

Succession Planning In Academic Libraries: A Reconsideration

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** It has been widely projected in the library literature that a substantial number of librarians will retire in the near future leaving significant gaps in the workforce, especially in library leadership. Many of those concerned with organizational development in libraries have promoted succession planning as an essential tool for addressing this much-anticipated wave of retirements. The purpose of this paper is to argue that succession planning is the wrong approach for academic libraries.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This paper provides a review of the library literature on succession planning, as well as studies analyzing position announcements in librarianship which provide evidence as to the extent to which academic librarianship has changed in recent years.

**Findings:** In a review of the library literature the author found no sound explanation of why succession planning is an appropriate method for filling anticipated vacancies and no substantive evidence that succession planning programs in libraries are successful.

**Practical implications:** Rather than fill anticipated vacancies with librarians prepared to fill specific positions by means of a succession planning program, the author recommends that academic library leaders should focus on the continual evaluation of current library needs and future library goals, and treat each vacancy as an opportunity to create a new position that will best satisfy the strategic goals of the library.

**Originality/value:** In contrast to the nearly universal support for succession planning found in the library literature, this paper offers a different point of view.

**Keywords:** Succession planning, succession management, succession planning and management, workforce development, workforce planning, retirement.

### Succession Planning In Academic Libraries: A Reconsideration

It has been widely projected in the library literature that a substantial number of librarians will retire in the near future leaving significant gaps in the workforce. Many of those concerned with organizational development in libraries have promoted succession planning as an essential tool for addressing this much-anticipated wave of retirements. Succession planning has also been promoted as a solution for a corresponding expected shortage of qualified librarians capable of moving into leadership roles—especially in academic libraries.

Those who have been promoting succession planning in libraries do not seem to have agreed upon a definition for the term. In the library literature there has been little effort to differentiate among succession planning and a host of related concepts: succession management, strategic human resource management, workforce development, workforce planning, manpower planning, replacement planning, talent management, and human capital management. What initially seems appealing about the concept of succession planning—having a plan in place should leadership positions become vacant as a result of resignation, retirement, termination, or untimely death—becomes less appealing when it becomes apparent how broadly advocates of succession planning would apply the concept. A review of the library literature reveals a range of meanings for succession planning from the fairly specific, a process of ensuring that qualified persons are available to assume *key leadership positions* should they become vacant, to a much broader process which would include any position in the organization deemed to be of some significance. For the purposes of this discussion, succession planning can be defined as a systematic effort to identify and develop particular individuals to assume key leadership and management positions as part of a larger plan to ensure organizational continuity. More simply, it is an attempt to have “the right leaders in the right place at the right time” (Sloan, 2007, p. 776).

Some may associate the term succession with nobility, hereditary monarchy, or royal succession (Who is going to inherit the throne? How is the order of succession to be determined?) Perhaps others may think about the application of succession planning to business. In corporations, large and small, succession planning is a process generally used to identify, train, and prepare select employees to fill key leadership roles within the company, such as chief executive officer, chief operating officer, or chief information officer. When there is turnover at the executive level in large organizations, succession planning can be part of a broader strategy to provide continuity, ease executive transitions, and perpetuate the organization.

Succession planning has been a concern of human resources professionals in the for-profit sector for decades, appearing in the business literature in the 1960s (Blakesley, 2011, p.1). Ostrowski (1968) observed, “with the growth of the large, publicly owned corporation, management succession has become a major corporate concern, and properly so, since it is critical to the survival and continuity of a business enterprise” (p. 10). Having been championed in the business literature for several decades, succession planning has lately been an increasingly popular topic in the library literature. As baby boomers retire, the ratio of new appointments to long-time employees is expected to tip toward newcomers. Concerns regarding succession in libraries have increasingly occupied the attention of library management and human resource professionals. Some have advocated that this coming “crisis in library leadership” necessitates that libraries adopt succession planning to fill anticipated openings in library leadership.

The author of this paper contends that succession planning is the wrong approach for addressing concerns about the expected retirement of large numbers of librarians. The author will argue that, although succession planning may be a sound approach for some for-profit corporations, it is not a prudent approach for academic libraries. A review of the library literature suggests that the rationale for applying

succession planning to academic libraries advocated by proponents is questionable. Further, the literature offers no sound explanation of why succession planning is an appropriate method for filling anticipated vacancies and no substantive evidence that succession planning programs in libraries are successful. Most importantly—although succession planning may appear to be a credible, even forward-thinking concept—libraries implementing a succession planning program risk perpetuating an obsolete organizational structures. Specifically, in this paper the author will argue that (1) succession planning is not the best solution for addressing concerns about an expected shortage of librarians, and (2) succession planning may not be the right solution for addressing concerns as to where the next generation of academic library leaders is to come from.

The author will address the ways in which succession planning has been broadly and variously defined as well as provide background information on both the expected wave of retirements and the corresponding idea that there is a lack of suitably prepared candidates. The author will argue that succession planning is the wrong approach for academic libraries, citing in particular the many studies published in the library literature which analyze position announcements. The body of articles describing changes in position announcements, a common method for exploring trends in library work, provides ample evidence as to the extent to which academic librarianship has changed in recent decades, and offers a thought-provoking counterpoint to those in the field who advocate for the use of succession planning in academic libraries. The author will also acknowledge several scenarios in which the implementation of a succession planning program might be useful.

The author will make four recommendations for staffing academic libraries for the future. First, those in leadership positions should continue to mentor and guide those who possess leadership potential—even though those librarians may ultimately serve elsewhere. Second, library leaders should continually assess the climate in and out of

the library to identify current and future needs. Third, as librarianship is changing rapidly, potential vacancies should be evaluated in order to determine where in the library the new position is most needed; rather than fill existing and anticipated vacancies as they occur, each new vacancy should be looked upon as an opportunity to create a new position that will best satisfy the strategic goals of the library. Fourth, when possible, these newly created positions should be filled with qualified candidates recruited from outside of the organization. Key leadership positions in particular should be filled by external candidates who possesses the knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics required to fill that new role, and who will bring a fresh point of view or perspective to the organization. Although this paper will focus on academic librarianship, the assumptions made by the author—as well as the conclusions drawn—may well apply to other types of libraries.

### **Defining Succession Planning**

Succession planning has been defined broadly and variously throughout the library literature. In an effort to define succession planning and differentiate it from a number of related concepts, the author consulted standard works in the literature of human resources, including reference works and standard texts. In the library literature, a variety of definitions of succession planning have been offered (as well as varying definitions of related terms such as workforce planning) by Bridgland (1999), McCarthy (2005), Noon (2004), Whitmell (2002, 2005b), and others.

Formulating a critical response to succession planning in libraries has proven to be a challenging endeavor—not because of the excellence of the concept, nor because of the strength of the argument of others—but for the reason that succession planning is a problematic construct. During the process of researching, reading, and writing about succession planning in libraries, the author found it challenging to address a concept that has been so broadly and variously defined. Schrader (2005), noted “the concept of succession planning, as commonly employed in the corporate world and as used

increasingly in the library and information studies literature, does not have a generally agreed upon meaning” (p. 36). Noon (2004), wrote that “succession planning can mean several things in several different contexts” (p. 5). Whitmell (2005a), having noted that succession planning and staff planning “mean different things to different people” (pp. 119-120), explained that “for older workers, succession planning involves finding people to replace them. For younger workers, succession and staff planning are a means of moving upward” (p. 120). I Furthermore, there are a host of terms in the business literature— succession management, strategic human resource management, workforce development, workforce planning, manpower planning, replacement planning, talent management, and human capital management (a few of which have migrated to the library literature)—that describe concepts that are similar to succession planning, but do not quite describe the same concept. There has been significant overlap in the literature as to how these terms have been used.

An examination of business reference sources, as well as human resources and management texts was helpful in an attempt to clarify the definition of succession management and related terms. William J. Rothwell, author of *Effective Succession Planning: Ensuring Leadership Continuity and Building Talent from Within* (2010) the most comprehensive text on succession planning, has described succession planning and management as “any effort designed to ensure the continued effective performance of an organization, division, department, or workgroup by providing for the development, replacement, and strategic application of key people over time” (p. 6). More succinctly he wrote that, “succession planning is a process of developing talent to meet the needs of the organization now and in the future” (p. 371).

Rothwell (2010) also found that there are divergent understandings of succession planning. Referring to the more traditional definition of succession planning, he noted that “to some people, succession planning and management refers to top-of-the-organization-chart planning and development only. In short, the focus is only on

preparing people to assume top-level leadership positions.” However, Rothwell also suggested that the focus of effective succession planning could be more widely applied; “succession planning and management refers more broadly to planning for the right number and right type of people to meet the organization’s needs over time” (p. 13).

Some of those who have written articles in the library literature advocating for the implementation of succession planning programs also noted the shift from a more traditional, limited definition of succession planning to one that included more than those holding administrative or leadership appointments. For example, in an article describing the benefits of a competency-based succession planning system, Nardoni (1997) observed, “once a narrowly focused program that covered only a small percentage of senior executives and a limited numbers of key positions, the succession planning process has gone global in most organizations” (p. 60). The process now covers all or most employees, rather than just executive. Bridgland (1999) described a succession planning program as “a deliberate and systematic effort by an organization to ensure leadership in key positions and encourage individual advancement” (p. 21). Despite having presented that fairly narrow definition, she generally used succession planning as an umbrella term, suggesting that an effective succession planning program would extend to all levels, encompassing “more than a mere replacement of key positions or people” (p. 21). This broad description would be a more apt definition for workforce planning, rather than succession planning. Noon (2004) offered an explicit definition: “succession planning is a formal and structured process designed to ensure that we attract and retain the people and the skills that the organisation needs now and in the future to create a supply of current and future key job successors to optimize the organisations strategic needs and the aspirations of its individuals” (p. 6). It’s worth noting that despite the reference to “key job successors,” this definition is comprehensive in scope as to who is included in the process. Whitmell (2005b), in the introduction to *Staff Planning in a Time of Demographic Change*, broadly defined

succession planning as “replacing the large number of those anticipated to be retiring and leaving professional and nonprofessional positions in the next few years” (p. v). *Staff Planning in a Time of Demographic Change* (2005) is a collection of papers from a series of conferences held in Ontario, Canada in 2002 and 2003. The chapter authors identified and discussed the issues related to expected wave of retirements and the need to develop essential skills and competencies for leadership roles in the library and information science profession.

In the introduction to the book *Succession Planning in the Library: Developing Leaders, Managing Change*, Singer and Griffith (2010) explained that their original intention was to focus only on succession planning, and how to design succession planning program (p. vii). However, the authors decided to broaden the topic, and did so significantly. The first three chapters focused on succession planning for all positions below that of library director (workforce planning). Two chapters addressed retention. Only one chapter focused on planning for the succession of a new library director. The explanation of what succession planning includes is further extended as the authors expanded their original intention: “we refer to the process holistically as succession planning and development. We need to plan for succession, and in collaboration with our staff we need to focus on employee development and retention” (p. viii).

In the last several years, succession planning has increasingly been thought of as a holistic process—one that involves all positions in the organization, not only anticipated vacancies. Blakesley (2011) observed, “succession planning may increasingly be viewed as just a part of strategic planning processes, as we decide what must be done and what can be given up, and how to reallocate, retrain, and realign the people who remain in our organizations” (p. 2). Galbraith, Smith, and Walker (2012) wrote “succession planning involves more than simply identifying a successor for leadership positions—it is training and developing employees throughout the organization to have the skills, knowledge, and experience to be effective in their

current and future positions” (p. 222). Others have also taken a broad view, recommending training and developing employees throughout the organization. Schachter (2013) suggested that “succession planning is more than just finding people to promote from within—it is about developing capacity and skills among your staff” (p. 30). Similarly, Hall-Ellis and Grealy (2013) wrote “succession planning allows an organization to anticipate new leadership, assess the skills and knowledge of employees, identify individuals who have leadership potential, and provide professional development opportunities, mentoring, and experiences to prepare the library staff for personnel changes” (p. 587).

### **A Multiplicity of Terminology**

Succession planning has frequently been defined and described in a manner that confuses it with other closely-related concepts. There are many terms in the management and human resources literature used to describe concepts that address workforce continuity. Among the terms readers have to contend with are succession management, strategic human resource management, workforce development, workforce planning, manpower planning, replacement planning, talent management, and human capital management. Some of these terms mean essentially the same thing; others have quite distinct meanings. Unfortunately, there has been a tendency to use them loosely; hence there is considerable confusion about these terms. Hartley (2004) wryly observed “gather any group of HR professionals in a room and you can be sure to have a plethora of additional terms” (p. 20). Fortunately, not all of these terms migrated from the management and human resources literature to the library literature; succession planning, workforce planning, and workforce development are the terms that appear most frequently. Succession planning has emerged as the term most commonly used to describe a planning process intended to ensure that the right people with the right skills are on board to meet the needs of an organization over time.

There has been some effort in the library literature to distinguish among succession planning and the other closely related terms. For example, in an article about how a possible crisis in the workforce as baby boomers reach retirement age would affect special libraries, Whitmell (2005c) differentiated between succession planning and workforce planning: “while succession planning includes identifying and training people for specific key positions, workforce planning goes beyond this to include strategies for educating, recruiting, retaining, training, developing and mentoring staff throughout an organization” (p. 135). Hawthorne (2011) suggested that “workforce planning is a broader and more comprehensive approach planning for overall workforce needs, not just for leadership skills and knowledge” (p. 8). Galbraith et al. (2011) maintained that succession planning “involves more than simply identifying a successor for leadership positions—it is training and developing employees through the organization to have the skills, knowledge, and experience to be effective in their current and future positions” (p. 222). The latter portion is arguably a good definition of workforce planning, rather than succession planning.

Replacement planning has not been clearly defined in either the business literature or the library literature. Sloan (2007) suggested that the term replacement planning has been superseded by the term succession planning. Replacement planning has been described as a process “in which key positions were targeted and slates of candidates were identified as possible backups in case the current incumbent retired, was promoted, or was ‘hit by a bus’” (p. 776). Similarly, Hawthorne (2011) defined replacement planning as “a form of risk management that focuses on how to replace key leaders in catastrophic circumstances” (p. 8). Rothwell (2010) attempted to differentiate between the two terms by suggesting that “replacement planning is about finding backups to fill vacancies on an organizational chart,” while “succession planning is about grooming the talent needed for the future” (p. 371).

In recent years there has been a shift in the literature from the use of the term succession planning to succession management. This change in terminology suggests a link between the development of people in an organization to the growth and development of the organization itself. Some of those concerned with organizational development in libraries have used the term succession planning when writing about the need to establish a succession plan, which is closely related to the part of strategic planning focused on human resources. Arguably, succession planning is part of succession management, the latter suggesting a broader approach to organizational development.

It is useful to differentiate between succession planning and succession management (alternatively, a succession management plan) for an institution. The latter is a more holistic approach related to strategic planning. Succession management involves more employees than succession planning; rather than merely identifying replacements for key positions at the top of the organization, succession management has been an effort to “develop a robust pipeline of leaders at all levels of the organization to ensure its continued growth and success” (Sloan, 2007, p. 777). Having noted that succession planning and succession management are not the same thing, Hawthorne (2011) explained that “succession planning is active planning that ensures an organization will have the right people in the right place at the right time for the right job,” while “succession management is managing implementation of the plan and the internal processes (p. 8).

Although the Rothwell text is titled *Effective Succession Planning* (2010), he generally used the phrase “succession planning and management,” which he defined as “the process that helps stabilize the tenure of personnel” (p. 6). In the library literature, Hall-Ellis and Grealy (2013) also used this phrase and described succession planning and management as an effort to “provide a deliberate strategy to identify, develop, retain, and reassign personnel in anticipation of changes in the library staff” (p. 598).

It is worth noting that there has clearly been confusion in the literature between a call for the implementation of a succession planning program in libraries and what appears to be a need for strategic planning. In some of the literature—when it is the organization as a whole that is being discussed—the author has used the term succession planning, when he or she could have (and perhaps should have) used the term strategic planning.

The library literature suggests that the definition of succession planning has indeed broadened to include most positions in the library, not just administrative positions. This broad focus may be accounted for by the fact that in any large academic library organizational structure there is a wide variety of specialized positions. Many librarians hold positions which significantly differentiate their role from that of their colleagues. Often those working in technical services, such as an acquisitions librarian or a special formats cataloger, or those fulfilling a variety of roles in digital scholarship, hold unique positions in each institution. In public services, there may be a team of liaison librarians responsible for reference/research support, instruction, and collection development for specific departments or schools. Each liaison serves clientele with differing needs, making the role of each of these librarians, to some extent, specialized. The expertise of the nursing liaison is different from the liaison for political science, or modern languages, or business. Thus it could be argued that most academic librarians hold unique positions. Succession planning seems to be a suitable approach for ensuring that there are appropriate candidates already on staff to step into any significant, unique role should it become vacant. This is perhaps one of the flaws of succession planning. Spending time, money, and energy on an effort to be prepared to fill potential vacancies across the entire organization would not be especially prudent. Given the rapidly changing climate, many of the current positions in any large academic library may not be filled should they become vacant.

### **The Anticipated Wave of Retirements**

Concerns about the graying of the profession have been accompanied by concerns about the corresponding retirement of members of the baby boom generation as well as a shortage of library school graduates. For several decades, commentators throughout the professional literature have foretold of a possible crisis in the workforce as baby boomers reach retirement age, and predicted that the library profession will face a severe shortage of librarians sometime in the near future (Hernon, Powell, and Young, 2003; Matarazzo, 2000; Wilder, 1995). Library human resources experts have long anticipated that one of the effects of an aging workforce and subsequent retirements will put libraries at risk of losing their most experienced workers. Marshall (2005) identified three factors (which she termed “the triple whammy”) likely to contribute to the expected wave of retirements: (1) those belonging to the baby boom will reach the age of retirement, (2) the older age upon which librarians enter the profession, and (3) a fluctuating rate of hires.

### **Demographics**

A review of the library literature with a focus on demographics of the profession suggests that there have long been concerns regarding potential shortages of librarians. Forty years ago, a Bureau of Labor Statistics report sought to identify and analyze factors influencing manpower needs and to develop projections of demand for library personnel (US Department of Labor, 1975). Similarly, a later report prepared for the National Center for Educational Statistics and the Office of Libraries and Learning Technologies attempted to project the supply and demand of professional librarians through 1990 (King Research, 1983). Since the early 1990s there have been several studies describing the graying of the library workforce. Based on data from an annual salary survey conducted by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), Wilder (1995) examined the age profile of librarians employed at ARL member institutions. In this widely-cited report, “The Age Demographics of Academic Librarians: a Profession

Apart,” Wilder concluded that, as a group, librarians are older than members of most comparable professions.

A review of the library literature documenting employment trends over the long term suggests a recurring boom and bust cycle for both librarians seeking jobs and libraries seeking employees. It appears that during some periods recent (or soon to be) graduates from schools of library and information science have far outnumbered available entry level positions, while during other periods there have been concerns that the number of students completing their degrees and entering the workforce was insufficient to fill current or anticipated openings.

During the past two decades numerous articles have appeared in the library literature projecting that a substantial number of librarians will retire in the near future. Hernon, Powell, and Young (2002) observed, “Throughout much of American higher education, there is a growing concern over the number of individuals approaching retirement age and the ‘graying of the professorate.’ Librarianship is not exempt from this trend” (p. 73). It has been assumed that the number of those retiring or otherwise leaving the profession will exceed the number of those completing library and information science degrees and entering the profession. Thus, it has been projected that the library profession will face a severe shortage of librarians sometime in the near future. An Association of College and Research Libraries report, noted “librarianship is experiencing a labor gap between increasing demand for library and information science professionals and a declining supply of qualified individuals” (Ad Hoc Task Force, 2002, p. iv). In a guest editorial in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Matarazzo (2000) provided a historical overview of the shortages of librarians and the figures used by various entities in estimating the number of librarians currently working in the profession, projected surpluses, and projected shortfalls. He explained that “in the last 40 years, librarianship has had three periods of shortages and two corresponding periods of what appeared to be an oversupply of professional librarians” (p. 223). It is

widely understood that many people come to librarianship as a second career, and thus there are few younger librarians and more middle aged and older persons as compared to other professions. Citing Wilder (1995), the Ad Hoc Task Force report (2002) suggested that “when compared to similar professions, librarianship has only about half the number of individuals aged 30 and under that other professions have and 40 percent more individuals aged 45 or older” (p. 5). Similarly, Singer and Griffith (2010) noted that “because library workers are disproportionately middle-age and older, the percentage of younger workers in their twenties and early thirties is comparatively quite small” (p. 4).

### **Where Do the Numbers Come from?**

It is important to note that there has been little research conducted in recent years regarding potential retirements of librarians. Most of the authors writing about the graying of the profession and the need for succession planning cite these same studies: U.S. Department of Labor (1975); King Research (1983); Lynch (2002); Lynch, Tordella, and Godfrey (2005); and any of several reports by Wilder (1995, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003).

A study of library manpower demand and supply conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. projected that “the number of librarians needed to replace those who retire, die, or leave the labor force for other reasons will greatly exceed the number required to fill newly added positions” (U.S. Department of Labor, 1975, p. xi). Furthermore, the report predicted that in order “to meet the projected demand for 168,000 librarians between 1970 and 1985. . . The number of persons entering the profession must average 11,200 a year.” The report predicted that there would be an average of 9,000 new graduates entering the profession each year (p. 48).

*Library Human Resources: A Study of Supply and Demand, a report prepared for the National Center for Education Statistics and the Office of Libraries and Learning Technologies* (King Research, 1983), projected the supply of and demand for librarians

through 1990. The investigators predicted that “on the demand side, the number of positions in libraries is expected to increase modestly in the early 1980’s and then level off through 1990;” and further, “the number of individuals completing library education programs and seeking employment is also projected to remain fairly constant through the decade” (p. 3). This report did not project a significant shortage. Matarazzo criticized the data selection decisions of the investigators, believing that the estimate of the total number of librarians was much too low (1989, p. 22; 2000, p. 223).

Stanley J. Wilder has written a number of articles and reports about academic librarians and demographic trends, most importantly, “The Age Demographics of Academic Librarians: A Profession Apart” (1995). Drawing from unpublished data sets collected by the Association of Research Libraries, the study examined “the shape and movement of the age profile of ARL librarians” (p. ix). Wilder’s projections suggested that “16 percent of the 1995 ARL population will retire by 2000. Another 16 percent will retire between 2000 and 2005, 24 percent between 2005 and 2010, and 27 percent between 2010 and 2020” (p. viii). Wilder’s work has been widely cited throughout the library literature addressing the graying of the profession. Arthur (1998), Galbraith et al. (2012), Herson, Powell, and Young (2001, 2002), Kaufman (2002), Marshall (2005), Matarazzo and Mika (2004), Munde (2000), Schrader (2005), and Whitmell (2002) all cited one or several reports by Wilder (1995, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003).

Mary Jo Lynch, a long-time director of the ALA Office for Research and Statistics, and a national authority in the area of library employment, pointed out in a 2002 article in *American Libraries*, “Reaching 65: Lots of Librarians Will Be There Soon,” that it’s difficult to estimate the number of librarians who retire in the near future, as retirement is an individual decision. Lynch explained however, that it is possible to estimate the number of librarians who will reach the age of sixty-five each year—a customary age for retirement—and thus project when these individuals might be retiring. The prediction was based 1990 census data. Lynch (2002) projected that librarian retirements would

peak between 2010 and 2014 (p. 55). Aversa (2005), Davis (2005), Galbraith et al. (2012), Heron, Powell, and Young (2003), Matarazzo and Mika (2004), and Schrader (2005) all cited Lynch (2002).

A follow-up article by Lynch, Tordella, and Godfrey (2005), "Retirement and Recruitment: A Deeper Look," was based on 2000 census data, rather than 1990 data. The researchers determined that the largest wave of retirements would occur later than what had been previously projected, between 2015 and 2019, rather than between 2010 and 2014. "In total, the decade beginning in 2010 will see 45% of today's librarians reach age 65, representing the early wave of baby-boom librarians reaching the traditional retirement age" (Lynch, Tordella, & Godfrey, 2005, p. 28). Davis (2005), Nixon (2008), Zook (2012) cited Lynch, Tordella, and Godfrey (2005).

In a two-part study in *College & Research Libraries*, Heron, Powell, and Young (2001, 2002) described the graying of the profession and its implications for the next generation of university library directors in the Association of Research Libraries. Following the publication of these articles, Heron, Powell, and Young produced a book-length treatment of the subject, *The Next Library Leadership* (2003). The book identified a set of qualities necessary for library leadership; the first chapter of the book was devoted to an expected shortage of librarians. Many of the articles appearing in the trade literature during the last ten years addressing concerns about the graying of the profession, pending retirements, and possible shortage of librarians have cited the Wilder report and the works of Heron, Powell, and Young.

It is also important to note that many of those addressing the graying of the profession did not cite those who conducted the research, but rather others who cited it. For example, Heron, Powell, and Young (2002, 2003) and Marshall (2005) cited Matarazzo (2000). Curran (2005) and Nixon (2008) cited Heron, Powell, and Young (2001).

It has been suggested that there are significant problems with some of the projections that have appeared in the literature. Matarazzo and Mika (2004), in an editorial in *Library & Information Science Research*, summarized the attempt by a variety of library associations, agencies, and practitioners to predict workforce shortages and the effort to address potential shortages. The authors provided a historical review of demographic changes in librarianship and the large disparity in the number of working librarians by various sources—and the corresponding disparity in the numbers of predicted retirements. Matarazzo and Mika (2004) argued that accurate forecast of retirements is not possible if the professional cannot accurately count the number of library professionals in the workforce; “despite a profession that is superb in locating information, it is ironic that the profession does not have accurate information on its future, its job market, accurate retirement statistics, predictions of the specializations that will be needed, the number of likely retirements, the number of graduates from LIS programs that are entering library environments, and the states and regions with the greatest need for librarians” (p. 118).

### **Shifting Timelines**

It is also noteworthy that both the projected number of retirements or vacancies and the projected period in which these retirements will occur has changed over time. Originally, some projected that the predicted wave of retirements of librarians would peak during the first decade of the new millennium. Wilder (1999) projected that 24 percent of (ARL) librarians would retire between 2005 and 2010; Lynch (2002) had projected that retirements would peak between 2010 and 2014; and Lynch and her colleagues (2005) later revised that projection, suggesting that the largest wave of retirements would occur between 2015 and 2019.

The financial crisis and global recession of 2008 significantly affected these projections with employees across many professions delaying their retirement. In an article discussing retirement conditions for law librarians, predictions of library staffing

shortages, and the impending effect of the retirement of members by the aging baby boom generation on libraries, Zook (2012), observed mockingly “the future is now, look around you . . . Have you noticed the shortage of librarians yet? Me neither” (p. 14).

### **Research Findings**

Galbraith et al. (2012) conducted a survey of ARL member institutions focused on the “ages of library leaders, hiring practices, and opinions about the importance and practice of specific succession planning principles.” This appears to be the only research study in the literature reporting the state of succession planning in libraries. The authors reported that while “a large portion of the literature discussed the need for succession planning,” there was little offered in the way of solutions or examples (p. 224). The present author concurs, having found that most articles speculate about a pending crisis, with some offer a corresponding call for action, but none based on qualitative or quantitative data, with few outlining an actual plan. In the study conducted by Galbraith et al., 112 of the 125 members of the Association of Research Libraries were selected to participate in the survey; thirty-four responded, resulting in a response rate of approximately 30 percent. “The survey results show that there is a gap between the perceived importance of various principles of succession planning and how well the principles are practiced” (p. 226). The authors concluded that many libraries are not prepared to fill library leadership positions should they become vacant—and further, that academic libraries need to make succession planning a priority.

### **Lack of Suitably-Prepared Candidates**

Not only has it been widely projected that substantial numbers of librarians will retire in the near future leaving significant gaps in the workforce, it has also been suggested by some that there is not a sufficient number of midcareer librarians prepared to step into significant leadership roles as those currently holding those positions retire. In “Top Ten Trends in Academic Libraries” (2010), a report issued by the ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, the authors—having noted the

impending retirement of many library directors—asked if associate deans and directors are ready for new roles, and if middle managers are prepared to step into higher-level administrative roles. The report not only raised concerns about a possible leadership gap, but also a loss of institutional memory (p. 287). Having noted that “persons in library directorships are generally older than those in other library positions,” and that “we are facing a large turnover in our senior leadership,” Munde (2000) suggested that “this presents a signal opportunity for academic libraries to reinvent themselves from the top down, both in their role in academe and in the racial, cultural, and gender composition of their leadership” (p. 171). In their study of succession planning in ARL member libraries, Galbraith et al. (2012) reported, “the age data we collected suggest that succession planning should be an area of concern as a large percentage of university librarians (including directors and deans), assistant university librarians (AULs), and department chairs will be eligible for retirement within the next five to ten years” (p. 222). Galbraith et al. (2012) noted that “senior positions are filled by those who are older and presumably have more experience” (p. 229).

A number of observers appear to be concerned that there will not be enough of “suitably-prepared candidates” available to fill leadership roles. Whitmell (2002) wrote that “during the downsizing of the 1990s many management levels were eliminated. This has resulted in a deficiency of individuals with management and leadership skills and experience,” and further, that, “at the same time many of the middle managers remaining are in the same age group and will retire at or around the same time, many of them at the same time as the chief librarian” (p. 152). Herson, Powell, and Young (2003), reported that during the interviews conducted for their book *The Next Library Leadership*, “a number of library directors expressed concern that a continued shortage might ultimately result in a crisis—that is, if the pool of new librarians does not contain individuals who could become the next generation of talented and dynamic directors and leaders in the profession” (p. ix). Similarly, Curran (2005) claimed that “there are

very few experienced, trained, middle-level managers, supervisors, and administrators within the middle-age group of librarians (age forty to fifty) who could ensure appropriate succession in the libraries in the event of a massive retirement exodus” (pp. 125-126). Nixon (2008) reported that “statistics on the demographics of librarians . . . indicate that there is and will continue to be shortage of qualified middle-level librarians available for the projected management positions” (p. 259). Stinehelfer and Crumpton (2010), citing “statistical and anecdotal evidence” regarding the aging of the profession and the lack of new graduates (p. 27), concluded that “there is an insufficient bench of professionals who can fill middle management or senior level positions”—and hence, “the rising need for succession planning is clear” (p. 28).

Several authors wrote not of the scarcity of suitably-prepared candidates, but a lack of interest on the part of potential candidates to move into leadership roles. Kaufman (2002) asserted that “it has become increasingly difficult to interest frontline librarians in taking on managerial responsibilities, and just as difficult to entice middle managers to consider assuming the responsibilities of senior library positions” (p. 1). Hernon, Powell, and Young (2002) expressed concerns about both issues; first, “the challenge of replacing retiring directors is increased by the rather small size of the pool of academic librarians qualified to be directors of large academic research libraries,” and second, “by the fact that a number of qualified librarians are not interested in becoming directors of such libraries” (p. 73). Schachter (2013) also reported that younger librarians are not expressing interest in assuming top jobs (p. 30).

In addition to a pending retirement crisis, retention issues have also been cited as another reason to develop and implement succession planning programs. Markgren, Dickinson, Leonard, and Vassiliadis (2007) identified a job change pattern they termed the “five-year itch;” the itch occurs when “a librarian purposefully switches jobs or roles at least once within his or her first five years as a professional” (p. 71). Citing the research of Markgren and her colleagues, Nixon (2008) also noted that “the already

tight recruiting market” is complicated the five-year itch (p. 253). Nixon believed “many new librarians are leaving the profession dissatisfied and restless within their first five years” (p. 253), and called for formal succession planning programs as a vehicle for leadership development that would help address this retention problem.

It is important to note that none of these articles offered any substantial evidence that support the claim that middle managers are not capable of stepping into upper-level leadership roles or that they are not willing to do so. Most of these articles express the opinions of the authors or the beliefs of deans and directors interviewed, not the sentiments of middle managers or others preparing themselves for leadership roles.

### **Succession Planning—A Promising Solution**

Many of the articles in the library literature referred to above, concerned with demographics, graying of the profession, impending retirements, potential shortages, and so forth, point to succession planning as a solution. Singer, Goodrich, and Goldberg (2004) suggested that the presence of a succession planning program, common in large corporations, implies that leaders of such organizations understand their obligation to stakeholders to ensure a successful transition—and that librarians too have responsibilities to their stakeholders. During the last ten years, many articles as well as two books have been published which appear to support this idea. Some of these articles are case studies; for example, Murray (2007) provided an overview of leadership issues in academic libraries, including why we should “worry” about leadership succession, why it has become difficult to fill leadership positions, why “growing your own” is an obvious strategy, and how we might learn from the private sector. Nixon (2008) also advocated a “grow your own” strategy, process by which staff potential for upper-level positions would be trained and mentored in order to be ready to assume leadership positions in the future.

There is a substantial body of literature in which those concerned with organizational development in libraries have recommended that library leaders should

be proactive in their efforts to plan for future talent needs at all levels of the organization and implement a succession planning program that would ensure that the right people are available for the right jobs at the right times. In *Staff Planning in a Time of Demographic Change*, Whitmell (2005b) took a pro-active view of the need to be prepared to address issues related to the large number of expected retirements: “During this time of demographic change, it is crucial for libraries to think about their future and about who will move each library forward” (p. vii). Galbraith et al. (2012) wrote, “we believe that academic libraries need to make succession planning a greater priority” (p. 233).

Singer and Griffith (2010) have not advocated for a narrowly-focused succession planning strategy focused only on senior-level management. They used the phrase “succession planning and development” to indicate their broad approach to the subject, explaining “unlike typical succession or replacement planning that concentrates only on a few senior leadership positions, we propose a system that develops a broad range of high-performing members of the workforce” (p. 15). Even though applied broadly, it becomes clear later in the book that it is not succession planning that is being encouraged, but talent development. In their discussion of the succession planning and development process, Singer and Griffith, harken back to the original, narrower definition of succession planning: “replacement charting was the original goal of succession planning before it broadened out to include, as in the case of this book, talent development and building a pipeline of employees ready to fill vacancies” (p. 56).

Beyond concerns about large numbers of retirements, both Kieserman (2008) and Pennell (2010) identified several benefits associated with the implementation of succession planning in libraries. Kieserman wrote “the obvious benefit of succession planning is internal employees ‘waiting in the wings’ who are trained in the event that one of the current job holders suddenly must take leave, gives notice, or is fired” (p. 136). Pennell claimed that “developing high potential individuals from within the

organization can be less expensive, more motivating to internal employees, and will provide a more seamless transition,” and further, that filling positions from within “also encourages current employees who are looking to move up in the organization and aids in retention” (pp. 280-281).

Regardless of what one thinks of the role succession planning, workforce planning, workforce development, and similar efforts in academic libraries, most agree on the importance of strategic planning. Although no one can predict precisely what the library will look like in twenty years, or even in ten years, those in library leadership roles do need to consider where libraries are now, and where libraries should be in the coming years. Whitmell (2002) pointed out that the “key to knowing what skills will be needed is knowing where the library needs to be and is going to be over the next three to five years. This means having in place a realistic detailed strategy which is based on the realities of the environment, the needs and wants of users, and the anticipated changes to technologies and the delivery of information” (p. 149). A strategic plan is the basis for determining what the library will be doing in the future, and thus the skills needed by the individuals who will carry out this plan.

### **Succession Planning—The Wrong Approach for Academic Libraries**

Succession planning originated in the for-profit sector. What may be a good solution in the corporate environment is not necessarily appropriate for higher education or academic librarianship. Aversa (2005), writing about leadership concerns for schools of library and information science, pointed out that, “universities do not groom faculty members for advancement in the way that the corporate sector does” (p. 89). This is unlikely to change. College and university missions focus on teaching, research, and service. Although faculty (librarians included, regardless of status) are rewarded with increased salaries and titles denoting greater prestige for accepting administrative appointments, this path does not mimic the corporate ladder; appointments as department chairs, deans, and similar leadership roles are rarely permanent in

academic departments, although they generally are so in academic libraries. It is easy to envision the opposition that would be generated by an attempt to implement a succession planning program in the administration of higher education. In academic librarianship, it is very unlikely that librarians would allow retiring colleagues to be replaced with particular in-house candidates pre-selected by members of the library administrative team.

The selection of a replacement for a departing academic library dean or director is not a decision made internally; it is a campus decision. Search committees for academic library deans or directors are generally comprised of a mix of individuals with a variety of roles on campus, not just librarians and library staff. This point was made by Galbraith et al. (2012) in their study of succession planning at Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member institutions: “we acknowledge that most ARL libraries have little control over the university librarian position, which is usually hired by the university or sponsoring institution” (p. 223).

### **Criticism of Succession Planning in the Library Literature**

There is very little in the literature of library science—or in the business literature—that is critical of succession planning, workforce development, workforce planning, or related concepts. Rowley (1989) is an exception; she argued that efforts toward what she termed manpower planning—an effort to estimate the number of people required in the workforce in the future—is useless: “manpower planning in the library and information world is a waste of time, energy and money” (p. 157). She made five basic assertions about what is wrong with manpower planning. The first—“manpower planning for the information world is not possible” (p. 157)—remains as true today as when this piece was published in 1989. The information and technology landscape is changing so quickly that one cannot know with any surety what the needs will be five years from now. Having noted the difficulties inherent in manpower planning in general, Rowley pointed out “manpower planning for a specific professional group

poses more evident problems. It is necessary to identify the nature of the job that professionals in a certain area will be engaged in, and, preferably to estimate the numbers of people with specific skills that will be required. In the information industry this becomes almost impossible” (p. 157).

Noon (2004) also delivered a stinging assessment of succession planning. Noon asked, “isn’t succession planning just another corporate (and in our case library) version of the nanny state, something along the line of ‘we can’t trust the lazy buggers to look after themselves and to make themselves decent and skilful candidates so I suppose we shall have to do it for them?’ Why isn’t it the responsibility of each aspiring individual? Ardent disciples of succession planning seem to neglect the fact that individuals are quite capable of identifying themselves for succession to senior roles and getting themselves suitably tooled up for the job” (p. 9).

### **Where is the Evidence that Succession Planning Works?**

As previously noted, a review of the relevant library literature finds no sound explanation of why succession planning is an appropriate method for filling anticipated vacancies and no substantive evidence that succession planning programs in academic libraries are successful. Unfortunately, the approaches to succession planning in libraries as described in the literature have largely been based on assumptions about organizational development and employment trends—not on evidence.

The arguments put forth by many of the writers advocating for the implementation of a succession planning program appears to be quite reasonable. Munde (2000), for example, wrote “it seems obvious, given the projected retirement rates, that incumbent and incoming professionals will rise to the leadership, high demand, and hard to fill positions simply because they are in the right place at the right time. The only choices concern how quickly they will rise and whether or not they will do it with the best possible preparation” (p. 174). Munde was an advocate for what she termed “organizational mentoring,” efforts sponsored by library administrators to help

libraries meet their workforce needs. This appears to be a credible approach. However, the proposal described in the article looks like succession planning—essentially a plan for filling existing positions—and thus may have the same downside as a succession planning program; such an effort may only serve to perpetuate an obsolete organizational structure.

Singer and Griffith (2010) wrote that succession planning means “assessing the key positions (not just top management positions, but all specialties and areas of expertise) that could become vacant in the near future and providing training, mentoring, special assignments, and other developmental opportunities so that staff members are ready to move into them when the time comes. . . . Forward thinking librarians are doing just this” (p. 2). This appears to be a smart strategy. However, what is described here is exactly what’s wrong with succession planning: a focus on “the key positions . . . that could become vacant,” rather than an assessment of current and future needs of the library and the creation of new positions that will meet those needs. Although Singer and Griffith (2010) described succession planning as “a way to ensure that you have the right people, in the right place, at the right time, doing the right work” (p. 7), filling vacancies in administration and other key positions with internally developed candidates is not the best strategy. Succession planning assumes that library leaders would want to fill those same positions—some of which may no longer be “the right work” for the current or future climate. Library administrators and human resources professionals should not be preparing people for roles that no longer meet the library’s needs.

Galbraith et al. (2012) recommended that academic libraries need to make succession planning a priority. However, the results of their survey of ARL member libraries indicated that there are adequate numbers of associate university librarians to fill anticipated university librarian vacancies in those institutions (p. 230). The authors acknowledged that the talent pool from which library directors are hired does not consist

only of AULs from ARL member institutions. They draw the same conclusion with regard to associate university librarian positions: “based on the numbers of department heads under age 55 from this sample, those associate university librarian positions could be filled just from the subset of member institutions” (p. 231).

### **What’s Wrong with Succession Planning?**

In an effort to distinguish succession planning and management from workforce planning, Rothwell (2010) suggested that few organizations actually practice workforce planning. More commonly, they simply “fill positions as vacancies become available or as demand requires people to do the work” (p. 13). Rothwell reported that such an organization “builds up a large number of legacy employees who may be ill-suited to help an organization meet its strategic objectives.” (p. 13). Although Rothwell is discussing workforce planning, he is describing exactly what is wrong with succession planning. A plan to fill expected vacancies with handpicked internal employees trained expressly for those vacancies is likely to perpetuate obsolete organizational structures.

Hawthorne (2011) recommended an approach to succession management focused on development rather than replacement: “if your program focuses on continual growth and development of talent within your organization, you are more likely to reap the benefits than if the program focuses on specific job titles and responsibilities” (p. 12). Unfortunately, succession planning as described in the literature tends to be focused on efforts to fill specific existing or potential vacancies. In such programs candidates are identified based on what currently needs to be done based on an existing job description, or worse, what was expected when the position was last posted, which may have been years or even decades ago. The focus appears to be on the qualifications needed to competently execute the work currently outlined for that position. It should be obvious that each time there is a vacancy the job description should not simply be updated and then posted. Rather than search for a replacement, library leaders and human resources professionals should determine what they would a

new hire to accomplish in the coming years and then search for a candidate who can make that vision happen. Better still, there should be consideration of what type of position the library needs to fill next given the ever-changing climate in academic libraries and higher education. Innovative thinkers with innovative ideas are needed to fill vacancies, not individuals who will adequately performed a predetermined set of duties.

In addition, some of those promoting succession planning in libraries have described the succession planning process as one that includes an intentional focus on specific individuals. For example, Jantti and Greenhalgh (2012), described six needs that supported the approach to succession management and leadership development at the University of Wollongong Library (Australia); four of these needs focused on individuals, not the process: “establish a process for staff with leadership interest or potential to be independently assessed and provided with feedback; implement a process to develop career strategies and opportunities for those with aptitude, capability and commitment; consider different approaches to leadership development training and opportunities for existing team leaders; [and] assess availability of external and internal coaching and mentoring for targeted staff” (p. 422). Similarly, Fitsimmons (2013), in a column addressing succession planning, suggested that “as you monitor the state of your staff, you should begin to recognize when any staff member shows desire and/or potential to be a library administrator” (p. 142). Gonzalez (2013) reported that “American libraries are starting to consider the adoption of such measures as analyzing current employee demographics, identify high-potential employees, evaluating their strengths and weaknesses and development training methods for them, including personal development plans and mentoring and coaching programs” (p. 409). And finally, Hall-Ellis and Grealy (2013) suggested that, among other things, “succession planning allows an organization to . . . identify individuals who have leadership potential” (p. 587). This suggests that such succession planning programs focus on internal, high-potential

candidates who appear to be particularly good matches for an expected vacancy. Unfortunately, this approach increases the likelihood that these designated replacements will be replicas of those they are replacing. Rather than fill projected vacancies in the library with what was, it is important to assess vacancies in light of current library needs and then determine the best way to fill open positions.

Succession planning is ultimately shortsighted. Why pre-select and train a replacement to fill a potential vacancy that may not become available for months (or even years) from now? The knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics essential for the present position will not be the same as what is needed when the transition takes place. Employees should not be groomed for positions which may never be filled. The library profession has changed significantly in recent years—and continues to do so at a rapid pace. Each opening should be assessed in light of what is most needed by the entire organization.

If development is focused on a select, hand-picked group of employees, other employees may become demoralized—and perhaps resentful—by not having been selected to participate. Employees not selected for further development may opt to leave the organization for one in which they have better career prospects. Those identified in advance for advancement may possibly begin to coast, as they know that their contributions, abilities, and potential have already been recognized—and now the reward is expected. If the number of employees targeted for development exceeds the number of potential leadership positions, the competition among the candidates could hurt the organization. Those selected for development programs, but ultimately not promoted, may also elect to leave the organization and work elsewhere.

The biggest flaw in the succession planning concept is the fact that one cannot predict the future. There is a tendency in most organizations to treat the future as we a continuation of the present. Those in the organization with potential for leadership may be awarded opportunities to increase their knowledge and develop new skills, but that

knowledge and skill set may not be what is needed in the future. User expectations have changed significantly—and continue to change. The knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics needed by those who will assume leadership positions in academic libraries will change. It is no longer feasible to identify and train possible candidates for positions that are likely to be fundamentally different in the future. By the time that human resources professionals and library administrators have designed and implemented a program by which they will develop the next generation of key players for their organization, the world of academic librarianship will have moved on and the particular skills and abilities developed by the would-be successors will be largely obsolete. It is also important to note that time horizons in higher education have changed significantly in recent years. At many institutions, the terms of university presidents, provosts, deans of colleges and schools, and deans or directors of libraries have become comparatively brief. A multi-year time frame to develop possible successors for leadership positions is not realistic given the rapidly shifting leadership landscape.

### **When is Succession Planning the Right Thing to Do?**

The author concedes that there may be circumstances in which succession planning may be useful for some types of libraries, filling “true leadership” positions, filling positions on an interim basis, and—perhaps—for what Rothwell (2010) called “technical succession planning.”

Developing and implementing a succession planning program may be a shrewd strategy for some types of libraries. For example, large public library systems with many branch libraries may have an ongoing need to fill branch management positions. These are leadership positions which are likely to continue to require a particular blend of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics necessary to manage day-to-day operations and successfully serve a public library clientele.

Succession planning may be useful for what could be characterized as “true leadership” positions. Such positions are not based on having competencies related to particular areas of knowledge or a specific set of job-related skills, but the ability to lead, guide, and motivate others in an effort to achieve organizational goals.

Rothwell (2010) wrote that “amid the pressures of pending retirements in senior executive ranks and the increasing value of intellectual capital and knowledge management, it is more necessary than ever for organizations to plan for leadership continuity and employee development at all levels” (p. xx). Although succession planning may not be the right approach for academic libraries, it would make sense to be prepared to fill vacancies created by unexpected departures by ensuring that there are individuals prepared to fill positions on an interim basis. Are there individuals within the organization with leadership potential (and inclination) who possess the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics necessary to step into a leadership role in the short-term? Munde (2000), addressing personnel challenges and their implications, predicted that “succession planning, or at the very least, conscious preparation of librarians who will be expected to serve in interim roles, will become commonplace” (p. 172). Some level of preparation to fill key positions on a temporary basis would be prudent. Singer and Griffith (2010), referred to succession planning as a form of risk management (p. 88). This is a valid point; if a key player in an administrative role—especially a dean or director—resigned tomorrow, are there one or more individuals who could effectively oversee the operation of the library until the next dean or director assumed the leadership role?

There are also compelling reasons why the definition of succession planning has broadened to include other critical positions besides leadership. Like the unexpected departure of a person in an executive position, the departure of a person in a non-executive—but critical—position could also upset the continuity of day-to-day operations of an organization. In a library, many of the positions found throughout the

organization—whether professional appointments or staff positions—could be characterized as critical because the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics necessary to successfully perform in that position may be quite specific. Having a plan to replace particular individuals who possess specific technical knowledge or abilities certainly appears to be a sensible plan. However, like succession planning, there is some possibility that time, energy, and money would be invested in assuring transfer of knowledge in an area where that knowledge may no longer be needed in the future.

Library leaders and human resources specialists should be asking if it truly appropriate to be training particular librarians to fill particular roles. For example, in technical services, there may be a librarian who catalogs special format materials; in teaching and learning, there may be disciplinary specialists or subject-area bibliographers who are the only people in their institution having a particular area of expertise. Some might argue that these are key positions. But if the librarians holding these positions resigned or retired, would they be replaced? It may be more appropriate to be training or hiring for roles in scholarly communications, data management, user experience, or digital humanities. This could be a different list five years from now or perhaps even next year.

### **The Proliferation of New Positions in Academic Libraries**

Although there are number of approaches one could take to argue that succession planning is the wrong approach for academic libraries, there is one particular body of library literature that provides a thought-provoking counterpoint to those in the field who advocate for the use of succession planning in academic libraries. Studies reporting the analysis of job advertisement or postings have appeared regularly in the library literature for decades. Such studies have been a common method to monitor trends in library work. A review of the major studies highlight the extent to which the profession has changed in recent decades. An examination of trends in library

staffing and how position requirements have changed over the preceding twenty years suggests that a program focused on training staff to fill the specific current or potential vacancies is a poor approach to staff planning in academic libraries.

There is some variation in the focus of these studies. Most have examined specific types of positions over time, such as catalogers, reference librarians, and subject specialists, or larger functional areas, such as public services, technical services, and systems. These studies may look at postings from a specific time period and/or from specific journals or sites, or they may compare postings from two specific periods of time to determine how those positions have changed over time. Other studies have examined particular job requirements and expectations, such as education, experience, or other qualifications. Some of these have been both comprehensive and longitudinal, having looked at academic librarianship as a whole over a significant period of time.

Studies of the content of job advertisements have analyzed specific jobs or job categories, such as cataloging (Buttler & Garcha, 1998; Hall-Ellis, 2005); serials cataloging (Copeland, 1997); collection development and management (Robinson, 1993); electronic, electronic resource, and digital librarian positions (Albitz, 2002; Croneis & Henderson, 2002); serials (Kwasik, 2002; Mueller & Mering, 1991), systems (Foote, 1997) and technical services (Deeken & Thomas, 2006). Other examples include outreach (Boff, Singer, & Stearns, 2006); preservation (Cloonan & Norcott, 1989); reference (Cardina & Wicks, 2004; Detmering & Sproles, 2012; Wang, Tang, & Knight, 2010; White, 2000); reference-bibliographers (Schreiner-Robles & Germann, 1989); special collections (Hansen, 2011); subject specialists (Dettefsen, 1992; McAbee & Graham, 2005; White, 1999); and science and engineering (Bychowski, Caffrey, Costa, Moore, Sudhakaran, & Zhang, 2010; Osorio, 1999).

Some studies analyzing library position announcements have looked at requirements for employment—and how those requirements of changed over time. For

example, Wells (1982) reviewed education, experience, qualifications, and responsibilities as outlined in job advertisements for academic librarians from three publications between 1959 and 1979. Lynch and Robles-Smith (2001) analyzed the content of 220 job advertisements that appeared in *College & Research Libraries News* between 1973 and 1998. Starr (2004) investigated job advertisements from 1983 and 2004 to gain insight regarding the number of openings, job titles, geographic distribution, salary, and various requirements and expectations. Goetsch (2008) considered the “impacts, benefits, and tensions” on academic libraries brought about by a changing workforce through an analysis of systems librarians, reference librarians, and subject librarians. Further, Goetsch speculated “about how the changes in these positions . . . serve as predictors for the future” (p. 159). Grimes and Grimes (2008) investigated the changing importance of the MLS as a requirement for employment in academic libraries.

Three studies are particularly noteworthy, as the latter two have built upon the previous studies. Reser and Schuneman (1992) analyzed more than 1100 public and technical services jobs advertised in 1988 examining particular requirements and expectations including computer skills, foreign language requirements, work experience, and education. Beile and Adams (2000) examined 900 position announcements comparing their findings with those of Reser and Schuneman (1992). Triumph and Beile (2015) conducted an analysis of academic library position announcements, comparing the results of their study of postings from 2011 to the two earlier studies which analyzed position postings from 1988 (Reser & Schuneman, 1992) and 1996 (Beile & Adams, 2000), and identified how the content of library postings have changed over time.

### **The Changing Nature of Library Work**

A review of these studies demonstrates the extent to which the nature of work in academic libraries has changed. Munde (2000) observed that “many vacated positions are already being redirected toward new functions and services.” She reported that “the

most frequent position redeployment is from cataloging to technology positions, although there are other emergent needs, such as distance education, electronic resources/reserves, and copyright/licensing positions” (p. 171). Croneis and Henderson (2002) reported that “over the past decade, positions requiring expertise in electronic and digital technologies have appeared, and their numbers have increased dramatically” (p. 236). Starr (2004) pointed out the proliferation of new job titles, “including library educational technology coordinator, director of preservation, reformatting and digitization, technology coordinator, electronic resources librarian, digital information services librarian, visual resources director, information technology specialist, and software analyst” (paragraph 23). Goetsch (2008) made several important observations about changes in the postings. New job titles reflecting “the promise of the Web as a tool for delivering instruction and information,” included “Web Services Librarian, Web Development Librarian, and Library Web Manager.” She also pointed out the prevalence of the word *digital* in newer job titles, including, “Digital Services Librarian, Digital Support Librarian, Digital Collections Librarian, Digital Initiatives Librarian, Digital Projects Librarian, and Digital Resources Librarian” (p. 163). Having suggested that “libraries will need to provide foundational infrastructural support” for what she termed “new work,” Goetsch wrote that “academic libraries are acting on the need for grant writers, fundraisers, marketing and public relations specialists, graphic artists, numerical and spatial data specialists, electronic records managers, copyright and intellectual property experts, and instructional designers in growing numbers” (pp. 169-170). Cox and Corral (2013) observed that “one feature of changing times in academic librarianship has been the emergence of new specialties. These range from the systems librarian or digital librarian to the institutional repository manager and now the research data manager; there is also the information literacy educator, the informationist, and the information or digital asset manager” (p. 1526). Similarly, Triumph and Beile (2015) observed that “if the proliferation of position titles is

any indication, academic library jobs are becoming increasingly specialized—and many require new job skills” (p. 735). The authors reported that job titles first appearing in their 2011 study of postings include digital librarian, electronic resources librarian, emerging technologies librarian, metadata librarian, scholarly communication librarian, and web services librarian.

### **Changes in Technology, Changes in Services, Changes in the Profession**

The increasing availability of relatively inexpensive technologies has unquestionably changed academic libraries. Students and faculty conduct their research in new ways; as a result, new library services have emerged. These new services have required that librarians and staff develop entirely new skill sets, hence the proliferation of new positions and new titles in the last twenty years. Academic libraries have developed a multitude of new titles reflecting new positions requiring new skills based on changing technologies and the changing needs of our users. Croneis and Henderson (2002) concluded that the findings of their study “demonstrate the nature, magnitude, and swiftness of changes in the profession because of technology” (p. 236). Having pointed out that “technology has significantly influenced how students and faculty use the services and collections of academic libraries,” Goetsch (2008) observed that libraries have responded by “identifying new roles and responsibilities for librarians by both reinventing more traditional positions as well as creating new job roles that require different skill sets and mind sets” (p. 157). Similarly, Meier (2010) noted that “the nature of a librarian’s job is ever changing with new technology and the evolving information landscape” (p. 165). Triumph and Beile (2015) concurred, noting that “researchers who investigated specific job titles over time tend to agree the traditional position titles have become increasingly segmented or specialized” (p. 719).

Goetsch (2008) wrote that “the work is defined by customer needs and not a job description” (p. 158). The proliferation of new position titles in academic librarianship is one body of evidence that could be cited in questioning the soundness of the concept of

succession planning. Academic libraries maintaining traditional services—and hence traditional roles—as well as opting to develop and implement a succession planning program do indeed risk perpetuating obsolete organizational structures.

### **Staffing For the Future**

The author recommends four strategies to address the anticipated departure of large numbers of retiring librarians and to meet the future staffing needs of the library. First, continue to mentor and guide those in the organization who possess leadership potential. The decision to not invest in a succession planning program to fill specific vacancies does not mean that library leaders should not provide mentoring and professional development opportunities. Second, library administrators and human resources professionals should continuously assess current and future needs. This may seem obvious, but the author suspects this is not widely practiced in terms of how vacancies are filled. Third, rather than fill vacancies as they occur, follow through on the assessment of current and future needs and create new positions that best meets the needs of the library now and in the future. Finally, conduct a search for external candidates who possess the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics required to fill these new roles, and when possible, fill the new vacancies with an external candidates who will bring fresh energy and perspective to the library.

### **Provide Mentoring and Professional Development Opportunities**

Those in leadership roles should continue to mentor and guide those in the organization who possess leadership potential by providing professional development opportunities and funding—even though some of these librarians may ultimately serve at another institution. Despite criticisms of the usefulness of formal succession planning programs that focus on specific individuals, library leaders—working closely with their human resources team—should continue to identify and encourage potential leaders within their organization. Library leaders need to assess and plan for the future needs of

the organization, and continue to invest in and develop staff at all levels to ensure that they will be capable of taking on new roles as the library environment changes.

Fifteen years ago Munde (2000) described the need for librarians with new skills to meet the needs of today's library, suggested that "library schools may not be able to turn out enough people with these newer skills to fill the need" (p. 171). Although the climate has changed, the need for professional development and staff development remain important. Munde proposed that librarians "reinvent the ancient and venerable practice of mentoring if they are to meet their internal personnel challenges" (p. 171), and further, suggested that the use of "thoughtful and effective" mentoring practices could assist in meeting the challenges of the projected shortage of librarians, as well as help "rejuvenate the professional workforce" (p. 172).

Whitmell (2005a) emphasized the importance of "knowing and understanding the aspirations and ambitions of individuals in your library." It is important to let employees know of the possibilities for them in the organization and to have frank and clear discussions about options for increased responsibility and the likelihood of promotion (p. 115). Whitmell also advocated a broad approach to professional development in libraries and recommended that "training and professional education must be a core part of any staff plan," and further, "the training and continuing education program must focus on developing the skills that the library needs as a whole as well as the skills needed by individual staff members" (p. 116). Whitmell's broad approach is characteristic of workforce development rather than the narrow scope of succession planning which is usually focused on high potential individuals. Having noted that it's impossible to know what the future holds, Hawthorne (2011) suggested that "if your program focuses on continued growth and development talent within your organization, you are more likely to reap the benefits than if the program focuses on specific job titles and responsibilities" (p. 12).

It is worth noting here that professional development and leadership development are not the same thing. Professional development opportunities make it possible for an employee to improve his or her knowledge, skills, and abilities—and should ideally be available for all employees. Leadership development—focused on developing leadership skills—is perhaps best reserved for those who express an interest in developing leadership skills, those newly appointed to leadership roles, and those recognized as having potential for such a role (though they may not yet recognize it themselves).

Those who move into leadership positions do so through a variety of means. Some individuals simply have a blend of key attributes and personality traits that make for effective leadership and naturally move toward a leadership role. Others forge a deliberate leadership path, anticipating and making appropriate career moves leading to the position they desire. In librarianship, it appears that still others become “accidental leaders,” finding themselves appointed to managerial or administrative positions that they may never have intended to occupy.

Leadership development is an important component of planning for the future. In order to have high potential employees move into larger roles with greater responsibilities, time, money, and energy must be invested in their development. Whitmell (2005a) wrote “senior staff should also take responsibility for identifying possible successors for their position. If the right people are already part of the organization, they can be mentored and adequately trained to move into the positions as needed” (p. 117). However, those in senior staff positions in higher education rarely choose their own successors. A search for a new library dean or director would be a campus effort, not an internal effort. High potential people should of course be mentored and guided.

Similarly, in a guest editorial in *Community and Junior College Libraries*, Golden (2005) identified several conditions that would assist organizations in strengthening and

expanding the future leadership pool: establish stronger methods of training and development, identify potential leadership candidates, and assist potential leaders to determine the methods necessary to pursue a successful career development path (p. 5). Nixon (2008) advocated that libraries use a “grow your own” strategy; identify staff with the interest in and potential to fill upper-level positions, identify gaps in their knowledge, and provide training and mentoring programs for those in need. Hawthorne (2011), advocating the establishment of succession planning and management programs, suggested several practices for developing talent: identify educational opportunities; provide professional development and continuing education funding and opportunities; offer job-specific training, coaching and mentoring; create special assignments to help an individual build new skills; and invest in staff by sending them to leadership development programs (p. 12). It is noteworthy that the latter three cases all suggest targeting individuals with interest and/or potential candidates for leadership positions as one part of the program. The flaw here is that an effort to develop particular individuals, like the focus on particular positions, is shortsighted. Neither the person nor the position might be what the library most when that person is ready to assume that position or when that position becomes vacant. Ongoing efforts toward continual renewal—training, cross-training, workshops, classes, and so forth—is not wasted effort. Whitmell (2005a) noted that “while not all staff aspire to hold supervisory or management positions, you can encourage all staff to excel in their work and be proactive in career planning and development” (pp. 136-137).

Leadership development programs are just one method of developing library leaders. This approach, long a part of the profession, is an effort by educational institutions and library associations to offer leadership development programs for those interested in advancement. Few libraries are large enough to offer an in-house program for developing leaders; however, there are many options for leadership development. The literature search revealed many references to one-time programs offered at

conferences internationally—in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom—often sponsored by national and international library organizations. These forums offer librarians the opportunity to pursue individual leadership plans. Some of these programs are offered every year. For example, the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), in collaboration with the Harvard Graduate School of Education, offers the Leadership Institute for Academic Librarians, a weeklong professional education program focused on developing the capability of participants to lead and manage in their organizations. Similarly, the Peabody Professional Institute for Academic Library Leadership at Vanderbilt University, which was offered annually from 2006 to 2009, encouraged college and university librarians to consider the library to be a core function of the university mission and to prepare them to serve as campus leaders at their respective institutions. The American Library Association Emerging Leaders Program, an initiative launched in 2007 by ALA President Leslie Burger, is designed to fast-track new and young librarians for leadership roles in ALA and the profession. Galbraith et al. (2012) wrote that “national leadership training programs can offer libraries life-saving ‘blood transfusions’” (p. 233). There are also many state and regional programs designed to assist professional librarians to develop and strengthen their leadership skills. Mason and Wetherbee (2004) provided a comprehensive overview of programs for the development of library leaders.

Libraries need to provide opportunities for continued growth and development of the staff. It is essential that this training include managerial and administrative skills, even if, ultimately, those skills are deployed elsewhere. Mentoring and guiding those with leadership potential helps individual librarians grow professionally. Those who receive training in administrative functions or take advantage of professional development opportunities benefit personally and benefit their home institution, and they add to the pool of qualified candidates available to fill leadership vacancies elsewhere, and thus benefit the profession as a whole. Munde (2000) wrote that “given the

projected demographic reality of aging in librarianship and the existing needs for librarians in newer and emerging fields of operation, what if libraries were to prepare their faculty and staff consciously to meet these challenges? By consciously preparing employees to fill vacancies that are anticipated profession-wide, the profession would benefit, whether or not those persons choose to stay in their 'sponsoring' library" (p. 173). Addressing concerns about leadership for schools of library and information science, Aversa (2005) concurred, suggesting support of faculty development for those interested in administration for the benefit of the institution as well as librarianship as a whole (p. 91). Murray (2007) writing about institutional investment in personnel, noted that such efforts may be wasted should those trained leave to work elsewhere; however, she argued that "we need to take a broader perspective on the need for leadership by balancing short-term investment in the long-term health of academic librarianship as a profession" (Murray). Although participation in a mentoring program or the provision of professional development opportunities may not immediately benefit a particular academic library, Galbraith et al. (2012) also noted such efforts can benefit the profession as a whole (p. 235).

### **Assess Current and Future Needs**

Academic libraries adopting a succession planning program risk perpetuating an obsolete organizational structure. Libraries should no longer be filling vacant positions which do not address the most crucial needs of the organization as a whole. This is not to say that academic libraries should not engage in some form of strategic human resource planning; library deans and directors should be working closely with human resource professionals in a continuous assessment of current and future personnel needs. Writing about internships, residencies, and fellowships, Stinehelfer and Crumpton (2010) explained that "it is important to know where you are going as an organization and to project how trends and changes to operations, resources or service will affect the knowledge, skills and competencies of your future staff" (p. 30). Libraries

should be prepared to fill vacancies, at least temporarily if individuals occupying key positions leave unexpectedly. Ideally, there should be a climate in which the library is in a mode of continuous self-evaluation so that with the occurrence of an unexpected vacancy, librarians and staff in the institution would already know what was likely to be done. If there was a sudden vacancy in a particular area of librarianship, cataloging for example, those working in cataloging and related technical services areas would already know that the vacancy is unlikely to be filled, because it had already been determined that the library has other, more significant needs—perhaps in assessment, outreach, or scholarly communication.

Paula T. Kaufman (2002), University Librarian at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, outlined a forward-thinking approach regarding recruitment and a shift away from the traditional approach to filling vacancies. First, she noted that librarians “must examine just what we are trying to recruit talented librarians to do, and consider designing, changing, or perhaps even ending what we now know as ‘jobs’” (p. 2). Describing the conventional mode of operation, Kaufman reported that when faced with a vacancy, an organization “designed and described jobs with some degree of specificity and hired people to fill them” (p. 2). Alternatively, she proposed that “instead of filling jobs, we should consider hiring talented people for the general areas in which we need them, and then designing jobs around them” (p. 2). With this approach, professional development would play a significantly greater role. In addition to increasing funds for professional development for librarians and providing staff with the training necessary to take on new responsibilities, it would demand a cultural shift for most libraries: “If this is to be a successful strategy, we will need to provide the post-job employee with extremely flexible organizations. Policies will need to change; new training programs will need to be developed; different kinds of communication will be required. Careers will have to be reconceptualized and career development will have to be reinvented” (pp. 2-3).

James G. Neal (2006), Vice President for Information Services and University Librarian, Columbia University, in an article in *Library Journal*, described a trend in which academic libraries have been hiring individuals who do not hold a master's degree in library science, but instead hold an advanced degree in another discipline, possess specialized language skills, have teaching experience, or have technological expertise (p. 42). He also suggested that, “another related phenomenon that should be monitored is the proliferation of new professional assignments in academic libraries and the formation of professional-level classified management or technical assignments in jobs once held by librarians” (p. 44). This trend—which has certainly continued over the last decade—points to another reason why any academic library adopting a succession planning program risks perpetuating an obsolete organizational structure: if academic libraries persist in hiring only those with traditional credentials, it is unlikely that libraries would be able to meet the broad variety of needs of patrons effectively or efficiently.

David W. Lewis, Dean of the IUPUI University Library, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, is the author of the frequently-cited “A Strategy for Academic Libraries in the First Quarter of the 21st Century” (2007), an effort to provide a strategy for academic libraries for the remaining portion of the first quarter of the twenty-first century. In his discussion of the composition of library staff, Lewis proffered several assumptions about changes in the composition of library staffing. First, he suggested that libraries will see a reduction in the number of clerical positions, and second, that the number of technologists will increase (p. 430). Further, he predicted that although the number of librarians will remain roughly the same, the roles they play will change: “fewer librarians will be involved in the traditional library roles of selecting, processing, and managing purchased collections and in providing their expertise in person, either through reference work or classroom instruction. Librarians will be increasingly involved in new roles of curating collections and providing their expertise in ways that embed it in systems and other environments” (p. 430). Again, libraries utilizing a succession

planning program to fill anticipated vacancies may well have spent time and money developing librarians for what are essentially traditional roles in legacy services rather than newer roles, such as those identified by Lewis.

All three of these library leaders—Kaufman, Neal, and Lewis—have deliberated upon the future of academic librarianship and provided a more thoughtful view with regard to library staffing in the near future. An academic library implementing a succession plan focused on developing specific individuals to fill particular anticipated vacancies may have failed to accurately take into account future library goals, and missed the opportunity to create new positions that would better satisfy the strategic goals of the library. In a forward thinking organization, positions—even key positions—are not automatically filled when they become vacant. Instead, the functions of such positions are thoroughly reviewed before a decision is made whether or not to fill those positions. Better yet, a broad assessment of what is truly needed by the entire library is made.

### **Create New Positions that Best Meet the Needs of the Library**

Whitmell (2002) described what happens in many organizations when the need arises to replace someone who is leaving: “a job description is updated, a placement advertisement is written and posted and the wait begins for the right person to apply and accept the job on the terms offered” (p. 148). Whitmell outlined why this particular approach is now obsolete: the demographic picture has changed, attitudes have changed, and expectations around work and career have changed. Libraries need employees with new and more adaptable skills (p. 148). Whitmell offered workplace planning (or succession planning) as the solution.

The solution requires an even broader approach. As librarianship continues to change rapidly, the most effective method for filling potential vacancies in library leadership is to assess any potential vacancy in light of current and future library needs. Libraries should no longer simply fill vacancies as they occur, but should instead assess

each vacancy in light of current and future needs of the whole library. In other words, don't fill the opening in cataloging just because that's where the vacancy occurred. If the current climate suggests that it is more important to create and fill a new position in digital collections or data management than it is in cataloging, then the more imperative need should be met. Once a new position has been created to meet these needs, conduct a search for an external candidate who possesses the knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics required to fill that role. Fifteen years ago, having observed that vacant positions have been reworked to include new functions and services, Munde (2000) noted that "the most frequent position redeployment is from cataloging to technology positions, although there are other emergent needs, such as distance education, electronic resources/reserves, and copyright/licensing positions" (p. 171). Such a list would be different today; one would likely note that legacy positions are left unfilled in favor of entirely new roles in scholarly communications, data management, user experience, and digital humanities. Ten years ago, Marshall (2005), suggested that "libraries may not be replacing retiring librarians on a one-to-one basis. It seems more likely that library managers will reassess their needs as positions become vacant and make changes as required to build and maintain new services" (p. 6).

Singer and Griffith (2010) contend that "the library has to plan for the future of several key positions that are not in leadership roles but contribute significantly to the library accomplishing its strategic goals or are difficult to recruit: government documents librarian, archivist, faculty/liaison librarian, head cataloger, circulation supervisor, security supervisor, to name a few." (p. 15). This is precisely the approach that makes succession planning and related concepts troubling. One could argue that the field is changing rapidly, and that any one of the positions identified by Singer and Griffith should be discontinued in favor of a new position that meets a greater need now or in the near term.

Rather than automatically fill a vacancy, a decision should first be made whether to fill the opening at all. When library administration actively employs its strategic plan—practices strategic thinking as an ongoing activity—there should already be a sense of the areas in which the library needs to grow and the areas which invite downsizing. Singer and Griffith (2010) suggested that some positions might not be filled, and recommended looking at the work and responsibilities of individual positions to see if each still added value to the organization. Further, determine if the work continues to be part of the overall strategy and goals of the organization (p. 28). Decision-makers should not weigh these considerations alone. Take into consideration the needs of other departments and the work of the library as a whole. This will make it easier to see where support of legacy services can be discontinued, and the services of a new employee can be applied where it is most needed in the organization.

Perhaps library administrators and human resources professionals should consider the approach used in zero-based budgeting (or zero-based thinking) and apply that to human resource planning. If a group of academic librarians had an opportunity to build an entirely new library from scratch, what would it look like? What positions would be created to serve its users? This strategy can be applied any time a vacancy appears. It is essential to assess vacancies in light of current library needs and then determine the best way to fill open positions. Each time a librarian or staff member retires or leaves the organization, an effort should be made to determine whether that particular position is vital to the library's strategic direction, or could that line be used to create a new position where it is most needed? Some forward-thinking library administrators and human resources professionals having practiced this strategy for years. Upon learning of a vacancy in the system, they will likely create an entirely new position designed to fill current and future needs, not the needs of yesteryear.

### **Fill New Positions with External Hires**

Rothwell (2010) asserted that “there are, after all, only two ways to get talent. One way is to develop it internally, which is the traditional focus of succession planning. But the other way is to recruit it” (p. xxix). This is, of course, true in academic librarianship. When a vacancy occurs, the library could either consider internal candidates who have the potential to fill the position, or begin a search for external candidates who possesses the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics required to fill the new role. Some deans, directors, and human resources professionals prefer to hire from within. This practice is widely recognized as being good for morale—and it sends a strong message about the culture of an organization and the degree to which that organization appreciates the value of its employees. Some institutions commit significant time and money to the development process in an effort to train their own people for leadership and management roles.

Other institutions prefer to hire from the outside, recognizing that it is advantageous to conduct a national search to fill key positions with librarians from other institutions who will bring a fresh point of view or perspective to the organization. This is especially true for those libraries undergoing reorganization and/or a change in leadership.

When things are not going well in any organization, the most effective way to bring about change is to bring in a new person who may introduce new values, visions, strategies, and policies that can sometimes result in significant change. When things are going well in an organization, conventional wisdom suggests that the organization should stay the course, and thus when a vacancy occurs, the position is filled from within the organization.

In their survey of ARL member institutions, Galbraith et al. (2012), asked survey respondents if their institutions preferred to hire university librarians, associate university librarians, and department chairs internally or externally (or if they had no preference)—and further, respondents were also asked if, *in practice*, they generally

hired internally, externally, or both. Keeping in mind that they surveyed only ARL member institutions, and that there were only thirty-four respondents, the results are nonetheless informative. There was a stronger preference for hiring university librarians externally, but no preference for hiring with regard to associate university librarians or department heads (p. 232). They also found that practice mirrored preference: “53 percent prefer to hire university librarians externally, and the same percent reported that they typically hire externally for this position.” (Galbraith et al., 2012, p. 232). For associate university librarians and department chairs, the largest percentage reported that they “hired both internal and external candidates equally” (p. 232).

Bridgland (1999) identified a variety of reasons why promoting from within has value, including continuity for the organization, institutional memory, inside knowledge of people’s strength and weaknesses, ability to take advantage of the informal network, and the signal that hiring from within sends to others: senior management values the organization’s internal talent (p. 26). Galbraith et al. (2012) identified what are perhaps the two most common explanations for why promoting from within is advantageous: (1) it sustains or improves the morale of employees, and (2) “it smoothes transitions by ensuring that key positions are filled by those whose personalities, philosophies, and skills are already known to others in the organization” (p. 225). Galbraith et al. (2012) also asked survey respondents to indicate their top two reasons for hiring internally. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents indicated that “the transition is easier because internal employees understand the library’s culture, strategic goals, and vision,” while thirty-seven percent indicated that their employees were “well prepared for leadership opportunities” (p. 232).

In her study of succession paths for academic library directors, Hatcher (1997) weighed the internal succession path versus the external path, and noted “the negative sides of being an internal candidate are the problems that might exist or had existed in the past are still with the candidate even as they move up the career ladder,” while she

wrote that “the external candidate can serve as an agent for change and bring experience from other institutions” (p. 44). Bridgland (1999) also weighed in on the debate as to “whether to promote from within” or “attract and appoint fresh talent from elsewhere.” She suggested that the answer is probably to do both (p. 25). More specifically, with regard to hiring externally, she identified two key advantages: first, “choosing members of the executive leadership team from outside the organization often provides fresh thinking and reinvigorates the culture,” and second, “these individual have a readiness to act and take on a fresh challenge” (pp. 25-26). Murray (2007) in her article about ‘growing your own,’ wrote that “every library needs to recruit external candidates who bring new ideas, special skills, and experience,” but went on to suggest that “equally strong internal bench strength is required to meet both emergency and long-term leadership at all levels.” Galbraith et al. (2012), asked survey respondents to select two reasons why they choose to hire library leaders externally. Sixty-six percent indicated that they wanted “to hire leaders who can offer fresh perspectives or new ideas from other libraries.” Thirty-one percent of the respondents selected “internal candidates who might be qualified for these positions often do not apply,” while twenty-eight percent selected “internal candidates are qualified; however, external candidates are more qualified” (p. 232).

Another of the potential problems of succession planning is that such programs seem to be oriented toward filling vacancies quickly—perhaps too quickly. It may be a better strategy to leave vacancies open in order to allow time to assess thoroughly what is needed now—as well as what will be needed three to five years from now. Singer and Griffith (2010) observed that “when a library hears that its director is leaving, it is too easy to just rush into the hiring phase” (p. 90). They suggested not to rush; this “will help you hire the right leader, one who has the competencies to bring the library to new phases of growth in line with its strategy” (p. 90).

While there are some advantages in hiring an internal candidate, there are significant advantages in hiring an external candidate. An external hire is more likely to be able to introduce new ways of thinking and working; an individual recruited from another institution will bring new knowledge and a different set of abilities and skills to the organization.

### **Conclusion**

Ten years ago, discussing the challenge of replacing retiring library directors, Curran (2005), observed that “the paths that enabled current senior administrators to attain their positions will not automatically be the same for those who more recently entered the profession—nor may they be appropriate paths to the senior administration positions of tomorrow. Conditions change. As with every other professional library positions . . . the skills required fifteen or twenty years ago that paved the way for today’s directors may not be those need for library administration positions of the future.” (p. 128). Conditions do change—and will continue to do so. Although succession planning may appear to be a credible, even forward-thinking solution to an anticipated retirement of a large number of librarians and a potential gap in leadership, libraries adopting a succession planning program risk perpetuating an obsolete organizational structures.

The best hope for organizational continuity lies not in succession planning, but in an ongoing effort to mentor and guide those who have leadership potential; an effort to continuously assess current and future needs for the library; the ability to look upon each vacancy as an opportunity to create a new position that will best satisfy the strategic goals of the library; and the willingness to conduct a search for an external candidate who will bring a fresh point of view or perspective to the organization.

### **A Lack of Succession Planning is Not an Oversight**

In a study of the use of organizational development and academic libraries, Parsch and Baughman (2010) conducted two surveys to study “the existence and

extent of use of organization development (OD) programs and techniques in Association of Research Libraries (ARL)” (p. 3). The authors found that although a number of ARL member libraries have been engaged in activities that fall under the umbrella of organization development, succession planning has not been a priority activity among those libraries that responded to the survey.

The survey of ARL member institutions conducted by Galbraith et al. (2012) suggested a gap between the “perceived importance of various principles of succession planning and how well the principles are practiced” (p. 226). The authors found that “succession planning is simply not a priority” (p. 228). Those surveyed were asked to indicate the “top two hindrances to succession planning;” forty-seven percent of those responding indicated that “succession planning is not part of the library’s strategic goals or plans,” and further, twenty-two percent indicated “the executive team puts little emphasis on succession planning” (p. 228). These findings are not indicative of neglect on the part of library administrators and human resource professionals at ARL member institutions. Forward thinking deans or directors at these libraries may have made a well-considered decision that succession planning is not a useful tool for academic libraries in this climate of rapid change.

### **Focus on the Future**

Writing about the importance of developing an up-to-date job description, Singer and Griffith (2010) suggested that “although your inclination may be to reach for the departing director’s job description, resist the temptation. Instead of looking to the past and what was, focus on the future. Look forward toward the library’s aspirations and then shape the job, and job description, around your current and future leadership needs” (pp. 94-95). The present author has made four recommendations for strategic staffing of academic libraries in the future. First, current library leaders should continue to mentor and guide those in the organization who possess leadership potential—even though those librarians may ultimately serve elsewhere. Second, library leaders should

continuously assess the climate in and out of the library to determine current and future needs. As librarianship is changing rapidly, potential vacancies should be evaluated in terms of where in the library a new position is most needed. Third, rather than fill existing and anticipated vacancies as they occur, positions should be created that best meet the current and future needs of the library. Each new vacancy should be looked upon as an opportunity to create a new position that will best satisfy the strategic goals of the library. Fourth, when possible, such newly created positions should be filled with qualified candidates recruited from outside the organization. Once a decision has been made regarding a particular vacancy, a search should be conducted for an external candidate who will bring a fresh point of view or perspective to the organization undergoing a change in leadership.

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