INTRODUCTION

The library at the Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center in Shreveport (LSUHSC-Ś) had a professional staff of fifteen when one librarian retired in January 2007. Prior to his departure, the last professional vacancy had occurred three years earlier when three librarians left at the same time, two for library positions elsewhere and one due to retirement.
The authors questioned whether the minimal turnover and the reasons for departure in their library were unique to this library or representative of health sciences libraries in general.

A review of the literature revealed that turnover had not been heavily investigated in academic health sciences libraries [1]. Colding [2] and Luzius [3] examined turnover in academic librarianship, including job satisfaction, future salary prospects, and career goals. Luzius surveyed former academic librarians who cited unpleasant work environment and unacceptable compensation as some of their reasons for leaving the profession. The Medical Library Association (MLA) conducts a triennial salary survey of its individual members and includes demographic data on age and experience as well as a section on job dissatisfaction and turnover [4]. However, the authors sought turnover information from the organizational perspective rather than from the perspective of the individual health sciences librarian.

**METHODS**

Because personnel matters are usually handled by library administration, the authors targeted the members of the Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries (AAHSL), who are medical school library directors. The authors developed survey questions using their anecdotal observations of reasons for departures, including retirement and movement to a new position.

Survey questions generally covered demographics of professional staff departures, reasons for leaving a position, and difficulties administrators faced in filling vacancies. The online appendix shows a copy of the survey. The survey asked questions about vacancies in 2006, the year before survey launch in 2007, because the authors assumed recent vacancy information would be easy to recall or locate. A draft of the survey was reviewed by the authors’ library director as well as selected library faculty. Modifications were made based on recommendations. The survey was emailed to 134 member libraries of the AAHSL mailing list on January 9, 2007.

**RESULTS**

**Demographics**

Fifty responses (37.3%) were received by January 25. The survey was reissued to nonrespondents via SurveyMonkey on January 31, 2007. The survey closed on February 14, 2007, having received 35 additional responses for a total of 85 responses (63.4% response rate).

Responding libraries were largely similar in terms of the number of professional positions: 69 (81%) of the responding libraries had between 6 and 20 professional positions. Eleven libraries (13%) reported having 1 to 5 professional positions, and only 5 (6%) had more than 20. Survey respondents were asked to identify themselves by National Network of Libraries of Medicine region [5] (Table 1). The Southeastern Atlantic region reported 34 vacancies, the largest number, followed by the Middle Atlantic region with 23 vacancies.

**Vacancies**

Of the 85 libraries responding to the survey, 25 (29.4%) had 0 vacancies in 2006. Twenty-eight libraries (32.9%) reported 1 professional vacancy. Thus, 62.3% of responding libraries had 0 or only 1 professional vacancy in 2006. The largest number of vacancies reported was 6, occurring in only 1 library.

The 60 respondents reporting professional vacancies (107 total vacancies, mean 1.8 vacancies per respondent) identified the departments in which the vacancies occurred (Table 2). Thirty-nine of the 107 vacancies (36.4%) occurred in reference-related departments. Seventeen vacancies (15.9%) occurred in library administration, and 15 vacancies (14.0%) occurred in technology-focused systems departments.

**Reasons for vacancies**

Survey respondents were asked to identify the reason for each professional vacancy occurring in their libraries in 2006 (Table 3). The most common reason for professional turnover, accounting for 36 of the total 107 vacancies (33.6%), related to taking a position elsewhere. As a follow-up question, the survey asked whether the new position was another professional library position or a career change. Thirty-two of the 36 librarians (82%) who accepted a position elsewhere remained in the field rather than seeking alternative positions.
career choices. Retirement was the second most common reason for professional turnover, accounting for 32 vacancies (29.9%). Furthermore, 17 of the 32 retiring librarians (53%) had more than 20 years of service at their institutions.

**Filling of open positions**

Library administrators were not always able to fill professional vacancies. Of the 25 respondents reporting that they were unable to fill professional vacancies in 2006, 10 instances (40%) were attributed to a lack of qualified applicants. Only 3 respondents (12%) reported that they were unable to hire because of funding. Twelve survey respondents (48%) listed various other reasons that prevented them from filling positions in 2006. These reasons included: institutional factors such as libraries waiting for a new administrator or dean to arrive before hiring; restructuring, with library administrators transferring the responsibilities of the vacant position to existing staff; and vacancies not yet filled as the library was in the midst of a lengthy hiring process.

**DISCUSSION**

Survey results show the largest percentage of library vacancies occurring in reference, but this may be misleading. It may be that more librarians were working in this department, so it would be expected that the number of librarians leaving those positions would be larger. The graying of the library profession may have been a factor in the large number of library vacancies in administration in 2006. Lenzini reported in 2000 that over 50% of AAHSL directors intended to retire within the decade [6]. Salaries may have played a role in the large number of vacancies reported in systems. Libraries typically compete market-wide for individuals with advanced technology skills and often cannot match the salaries offered by for-profit businesses.

This study also reveals that, among survey respondents in 2006, the most common reason health sciences librarians left their libraries was to accept positions elsewhere. Based on this finding, library administrators may conclude that they should strive to increase institutional loyalty or examine factors such as the challenge of a position, compensation, or job flexibility that may encourage retention and discourage turnover. Libraries are labor-intensive organizations, and rehiring and retraining are time consuming and expensive. However, these potential drawbacks must be balanced with the organizational need for new professionals with fresh ideas and up-to-date skills. Furthermore, library management must recognize that some of the reasons for professional turnover, such as family and health, obviously cannot be controlled.

**Limitations**

The authors assumed that survey recipients would be more likely to respond if doing so did not require searching through years of records. Thus, the survey was administered early in 2007 and addressed turnover in 2006 only. While this might have encouraged participation by respondents who could rely on memory to answer the questions, this survey’s report of only one year gave a snapshot of professional turnover at a specific time rather than a historical overview.

Any questionnaire is answered based on the respondents’ interpretations of the questions. This study included wording that could be subject to varied interpretation by the respondents. For example, this survey’s questions used the term “professional positions” rather than specifying “librarians.” The authors intentionally selected this term to include all professionals and exclude paraprofessionals. However, these inclusions and exclusions were not specifically defined in the survey. Therefore, library directors’ responses were based on their own interpretations of the terminology, which might have varied among the respondents.

It is also possible that departing librarians did not share all their reasons for departure with their supervisors, particularly if interpersonal conflicts with supervisors were a factor or if a letter of recommendation would be needed in the future. Therefore, directors were only able to provide what they were told were the reasons for the departure of personnel.

Generalizability of this study was also limited by the small number of respondents. No responses were received from 49 of the 134 health sciences library directors, including 1 entire region, the Pacific Northwest. It was possible that some directors were reluctant to complete the survey because of its lack of anonymity.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Personnel matters are critical to achieving a library’s mission. According to the survey reported here, health sciences libraries were characterized by minimal turnover in professional personnel in 2006. Those librarians who left were most often going to work at another library, apparently seeking new professional opportunities but not leaving the field. According to this study, another common reason for professional turnover in 2006 was retirement. Results showed that many of the retiring librarians had worked more than twenty years at the same institution. These long terms of service, in addition to the small number of librarians leaving, implied staffing stability in health sciences libraries in 2006.

Further research would be necessary to determine if this staffing stability is an ongoing trend that might impact the careers of future librarians. Furthermore, additional research could expand on the reasons for turnover, including probing elements related to two-career couples or the desire to enhance professional skills. Additional research could also investigate facets of job satisfaction, particularly in an industry with heavy retirement forecasted [6], and professional...
culture and work expectations, aspects that often change across generations and that necessitate frequent investigation [7].

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