sample. Additionally, future study of involuntary staying and its implications for functional retention should also include experiences of librarians who are involuntarily staying and have not left their organizations.

We continue to be curious about many of the threads unearthed in our data: for example, the role of training for managers, the responsibilities of professional organizations, and the roles of human resources professionals or ombudspeople.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic was responsible for igniting new questions across all sectors about employees' relationships to work and their employers. While we believe that there are structural aspects of higher education and academic libraries that distinguish our profession, it will be essential to link studies of library workplaces more closely with research and thinkers from many fields outside our own. For example, how did academic libraries' responses to the pandemic change the way librarians felt about their organizations and their roles, and how might this impact

whether they are voluntarily or involuntarily staying? How does the framing of "quiet quitting," or doing the minimum requirements for a job, impact involuntarily staying? How should changing societal attitudes about mutual aid and collective care factor into our approaches to measuring functional retention? These are important questions that we hope will be incorporated into future explorations.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our thanks to Jessica Schomberg, Brittany Paloma Fiedler, and Kaetrena Davis Kendrick for their time and flexibility in guiding us through the publishing process. We are genuinely grateful for their constructive and insightful feedback and suggestions at every stage.

This article represents several years of workshopping and sharpening our ideas through conversations with each other, colleagues, and with audience members from presentations at several conferences; we appreciate all of these contributions.

We would also like to recognize the grant from the Friends of Boatwright Library at the University of Richmond that allowed us to compensate our interviewees for their time.

Finally, we are sincerely grateful to our interviewees, who each generously shared their stories, even when they were painful, so that others may feel less alone and in service of building a better profession for all of us.

Appendix A: Semi-structured interview guide

However you answer, we aren't here to judge you. We are coming from a place of research and empowerment. Your experiences are valid and are being heard.

Before we begin, we want to review a piece of the Informed Consent Statement you signed — as stated there, public reports of our research findings will invoke participants by a pseudonym and job title only, and that you will be given the chance to designate your own job title. This could be more specific (like "social sciences liaison librarian"), less specific ("liaison librarian"), or very general ("academic librarian") depending on your preference. You are also welcome to choose your own pseudonym if you'd like.

- What appealed to you about Job 1?
- What was your interview process like for Job 1? Did you feel any red flags? In retrospect?
- If someone was working at this organization, what would you

like them to know?
- How was the library structured administratively? Where did you fit in the hierarchical structure of the library? Who did you directly report to? Did you have any direct reports?
- What aspects did you like about your daily job duties?
- What aspects did you dislike about your daily job?
- Did you have colleagues you trusted?
- How were they able to navigate their jobs?
- Did you have support?
- How did that support manifest?
- Kendrick (2017) defines trigger events as "an unexpected negative event or a relationship that developed in an unexpected and negative manner." Was there a trigger event for you?
- How did you begin your new job search?
- Did you feel that the environment was personal, or was it part of a larger cultural problem?
- Did HR ever seem like an option?
- Were attempts made to retain you*? Is there anything that could have been done to retain you? How would you have liked to see this event handled?
    1. How could this have been made right?/How would you have preferred supervisors/admin to have addressed the issue?

- In retrospect, would you have done anything differently?
- Do you think that the problems were specific to that library, or library culture in general?
- What would you tell someone else who is in a similar situation?
    1. What would you tell someone who is interested in applying to your (old) position?

*Note: We used the term "retain" in our interview guide referring to a situation when an organization incentivizes an employee to stay after they've indicated that they're planning to leave (for example, with a salary counter-offer). We acknowledge that this usage of the term and concept is different from how we came to understand retention over the course of this project.

Appendix B

Interviewee #	Race/Ethnicity and Pronouns (self-identified by interviewee)
1	BIPOC (she/her)
2	White (she/her)
3	BIPOC (he/him)
4	BIPOC (she/her)

5	BIPOC (he/him)
6	BIPOC (she/her)
7	BIPOC (she/her)
8	White (she/her)
9	White (she/her)
10	BIPOC (she/her)

Table 1. Summary of Interview Participants

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1 RESPONSE

J Reply

2024–04–10 at 7:14 pm

As someone who struggled with a significant period of "involuntary staying," one coping mechanism I used was creating projects etc. for myself and collaborators that were meaningful to me and that I hoped would appeal to future employers as I navigated a difficult (for a number of reasons) job search. My workplace at the time

seemed largely indifferent to whatever I tried or accomplished, but this strategy allowed me more and more work projects/things that were *mine* and that reflected my skills and interests — and that I could talk about in interviews. Eventually I landed a job that was better aligned with my strengths and backgrounds, at least in part because I had done this for myself.

Doing lots of interviews also helped to give me better outside perspective — I definitely was introduced to how different library work cultures could be, and I found that helpful in warding off that sense that "every place is the same, every place will be like this."

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