Changing Leadership: A Longitudinal Study of Decision-making by Academic Library Leaders

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abstract: This paper presents the results of thirty-seven interviews of senior library leaders at American Association of University (AAU) institutions conducted in Spring 2023. The author replicated a 2016 study from *portal*, revealing an increased focus on strategic plan-based decision-making along with new priorities of open scholarship and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The COVID-19 pandemic had a drastic impact on staffing and budgets, requiring academic library leaders to balance internal operations and external collaboration. A younger, more diverse AAU library leadership population achieves success through strong advocacy to campus leadership and the inclusive leadership practices outlined in this paper.

Introduction

Leadership in academic libraries has been a robust area of study for many decades. To closely examine changes within libraries in higher education over time, a longitudinal study can reveal both quantitative differences and thematic shifts. With the increasing importance of reproducibility of research in the social sciences, the author undertook the replication of a 2015 study published in *portal*, which will hereafter be referred to as the "prior study."[1] That study conducted interviews with 44 deans and university librarians at large, research institutions within the U.S. and Canada. The current study was conducted on the same population using an identical demographic survey and interview questions that were expanded to include an investigation of inclusive leadership practices. This paper will focus on decision-making and analyze only the interview questions that were identical to the prior study. A companion paper will examine the findings related to inclusive leadership.

Since the 2015 study, multiple disruptions have had dramatic impacts on academic libraries, higher education, and society. In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused most universities to go entirely remote, emptying campuses of both students and employees. In that same year, George Floyd was killed by a police officer and powerful social justice movements, such as Black Lives Matter, emerged across the US. From February to May, 2023, the author interviewed 37 library deans and university librarians about their decision-making processes and future strategic goals. In some cases, change was driven by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and an increasing focus on social justice in society, but in many libraries change was already in progress.

Literature Review

Historically, academic libraries have been hierarchical organizations, with the senior administrator, dean, or director holding decision-making authority. Over time, academic library organizations have developed a flatter structure and dispersed power across additional senior leadership team members and middle managers.[2] While libraries traditionally valued stability, the increasing pace of change in higher education at the end of the 20th century spurred libraries to first embrace incremental change and later adopt transformative change in order to respond successfully to their institutions' needs.[3]

The 2015 study found that academic library leaders often make decisions in a collaborative environment with a close administrative team. They use strategic planning to prioritize goals, but organizational changes primarily occurred as a result of budget and personnel disruptions, such as cuts or retirements. The pace of change was most often gradual, though constant, with most shifts accomplished through modifying vacant positions or new partnerships. The prior study called for increased cultivation of future leaders to prepare for a leadership vacuum caused by the "graying of the profession." Strategic planning also focused primarily on traditional library services, such as reference and collections, and technology was the main source of innovation.[4] Since that time many other studies have examined decision-making, strategic planning, and priorities of library leaders.

Ithaka S+R, a non-profit organization focused on higher education, conducts regular surveys of library and campus constituents. Their 2022 US Library Survey found that most academic libraries are continuing to shift priorities from collections to services, decreasing expenditures for general collections, and increasing research data management services.[5] Respondents prioritized open access academic content that offered free and unrestricted access. Many deans and directors mentioned challenges with employee recruitment, convincing campus leaders of the library's value, and evolving information literacy programs to meet current university curricula. Student academic success, increasing student learning, and helping students develop a sense of community are the top priorities along with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). According to the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) libraries are focused on DEI, the impact of technology, and lingering effects of COVID-19.[6] In the same environmental scan from 2015, technology was the focus and discussion of diversity was limited to library collections.[7]

Academic libraries have long employed strategic realignment processes to provide improved support to their stakeholders within the university and community.[8] Interviews of different levels of library employees from multiple countries revealed libraries to be focused on responding to the changing needs of their institutional communities.[9] They noted a planning horizon of three to five years and recommended libraries focus on tracking paradigm shifts rather than trends. A scoping review conducted in 2022 surveyed the library literature for information inputs used for decision-making by academic library administrators.[10] The most common influence was from college or campus administration, followed by staffing factors, and the budget as the third-most. Library leaders gathered this input primarily from meetings and interviews and, secondarily, through surveys and data gathering.

Since 2020, the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have dominated the library leadership literature.[11] Academic libraries had to rapidly move services online during the remote period, which resulted in innovation but also surfaced inequities within the campus community.[12] With universities facing financial difficulties due to the pandemic, libraries tackled not only budget cuts but also additional operational challenges to traditionally physical services. Academic library leaders had to make quick decisions concerning the safety of users and staff and providing access to physical collections, while also shifting their organizations to new ways of working.[13] To expedite decisions, deans and directors were often willing to make them alone or consultation with a small team. While this created more nimble responses, it opposed leaders' preferences for shared decision-making.

In a crisis, effective strategic planning can be beneficial as a guide to decision-making that ensures alignment with the mission of the institution and library.[14] Library leaders can employ approaches like design thinking and rapid prototyping to adapt to changing situations.[15] It became vital for library leaders to work closely with university administrators to articulate the value of the library and coordinate so library services aligned with changes to teaching and research practices during remote work and return to campus. In many cases this strengthened campus-library connections, however it also surfaced disagreements and inequity.[16] Some library leaders were empowered to make decisions about budgets and services, while others faced budget cuts and deadlines to reopen campus spaces.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were global, with libraries around the world accelerating a shift to online services and digitization, which enabled increased flexibility and communication.[17] Research services, such as reference and data management support, benefitted from innovative solutions to the challenges of remote work, which resulted in some persistent changes to many library services and roles.[18] The remote work environment is not without challenges, including tension between those who can easily work from home and employees with work tied to physical facilities and services.[19] Departments such as technical services and special collections had to adapt numerous workflows to work remotely, and many library workers are in favor of continued remote work opportunities. Formalized flexible work arrangements, properly constructed, can find the balance to benefit both the library organization and employee.[20]

Scholarly publishing and technology trends are also impacting library strategic planning. Open data mandates, artificial intelligence (AI), and a multitude of open publish-

ing approaches will affect library services.[6] Generative AI is getting increased attention from libraries with concerns that several library services, especially reference, could be replaced. Machine learning could enable libraries to work at a much larger scale, but researchers recommend using library expertise to evaluate the potential bias inherent in AI systems.[21] The continued importance of data to university research and growth in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) funding, accompany student success and support for historically minoritized groups as university priories.[22] Despite the disruptions, university faculty still see the library's primary mission as access to and curation of scholarly resources.[23] University leaders still value the library on campus but are looking for library deans and directors to communicate impact on research productivity and student success.[24]

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine whether decision-making strategies and library priorities have changed over the past decade, especially with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In early March 2023 the author contacted the senior library administrators, including interim position-holders, at all 65 Association of American Universities (AAU) institutions using email addresses obtained from university and library websites.[25] A second round of invitations was sent in late March, and a final reminder was distributed in early April. Of those invited, 53 individuals responded to this method of direct contact and 37 agreed to participate in this study resulting in a 57 percent response rate.

The demographic survey was based on the instrument used in the prior study, modified to reflect current terminology used by the US Census Bureau for race and ethnicity and the UCLA Williams Institute for gender identity (see Appendix A). An age category of 70+ was also added. Participants were provided the informed consent information for the study along with the demographic survey prior to interviews. Almost all completed the survey prior to the interview, though some completed it during or immediately following.

Interviews consisted of seven questions (see Appendix B) and were conducted using a semi-structured approach that allows for follow-up questions. Five of the seven questions were identical to the prior study, while one question was modified to focus on preparing individuals with diverse identities for leadership. An additional question on inclusive leadership practices was added. Interviews were conducted over Zoom teleconference software and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Each was recorded and automatically transcribed by Zoom. The author cleaned each transcript, correcting transcription errors and removing personal and institutional identifying information. The recordings were then deleted to ensure confidentiality.

Content analysis was used to analyze the transcripts, following the same methodology as the prior study. The author tagged sentences in each transcript using a code book from the prior study. After applying these codes, the author identified additional codes for the most frequent themes not reported in the prior study, which were subsequently tagged in each transcript. Coding began in April 2023 after all interviews were completed and all transcripts were reviewed twice, first with the original code book and

then with the additional codes. The author totaled the frequency of each coded response and compared them to the prior study.

Results and Analysis

Demographic survey

Starting with the demographic survey results, comparisons can be made to the prior study and data available from the Association of Research Libraries (ARL)—from the most recent Annual Salary Survey and works by Stanley Wilder.[26]

Participants in this study indicated a female gender identity in 68 percent of responses. This is a 13 percent increase over the prior study and 9 percent higher than the most recent ARL data (see Figure 1). This study represents a small subset of the population of academic libraries, and women still face many barriers to career progression in academic libraries.[27] The percentage of women in leadership positions in this study's sample is higher than recent ARL data for administrators and exceeds the composition of ARL professional staff, which is 64.6 percent female.[28] However, ARL overall responses indicate only 59 percent women deans, directors, and university librarians within the association's member libraries as well as a significant salary gap between males and females. As Rutledge found, women in management roles in libraries experience many barriers to career progression. Several interview subjects talked about the challenges they faced and their use of peer networks for support. A few participants mentioned intentionally hiring more women into senior leadership positions at their institutions, along with their roles as mentors and peers to other women in the profession.
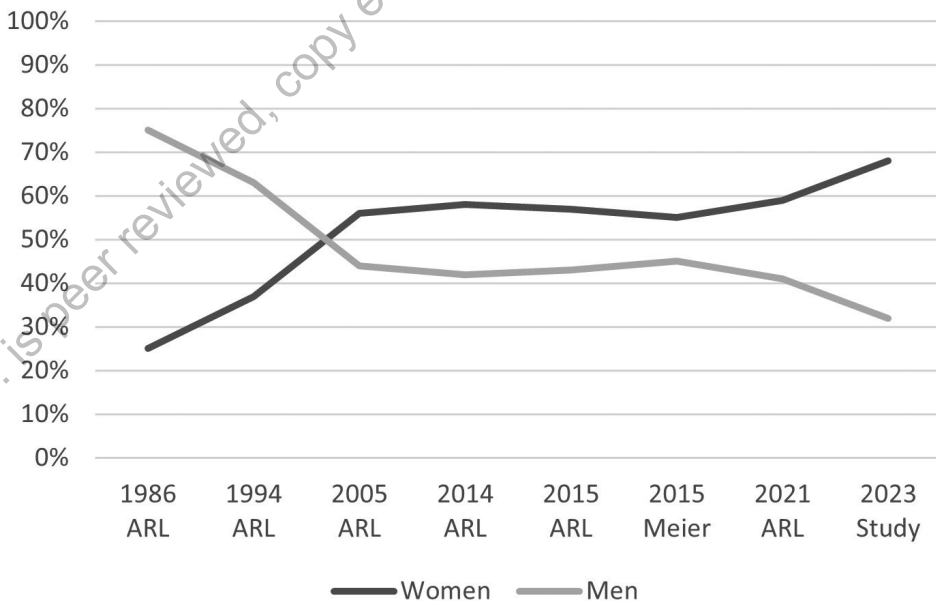

Figure 1. Percentage of gender representation among library leaders

When compared to the prior study and available ARL data, the average age of this study's population is the lowest seen since the 1990s (see Figure 2). ARL no longer collects age data, but the most recent available data was used. While the largest increase was in the 50- to 59-year-old group, there was also a measurable increase in the 40- to 49-year-old group and one participant was under 40 years old. The 60+ year-old group, while not the smallest, has steadily decreased in proportion since the 2010s. The amount of time participants have been in the profession—calculated based on their most relevant terminal degree—was an average of 25 years, versus 35 years in the prior study. They have been at their current institution a shorter time on average: 8 years versus 12 years in the prior study. Within the sample of 35 participants from institutions that were members of AAU in 2015 (2 newly joined), only four were in the same position during the prior study.

The average age of participants in this study is significantly lower than the prior study and follows the trend in ARL data over the past decade. The library literature has discussed the graying of the profession since the 20th century.[29] Study participants identified this along with a need for new library workers, library leaders and administrators. With the COVID-19 pandemic, a phenomenon known as the Great Resignation has also emerged, bringing a surge of employee turnover across all industries.[30] The combination of these two factors seems to have led to a remarkably younger cohort of deans, directors, and university librarians within both AAU and ARL.
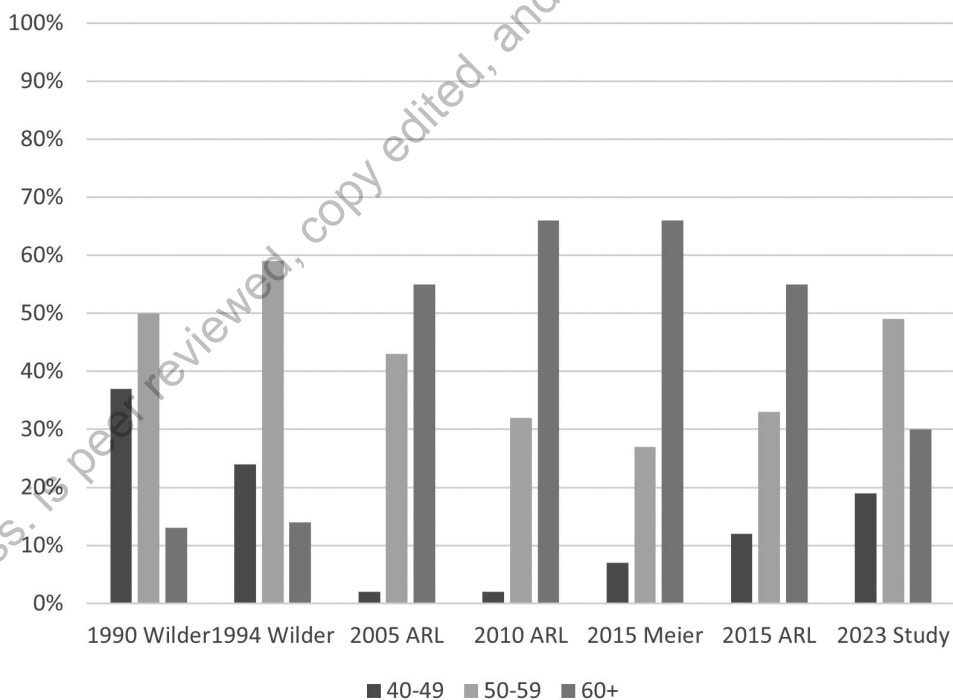

Figure 2. Age distribution of library leaders

Focusing on the responses to the survey question on ethnicity, 81 percent of participants indicated they were White compared to 95 percent of participants in the prior study (see Table 1). This aligns with ARL data that has shown an increase in Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) library leaders to a high of 26 percent in 2021, compared to 19 percent in this study. The representation of diverse identities in academic library leadership has increased, but it remains far from reflecting university populations and the community. While this topic will be explored further in a companion article, the importance of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion pervades responses to all of the interview questions. The impact of increased representation among participants is a significant part of that.

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Table 1.
Racial or Ethnic Identities of Survey Participants

Answers to the question "What is your racial or ethnic identity?"	White	Non-white
2014 ARL	86%	14%
2015 Meier	95%	5%
2021 ARL	74%	26%
2023 Study	81%	19%

Finally, job titles of participants have shifted slightly since the prior study (see Table 2). Many of the official titles contained multiple keywords, which results in total percentages greater than 100 percent. The percentage of participants with the title of Dean remained consistent, while the percentage of directors dropped significantly. More participants had a title that included vice provost or a similar name, while the percentage of university librarians also increased.

Several participants noted that their title, often recently changed, significantly affected their interactions with campus leadership. Those that gained the title of Vice Provost often counted among their most important contacts on campus the other members of the Provost's cabinet, while deans focused more frequently on other deans in academic units. One participant with the title University Librarian perceived that it brought them closer to student support services rather than academic deans, which they saw as aligned with their library's mission. The lower number of directors among the participants in this study could be explained by the gain in these other titles.

Table 2.
Respondents' documented job titles.

	Dean	Director	Vice Provost	University Librarian
2015 Meier	21 (48%)	5 (11%)	10 (23%)	20 (45%)
2023 Study	18 (49%)	2 (5%)	11 (30%)	19 (51%)

Decision-Making

Responses to the interview question about decision-making are shown in Table 3 alongside the percentage of responses coded to the same theme in the prior study, with three new themes identified. Percentages exceed 100 since participants frequently mentioned multiple factors in decision-making.

Table 3.
Answers to the question: "How do you make decisions about your organization's future?"

	2023	2015
Based on strategic planning and goals	70%	41%
Collaborative decision-making with senior leadership team	51%	70%
University Strategic Plan	41%	27%
Broad input and consensus	32%	new
Middle managers group or leadership council	30%	new
Based on budget	22%	16%
Directive from above/Provost	19%	14%
Individuals' talents and personalities	19%	7%
Data-driven decision-making	16%	7%
Research the problem	14%	11%
Make decisions alone	11%	14%
Others empowered to make decisions without Dean/Director	11%	5%
Based on the history and culture of the institution	3%	11%

A major shift in results since the prior study was toward strategic planning as the top response (70 percent) to the question of how they make decisions, although it was also important in the earlier study (41 percent). In many cases, participants conducted strategic planning as part of their arrival at a new institution, which would occur more frequently given the shorter time in role found in the demographic results. Also, many leaders found their strategic plan to be a source of steady guidance through the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. The university's strategic plan was also mentioned more frequently among this cohort of library leaders. One participant noted, "We designed our strategic plan to be in alignment with the University's Strategic Plan so that the Libraries' plan would tie closely together with the University's plan." This confirms Lauseng's 2022 findings about the importance of the college and campus to library decision-making.[31] Approaches to strategic planning participants mentioned ranged from using consultants and facilitators (16 percent), to a traditional strategic planning committee (14 percent), to a more inclusive planning approach involving all staff (14 percent) including in one case opening up the planning document for all staff to edit online.

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There was also a significant decline in the percentage of responses mentioning their senior leadership team when asked about decision-making. While this group, sometimes called the admin team or cabinet, continued to be an important source of advice and consultation, other leadership groups within the library were highlighted. Middle management leadership groups, sometimes called leadership council or department heads, rose to prominence as being involved in decision-making. This is consistent with research indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic showed a need for increased leadership by middle managers.[32] A good portion of participants also talked about seeking broad input, even creating new groups to represent staff interests, and holding regular town hall meetings. They also mentioned empowering employees to make decisions on their own twice as often as in the prior study.

This study showed similar rates of response for budget-driven decision-making and directives, though both increased somewhat since the previous study. This could be related to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. While other questions elicited more explicit COVID-19 related challenges, the most-cited challenge in several responses here was a lack of employees, often in key roles, which limited the capacity for effective decision-making. While fewer participants mentioned their decisions were guided by the history and culture of the institution, far more cited using data for decision-making. This data included student satisfaction surveys and focus groups, as well as formal assessments like LibQUAL, ClimateQUAL and ITHAKA surveys.

Main Strategic Goals

While many responses to the question on main strategic goals were like the prior study, a few new topics became very significant to library leaders (see Table 4).

Table 4.

Answers to the question "What are your main strategic goals over the next 3-5 years?"

	2023	2015
Open Access, Open Data, Open Science, Open Scholarship	62%	-
Focus on DEIAB	54%	-
Data Management	46%	36%
Teaching and Learning	43%	45%
New library spaces	41%	43%
Research	41%	41%
Community Engagement	35%	9%
Fundraising	30%	20%
Information Technology and Digital Projects	30%	45%
Digital Collections (new approaches to overall Collections)	27%	30%
Special Collections	24%	27%
Artificial Intelligence	24%	-
Deal with legacy print collection	19%	23%
Collaboration with other libraries	11%	25%
Increase size of staff	11%	5%
Health Sciences	5%	7%
University Press	5%	2%
Digital Humanities	5%	16%
Reorganization	0%	23%

The most frequently mentioned priority for interview subjects was "Open," which included open access, open data, open science, open scholarship, and open educational resources (OER). Specific topics included the US Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) 2022 memorandum on public access to research, and specific projects included the Higher Education Leadership Initiative for Open Scholarship (HELIOS). Data management also rose in significance among strategic priorities for AAU library leaders. Support for the twin missions of higher education, teaching and research, remained about the same in frequency of mention.

The second-most frequently mentioned priority was a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), which was another new theme to this study. Many library leaders cited the social justice movement within the US, and a few pointed directly to the killing of George Floyd in 2020. While detailed responses will be discussed in a companion article, it should be noted several respondents were cautious in how they could take action toward DEI due to legislation passed or pending in their state governments. Community engagement was a topic that increased greatly in mentions between the prior

study and this group of leaders, increasing from an appearance in only nine percent of responses in 2015 to thirty-five percent in 2023. Many of these themes are also related to social justice and creating meaningful partnerships and collaborative programming with the state, city, or nearby libraries and cultural heritage institutions. Other partnerships highlighted were on campus, often with student support services and centers supporting students with diverse identities.

While library spaces were still important, there was an increase in the frequency of participants mentioning fundraising, often in the context of renovations and new construction. Many new library spaces focused on student services, which resulted in collections being moved to current or new off-site storage facilities. Dealing with large physical collections and the trend of collections toward digital remained at the same level of priority as in the prior study. Collaboration with other libraries dipped significantly, though projects mentioned included shared print initiatives. This decline could be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic focusing library organizations on their own operations and services.

Significantly, information technology (IT) and digital projects were mentioned quite a bit less in this study. The major new theme in this area was artificial intelligence (AI), which was mentioned in 24 percent of interviews, with a few libraries already establishing positions or services, while most cited it as an area of necessary exploration. One participant observed, "With ChatGPT and all the other technologies, on the one hand, we're becoming more important because of digital information and all these apps. And yet, on the other hand, some of our service models are going to be really radically rethought." Digital Humanities (DH) dropped in frequency of mention by library leaders compared to the prior study, though terminology may be changing in this realm to include new modes and services including the broader "Open" umbrella term. Special collections and health sciences libraries remained at a similar response rate, while university presses were mentioned a few times.

Reorganization was not mentioned as a future goal by any participants in response to this question; however, later questions do indicate that a few participants will be making future changes to administrative portfolios. In response to other questions, library leaders indicated that many library employees and campus leaders disliked the term "reorganization" and preferred "restructure" or "realignment." Interview subjects frequently mentioned that their employees had little appetite for large disruptive organizational changes given both the COVID-19 pandemic and large-scale changes made by their predecessors. Increasing staff size rose in significance, much of this due to the loss of employees described in the next section.

Past Changes

The next question asked about major changes participants had made in the past three years (see Table 5). A much higher proportion (30 percent) of interview subjects indicated that they had been at their institution for fewer than 3 years, compared to 20 percent in the prior study. Some of these individuals spoke about changes their predecessor had made. Fewer individuals with interim appointments participated in this study (5percent) than previously (11 percent), with most interim leaders declining to participate or not responding to the study invitations. A similar portion of interview subjects said there were no major changes made in the last three years.

Table 5.

Answers to the question "What major organizational changes have you made in the past 3 years?"

	2023	2015
Consolidated units	30%	18%
Changed roles when filling vacant positions	27%	39%
Created new operational units	27%	23%
New AD or AUL	24%	30%
Dramatic change (reapplied for jobs, rewrote jobs, etc)	24%	18%
Reassigned or moved individuals	19%	30%
No major changes	14%	14%
Added more members to the administrative team	14%	9%
Hired Ph.D., experts and other non-librarians	11%	9%
Reduced size of units	3%	18%
Eliminated units	3%	9%
Matrix teams, management, organizational structure	3%	11%

The most frequently mentioned past change was consolidating units, often combining similar functions into a new department or in one case closing a branch library and moving collections and staff into the main building. The most frequently consolidated units were library IT, technical services, and metadata units. Participants pointed to shared skillsets in technology skills, like software development, among employees in these areas combining to support digital collections and data services. Also noted were acquisitions and interlibrary loan services, sometimes also with technical services. A few interview subjects mentioned public services that were combined, such as student learning and engagement departments, and access services across multiple locations. A few more participants mentioned creating new units than in the prior study, primarily in research data services. In some cases, current staff were moved into a newly created unit, while in rare cases all positions in the new unit were also newly created. A few other types of new library units were mentioned by individuals, such as student learning and success, learning design, and digital library strategies.

Another key change, though mentioned less frequently than in the prior study, was creating organizational change through reexamining positions when they have vacancies. While most interview subjects spoke about this practice generally, several gave specific examples such as changing a specific position to start a new service, expanding a team that was under-resourced, or even modifying a position to make it more recruitable. Some of these responses referenced creating a new associate dean (AD) or associate university librarian (AUL) position. Twenty-four percent of respondents discussed

this, which represents a slight decrease from the prior study (30%). In two instances, a second-in-command style position was created, called Executive AUL or similar, while in three other instances multiple positions were added. In most cases this resulted in a reshuffling of all portfolios among the administrative team. Interviews also mentioned adding members to the senior leadership team, and almost all of these cases directly mentioned diversity or inclusion as the goal, often including members of a DEI committee or a new DEI Director.

A higher percentage of participants described major reorganizations over the past several years than the prior study. Even with major changes, many of these responses called the change a "realignment" to avoid the term "reorganization," which they asserted did not appeal to either library employees or the university. These large-scale changes involved movement of reporting lines, changes to structure and administrative portfolios, and creating new units. In two cases all jobs were reviewed through human resources processes, which was described as a "monumental" undertaking. Interview subjects also described smaller scale shifts of individuals within the organization through promotion, reclassification, or movement to a different department. In a few cases this was due to personnel issues, but in most cases the decision was made to better align a job or manager with a department's mission and scope.

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In four cases, participants described intentionally hiring individuals without a Master of Library and Information Sciences (MLIS) degree into jobs that would normally require one, a response rate similar to the prior study. In one case, the respondent was hiring doctorate (PhD) holders to serve in liaison roles in their area of expertise, but overall, the expressed intention of this administrative choice was to reduce barriers and bring diverse viewpoints into the library and library leadership roles. In most cases, this expertise or qualification came from related fields such as museums, communications, or higher education.

Some topics that emerged in the prior study were almost nonexistent in current responses. The topic with the greatest decrease in mention was the reduction of the size of certain units: 18 percent of respondents discussed this in the prior study versus only 3 percent in this one. This could be attributed to the high loss of personnel noted by most interview subjects. Likewise, fewer participants said that they eliminated units entirely, with the lone example involving closing departmental branch libraries. Another theme that was expressed much less often was a move to a new style of organization, rather than a traditional hierarchy, such as matrix management.

Reasons for past change

The COVID-19 pandemic was the most cited rationale for organizational change by a large margin (see Table 6). A significant consequence and lingering outcome of the pandemic was increased hybrid and remote work for many university and university library employees. The ability to conduct work remotely was also a source of tension between different categories of employees, most often librarians, who can more easily work remotely, versus staff in on-site specific roles. It also became clear that many of the other reasons for change, though also appearing in the prior study, could be considered consequences of the pandemic as well. For example, the almost doubling of responses mentioning vacancies, not explicitly as retirements, as well as a new category of positions lost permanently, stemmed from the sweeping budget cuts and hiring freezes that have affected many libraries since 2020.

Table 6.
Answers to the question "What factors drove these changes in your library organization?"

	2023	2015
COVID-19	49%	new
Hybrid/remote work increased	32%	new
Vacancies (non-retirement)	24%	14%
Budget, budget cuts	22%	32%
Retirements	19%	34%
Strategy to reorganize	19%	18%
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	19%	new
Found efficiencies	16%	20%
Organization was not functioning	16%	16%
Tension between classes of employees over flexible work	11%	new
New services	8%	16%
Lost positions	8%	new
Collaborative (shared) project or services	0%	7%

It is surprising that budget cuts (22 percent) were mentioned less than in the prior study (32 percent), since that study found flat budgets or budget cuts are regularly expected by academic library leaders. Perhaps other terms, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, were used as a general and understood term for all of the impacts of that event, including budget and position cuts. Also, the number of participants who mentioned retirements (19 percent) was much lower than in the prior study (34 percent), despite abundant

literature on the Great Resignation. It should be noted that the combination of coding vacancies, retirements, and lost positions, totaling 51 percent, actually exceeds the prior study's summation of vacancies and retirements (48 percent), which does align with both the literature and the frequent references to lack of personnel capacity in other responses in this study.

DEI goals of the participants, their libraries, and their institutions was a significant new theme with 19 percent of responses, reflecting priorities in this area. It should be noted that equity drove most changes in organizational processes such as hiring, promotion, and salary. Participants also noted frequently that processes used to reorganize centered values of equity and inclusion through broader participation, facilitators and consultants, as well as training and preparation.

Making changes based on a strategy to reorganize, find efficiencies, or in order to address organizational dysfunction were mentioned at rates comparable to the prior study. While some of these changes stemmed from traditional strategic planning processes, in many cases the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic allowed for the changes. A few leaders also mentioned utilizing quicker, less labor-intensive reorganization processes such as creating a lightweight "strategic framework" or changing roles when filling positions (see Table 6).

Creating new services received half the number of responses when compared to the prior study. Reasons given included taking a service redesign approach to reorganization and creating new departments based on new services rather than traditional roles. It was also mentioned that the pandemic resulted in many new services, such as sending books through the mail and increasing online teaching and reference, which then resulted in a shift of work and staffing of libraries. No interview subjects mentioned collaborative or shared projects as a reason they made changes within their organization, in line with the decrease noted in future goals (see Table 4).

Future change

As found in the prior study, the most frequently mentioned future change was the shift away from traditional work for librarians, particularly liaison or subject librarians (see Table 7). Several interview subjects said liaison librarians are or should be doing less collection development and reference desk work. Most responses focused instead on supporting research data, digital scholarship, student engagement, or artificial intelligence (AI). Commentary on teaching was split, with a few respondents noting it is still vital work and others saying their librarians no longer teach and described relying on training TAs or others, often due to challenges of scale. Only one mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic as an impetus for these changes, with most saying the cause was demands for new services or the changing nature of scholarly publishing.

> **Several interview subjects said liaison librarians are or should be doing less collection development and reference desk work. Most responses focused instead on supporting research data, digital scholarship, student engagement, or artificial intelligence (AI).**

Table 7.

Answers to the question "What major organizational changes do you see ahead in the next 3-5 years?"

	2023	2015
New roles for liaison librarians, changing role of subject specialists	32%	32%
Major library renovations	24%	9%
Nothing major	24%	20%
Change AD portfolios	19%	16%
Focus on Special Collections	16%	14%
Budget cuts	11%	new
Grow and add positions	11%	23%
More collective effort (other libraries)	11%	7%
Consolidate units (also close libraries)	8%	23%
Less focus on collection development	5%	9%
Short strategic planning cycle, or rapid change	5%	9%
Eliminate units	3%	9%
Integrate new units into the library	3%	9%
New Library Building project	3%	11%
New programs for users	3%	14%
Create new operational units	0%	9%

There was a significant increase in the number of references to major library renovations (24%) compared to the prior study (9%). The cost of these large-scale, capital projects in some cases exceeded 100 million dollars for full renovation of a main library, and fundraising or philanthropy was a focus of most interviews. Respondents also spoke of renovating special collections and archives, or smaller projects to integrate new campus partners into library spaces. When a specific project was not mentioned, the focus was on facilities master planning with the university that could look out as far as ten years. New library building projects, however, declined in occurrence from 11percent in the prior study to just one response, perhaps due to the lower cost of renovation over new construction.

The number of interview subjects stating that no major organizational changes were planned was consistent with the prior study data. A few respondents explicitly noted that there was an aversion to drastic changes due to past reorganizations or the COVID-19 pandemic, while others reported a more positive climate for change. One participant observed, "I feel like, within the library, we have our direction set. We have our strategic plan developed. We have a newly articulated mission and vision. We've re-hired our people. We've cleaned up the organizational structure. And so in a lot of

ways I feel like what we need to do is just focus on excellent implementation, moving forward. So not a lot of big, strategic change after that." Changing AD or AUL portfolios was also mentioned at a similar frequency to the prior study. In most cases, this was planned to coincide with creating a new position or hiring to fill current vacancies, but in a few cases, it was mentioned as part of a plan to restructure. Special collections had a similar frequency of mention to the prior study, with most of the comments focused on the value of unique, distinctive collections, but with more of a focus on community partnerships and student engagement.

One of the new topics noted in this study was the expectation and planning for future budget cuts. While the prior study found that many library leaders expected no annual budget increases, or in some cases recissions, this study found 11 percent of responses forecasted major budget cuts still coming. This aligns with the result that many fewer academic library leaders planned to increase the size of their staff (11%) than in the prior study (23%). In these rare cases, the intention was to recover from large losses of positions—in one case the library had over 40 simultaneous vacancies. Significantly fewer responses mentioned closing libraries or eliminating units than in the prior study, perhaps due to the high number of employees already lost over the intervening years.

More library leaders mentioned collective efforts with other libraries than in the prior study, most often in academic and geographic consortia, which aligns with increased communication within these groups (see Table 8). This was most frequently related to shared storage of print collections, with a close second of digital collections projects. Overall, the remaining topics were mentioned quite a bit less than in the prior study, mostly by only one respondent or not at all. The largest decreases were in plans for new programs for users and new operational units, which can be explained by capacity issues cited by many participants.

Advice and Direction

The final interview question concerned who academic library leaders rely on for input and advice in decision-making. Lining up exactly with the prior study, the most frequently cited source of guidance was the senior administrative team (68 percent in both studies). Although fewer interview subjects mentioned this group in the question of decision-making processes (see Table 3), the high response rate to this question reinforces the importance of the direct reports of academic library deans and university librarians. Additionally, 30 percent of all those interviewed talked about the importance of being honest and "not holding back" among their administrative team. They saw this as vital to inclusive leadership practices and a group dynamic that can take time and intentional hiring to create.

The second most frequent group mentioned (65 percent) was other campus administrators outside of the library but at the same "level," such as academic deans, vice provosts, or support unit administrators. This was a significant increase over the prior study (39 percent). These interactions included formal meetings with their shared supervisor, such as the provost, and informal gatherings outside of work. The main rationale given for the importance of this group was to understand the priorities and needs of the university, which library leaders can then bring back to their library organization. One

Table 8.
Answers to the question "Who do you rely on for advice or direction in your leadership and decision-making?"

	2023	2015
Administrative team, executive team, senior team	68%	68%
Other Deans (campus administrators)	65%	39%
University Provost (immediate direct report)	62%	36%
Advice from regional consortia (UC system, CIC, Ivy+)	43%	20%
Professional peers, network outside of official channels	41%	new
Advice from other ARL directors	32%	59%
All Staff	22%	30%
Faculty Committees / Faculty Governance	14%	25%
Campus faculty (outside of library)	11%	18%
Managers, department heads	11%	25%
Coach	8%	new
Student advisory board	5%	9%
Consultants	5%	27%
Organizational Development Office on campus	0%	14%

participant summarized, "I have a lot of colleagues in analogous roles. Both in formal meetings where we tackle common topics as well as some informal get togethers, even through the pandemic. In some ways that strengthened the way we leaned on each other, because we were going through a similar experience with all different angles. A group of folks who have similar levels of responsibility across the university. I couldn't do my job if I wasn't well connected with others at the University." This finding was reinforced by the increase in frequency of response for their immediate supervisor, from 36 percent in the prior study to 62 percent now. Some interview candidates even spoke to taking their current job offer due to trust or respect for the person holding that position. This aligns with the senior university leadership's view that the library director should not behave as a manager of the library, but instead as a university leader responsible for the library.[33] It also seems likely that the COVID-19 pandemic made communication at this level essential for coordinating campus operations.

Another dramatic shift was the rising importance of regional consortia rather than national, such as the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). Referring to city, state, regional, or academic consortia, 43 percent of interview subjects found this type of group to be beneficial over only 20 percent in the prior study. The smaller size of these groups, the likelihood of shared challenges, and potential for collaborative projects were given as reasons for the importance of consortia. In contrast, ARL fell from the second most

frequent response in the prior study (59percent) to only the sixth in the current study (32percent). Fellow ARL directors seemed more important as resources when national trends, leadership professional development, or DEI programs were also mentioned. In fact, several interview subjects specifically mentioned participating in ARL programs, such as the Leadership and Career Development Program (LCDP) and Leadership Fellows Program, as cohort experiences that resulted in a lasting professional network.

One new theme that emerged frequently enough to be categorized was peer networks outside of formal networks like consortia. These varied greatly in form from cohort groups established in professional development programs, to grassroots support networks formed by individuals with shared identities, to community groups, to non-library related professional societies. Some of the key benefits of these groups were the ability to gain perspective from outside of the library profession, emotional and mental health support through shared experiences, and the high level of trust within a chosen group rather than one defined by formal rules.

There was a measurable decrease in a few other categories of influencers, many of which hold less power and authority within the academic hierarchy. Although many participants mentioned inviting broad input (see Table 3) and holding regular town hall meetings, the percentage mentioning library staff as a source of advice or direction dropped from 30 percent in the prior study to 22 percent now. Additionally, faculty senate committees and other campus governance groups were mentioned only 14 percent of the time in comparison to the prior study, when 25 percent of respondents noted their influence. Even less frequently occurring were references to individual campus faculty, dropping from 18 percent in the prior study to 11 percent. Despite middle management groups being called upon more in decision-making (see Table 3), in response to this question only 11 percent of participants referred to them. Student advisory boards were also one of the least cited.

One new theme that emerged with respect to sources of advice was leadership coaches, which were mentioned in reference to both the interview participants and their administrative team members. Three respondents talked about the importance of this support, recommending that it be institutionally formalized or requested as part of a job offer acceptance. Coaches with both library leadership expertise and non-library, higher education focused specialization were mentioned. This contrasts with the sharp drop in reference to consultants who, while still used often in strategic planning processes, were only noted as a source of advice by two participants. In this study no interview subjects mentioned their campus organizational development office, as opposed to 14 percent in the prior study.

Discussion

It is clear from responses across questions that the decision-making and priorities of AAU library leaders follow those of their university closely. While this was true in the prior study, there was a significantly higher frequency of participants mentioning the importance of relationships with campus leadership, the university strategic plan and focus on university priorities like DEI. Certainly, the library literature has expressed this as a goal for library deans and directors, but prior change was incremental.[34]Based

on these interviews it seems that the unprecedented disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the process. Deans and directors talked about the necessity of close collaboration with their supervisors, peers, and other stakeholders external to the library during the pandemic and beyond. Shorter-tenure academic library leaders can also spur more rapid change; leadership turnover changes priorities and involves new strategic planning.

> **Deans and directors talked about the necessity of close collaboration with their supervisors, peers, and other stakeholders external to the library during the pandemic and beyond. Shorter-tenure academic library leaders can also spur more rapid change; leadership turnover changes priorities and involves new strategic planning.**

Interestingly, the pull from external sources on the attention of academic library leaders was balanced by positive internal changes for their library organizations as well. This increasingly diverse group of senior library leaders looks at their employees and communities with an equity lens. Interview participants took a person-centered approach to decision-making, change, and strategic planning, talking about the impact of decisions on individuals and including as many voices as possible. Indeed, DEI was not just the second most frequent strategic goal for the future, inclusion was a noted priority in decision-making processes and strategic planning. Equity principles came through in the prioritization of access to information through open scholarship, as well as how changes such as hybrid or remote work are implemented. Diversity was advanced through hiring of specific leadership positions, improving recruitment and retention, and inviting underrepresented voices to the decision-making table.

Many of the themes from the prior study are still vital to academic library leaders and their organizations: the changing roles of subject specialist librarians, budget challenges, and evolving library spaces.[35] Emerging technology is also still a focus, with several participants speculating about the future of AI impact on research and teaching.[36] However, the findings from the prior study, which revealed incremental change through adjusting individual vacancies and making decisions based on budget challenges, exploded into drastic changes by the budget cuts and personnel losses resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant described losing a third of their workforce to retirement or other institutions—over 100 employees. While the scale of change was immense, the best methods of change management employed by academic library leaders were still collaborative decision-making, strategic planning, and effective communication within and outside the library.

> **Library leaders also offer cautionary tales about dramatic change without buy-in from employees or ignoring institutional culture and context.**

Library leaders also offer cautionary tales about dramatic change without buy-in from employees or ignoring institutional culture and context. It emerged across interview questions that mistakes had been made, often citing a predecessor, which

left the organization skeptical or demoralized by policy or structural changes. Also, the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic left little appetite for drastic reorganizations, which puts the impetus on senior leaders to be transparent and build trust before introducing change. Tensions have also arisen between classes of employees—those who can easily work remotely and those whose work is physically based. New priorities overshadowed traditional library roles, which explains why academic library leaders are most focused on convincing librarians—particularly subject specialists—that their roles are changing. Deans and directors should enable the pathway toward their future libraries rather than imposing it.

Limitations

The author acknowledges their bias and privilege as a White, cisgender male researcher at a large research institution. As noted in the previous study, responses were coded by one individual which preserved anonymity but does not allow a diversity of perspective in data interpretation. The population of AAU institutions is significantly smaller than the ARL, so the findings could be less representative of the whole population of academic libraries. Several participants referred to their written strategic plans in responses to question 4, which led to fewer overall responses per interview compared to the prior study. DEI was such a significant part of the findings of this study that the author chose to separate questions 1 and 2 into a separate paper, although the theme wove throughout the responses to all questions. Asking the new questions before the replicated interview from the prior study may have influenced subsequent responses, causing participants to focus more on topics related to inclusive leadership or diversity.

While the participation rate for this study was lower than for the prior study, the demographic changes in this small sample align with ARL data showing an increase in the percentage of women and BIPOC leaders over the past decade. While this will be discussed in more detail in the companion article to this paper, significantly more research is needed to determine the factors that contribute to these changes. The prior study found strong enthusiasm for professional development supporting future leaders with diverse identities, many offered by the ARL, the long-term impact is still unclear. This study found inclusive leadership to be more prevalent, but additional research is needed to assess the full extent of these practices.

Conclusion

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education and libraries was significant, and longitudinal analysis of interviews with senior leadership in academic libraries shows it accelerated change significantly. The unprecedented disruption drew together campus leadership, including library deans and directors, to meet the challenges of remote learning, budget cuts, and the Great Resignation. This resulted in greater alignment of library and university strategic plans and priorities, deeper relationships with campus administrators, and also challenges due to reduced budgets and staffing capacity. Academic library leaders now face greater challenges, but they may also have more opportunities to effectively lead and advocate for their libraries. This work cannot be done alone. The most effective leaders have a trusted senior leadership team, a wide

professional support network, and welcome input from all their employees.

Concurrently the social justice movement in the US, university values, and professional library principles have spurred academic libraries to prioritize and take action in support of DEI. Open scholarship, community engagement, inclusive leadership, and equitable employment practices are at the forefront of library deans' and directors' words and actions. The increasing number of women and BIPOC in academic library leadership roles has had an effect not only in representation, but in dismantling systems of oppression within universities and libraries. The future of academic libraries will be determined not just by the changes their leaders make, but how they lead and the values they demonstrate. The continued importance of collaborative leadership and the rise of workplace equity combine to show that all library employees should have a voice in this future and be recognized for their contributions.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. * ACRL is developing a definition for inclusive leadership, "Inclusive library leaders are individuals who are aware of their own biases, actively seek out and consider different perspectives to inform their decision-making, collaborate more effectively with others through cultural competency, and center empathy and compassion in their approach to leadership." How do you see this approach reflected in your work and planning?
2. * How are you preparing individuals with diverse identities for leadership roles in the profession?
3. How do you make decisions about your organization's future?
4. What are your main strategic goals over the next 3-5 years?
5. What major organizational changes have you made in the past 3 years? What factors drove these changes in your library organization?
6. What major organizational changes do you see ahead in the next 3-5 years?
7. Who do you rely on for advice or direction in your leadership and decision-making?

* Responses to these questions were not analyzed in this paper

Appendix B

Demographic Survey

Gender: How do you identify? (based on UCLA Williams Institute)
- ❑ Woman
- ❑ Non-Binary
- ❑ Man
- ❑ Prefer to self-describe _____

Do you consider yourself to be transgender?
- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

Which range below contains your age?
- ❑ 20-29
- ❑ 30-39
- ❑ 40-49
- ❑ 50-59
- ❑ 60-69
- ❑ 70+

What is your racial or ethnic identity? (Based on US Census data collection)
- ❑ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ❑ Asian American
- ❑ Black or African American
- ❑ Hispanic or Latino
- ❑ Multiracial
- ❑ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ❑ White
- ❑ Prefer to self-describe _____

What year did you receive your most relevant terminal degree? _____

What year did you begin working at your current institution? _____

Is your current appointment permanent or temporary? _____

What is your job title? _____

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