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The Face of Oregon's Library Community

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The Face of Oregon's Library Community

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Strong and Diverse Workforce

- *Bring the highest caliber of leadership to every Oregon library.*
- *Use the broadest range of skills and abilities from people with diverse educational, experiential, and cultural backgrounds.*

Call to action

The face of the library community changes annually as people retire, new staff members are recruited, and current employees learn different skills. Individual faces change (just look in the mirror), as do our institutional faces. In *Vision 2010*, we call for a “strong and diverse workforce” in Oregon’s libraries. We challenge ourselves to “bring the highest caliber of leadership to every Oregon library.” We urge the library community to “use the broadest range of skills and abilities from people with diverse educational, experiential, and cultural backgrounds.” This call to action focusing on the face of the library community emerged from the realization that the profession was aging, Oregon’s demographics were changing, and our libraries needed to respond.

Various studies and reports describe the changes in the library profession as well as U.S. society in general. An often cited study by the American Library Association showed a progressive loss of professional library staff resulting from an aging population as well as decreasing recruitment and retention in the library field (Lynch, 2000). According to a 1999 random sample survey of ALA members, 45 percent of the profession was between 45 and 54 years of age, and only 13 percent was under 35. Other survey evidence suggested that 40 percent of librarians may retire in the next nine years or less (St. Lifer, 2000). The evidence mounted as indicated by a recent report in the Monthly Labor Review on the aging of the ‘baby boomers’ (Dohm, 2000). Specific

information on school librarians was less easily identified; however, a study of the teaching profession suggested similar trends (Hussar, 1999).

The OLA Board recognized that this vision of the future could lead to a major shortage of well-trained employees, making it difficult to offer quality library collections and services to every Oregonian. During my OLA presidency in 2001–2002, I charged the OLA/OEMA Joint Committee to address the issue of retirement and recruitment in Oregon’s libraries. The Joint Committee decided to see if the national statistics reflected the situation in Oregon. Only when we understood the local situation could we focus our attention on developing aggressive plans to address retention and recruitment issues.

A coherent description of the demographics of academic, public, special and school librarians was simply not available. The Oregon State Library, the Oregon Department of Education, and the National Center for Education Statistics compile statistics that helped but did not put an accurate face on recruitment and retention issues. The most interesting source we found was the fall school survey that every school must complete. This identifies all personnel by age, education level, FTE, and position filled. We incorporated a copy of the fall 2000 data into our work.

As comparable information was not available for the public and academic libraries in the state, the Joint Committee looked for a simple, inexpensive way to collect data. We settled on a survey of OLA and OEMA members. We distributed the surveys at our annual conferences in 2002 knowing that our samples would be slightly skewed to those most active in our profession and perhaps to those more established. We decided that this was acceptable as we were concerned with replacing those who want to be involved in the library community as leaders and innovators; these people attend our annual conferences.



Our face

The survey sample of 148 from the OLA conference shows the predictable bulge of people in their 50s. Most have an MLS. Most plan to retire in their sixties. But there are several of us who think we will work much longer! The number of those younger than 40 does not appear to be strong enough to replace the 50-something monolith.

the near future. The 2003 Oregon School Directory reports a nine percent decline in the number of media specialists between 2000 and 2002. While no causes are described, we can imagine that it's likely a combination of retirements without replacements as well as layoffs. Besides the 50s bulge, we should be concerned with the meager numbers of younger media specialists.

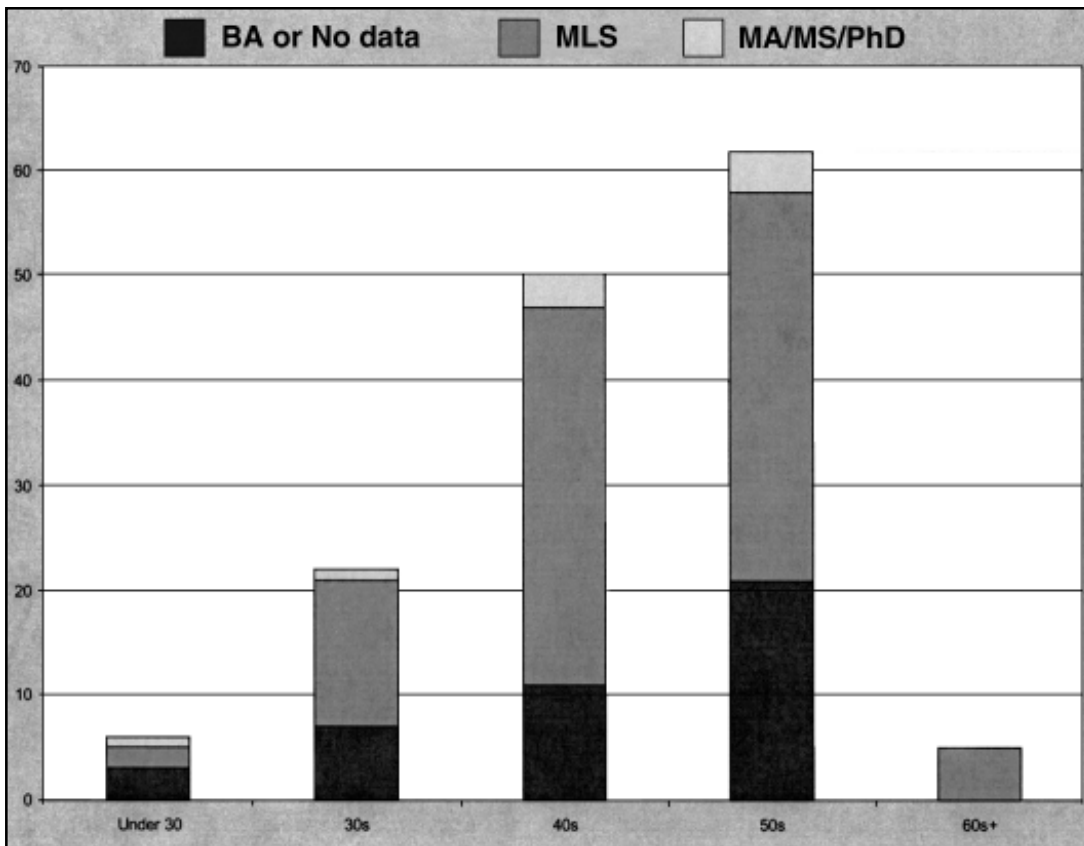


Figure 1
Sample of OLA members by age and education level

Academic libraries seem to have a slightly younger crowd than the public libraries. However, this could be a reflection of the sample population at the OLA Conference that tends to attract far more public library people than academics.

From the fall 2000 school survey data, most media specialists are in their fifties—57 percent of all media specialists and 64 percent of those with master's degrees. That means that many are eyeing retirement in

Our sample of 100 from the 2002 OEMA conference was smaller than the one from fall 2000, but still pointed out some interesting characteristics. For example, media specialists are much more specific about retirement dates, perhaps reflecting the more structured public school environment.

Next steps

Obviously there is more data we could collect, and more analysis to be done of



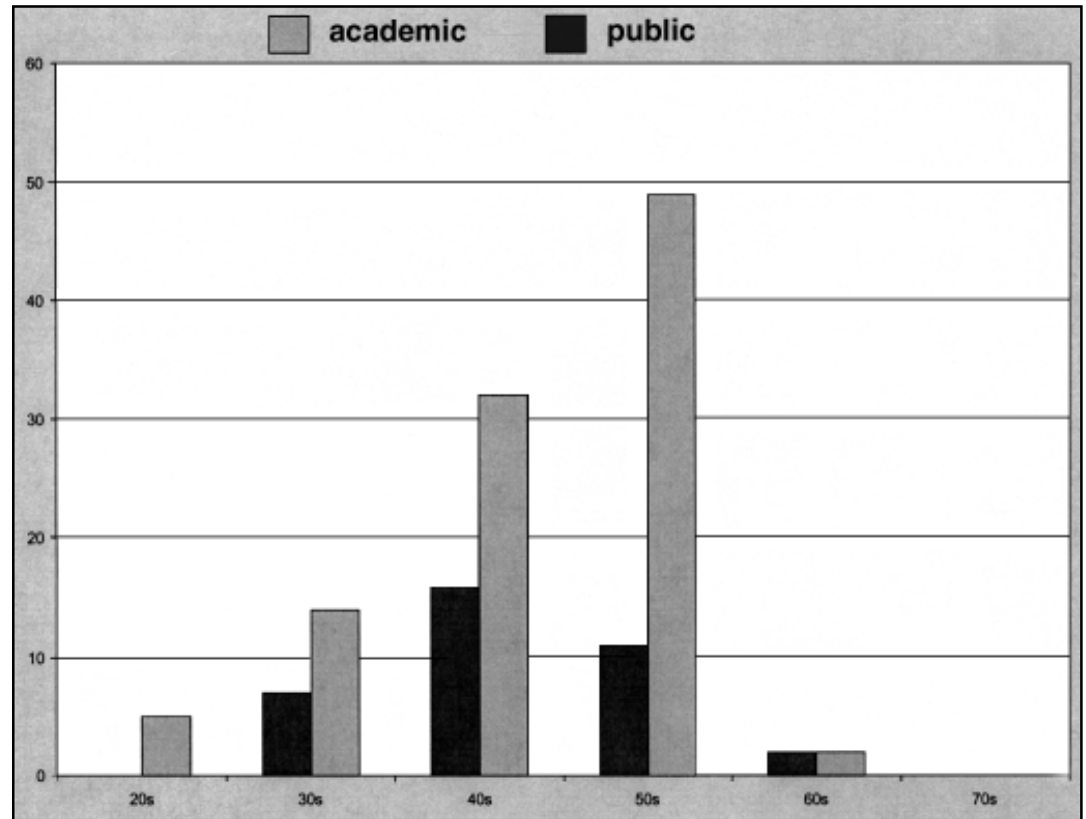


Figure 2
Sample of OLA members' age by type of library

the data we have. Yet, our simple research does give us part of the face of Oregon's library community: we are aging and those of us in our 50s plan on retiring in the next ten years. We did not collect ethnicity or gender information, but can safely assume that here again we would reflect the rest of the country—predominantly white and female.

So, what can OLA do to help all of Oregon's libraries address their staffing needs strategically? We can share ideas for replacing experienced library staff as they retire as well as recruitment methods that attract diverse candidates to serve our varied communities. The OLA/OEMA Joint Committee began this sharing with an excellent session at the 2003 conference.

Following up on this, I suggest the following ideas we can pursue as a community to realize the *Vision 2010* call to action for "a strong and diverse workforce."

- Develop an OLA recruitment Web page that extols the pluses of working in any Oregon library. This could support the recruitment efforts of all libraries.
- Give feedback on ALA recruitment Web site so it's attractive to prospective professionals.
- Offer more conference programming around human resource issues. We lack a forum for sharing ideas and challenges.
- Involve library school students in OLA projects and on committees, making them active in the profession early.
- Devote an issue of the *OLA Quarterly* to recruitment and retention issues.



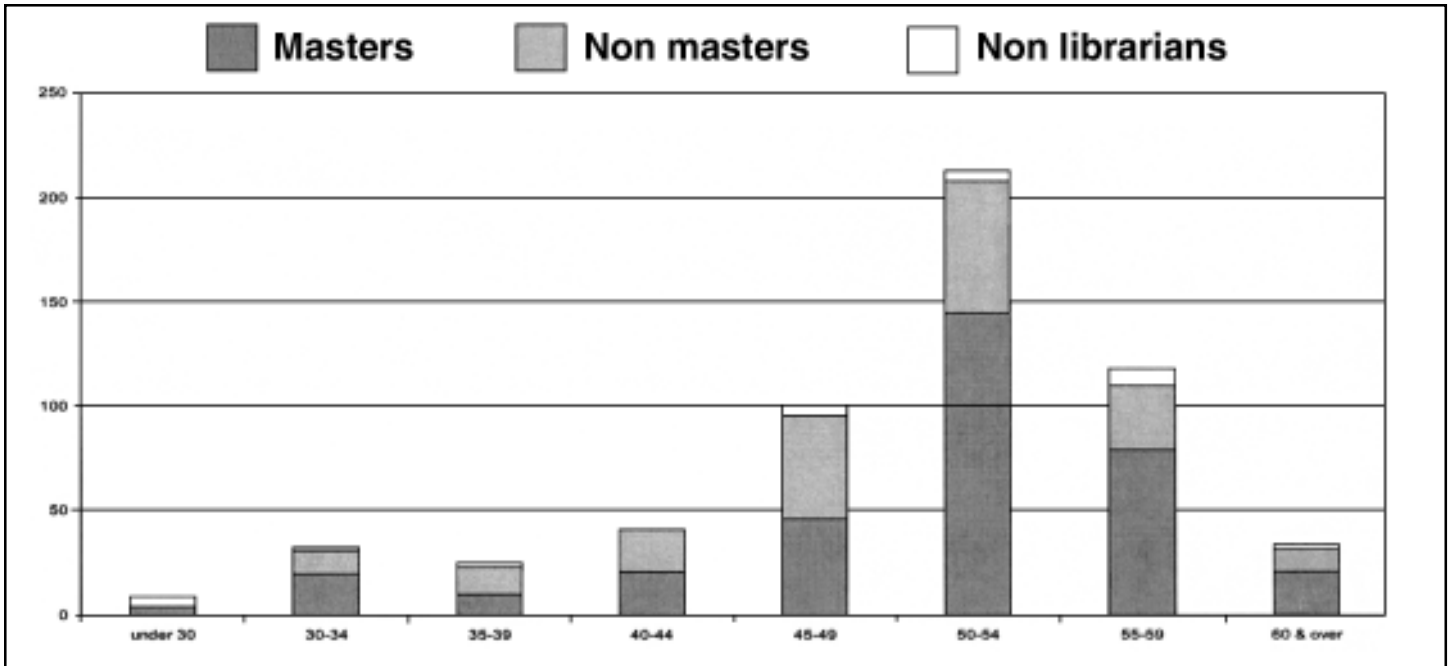



Figure 3
Oregon media specialists by
age and education level
(Fall 2000)

- Share information on how many libraries are “growing their own” as a strategy to attract and keep good staff members.
- Offer annual OLA scholarships for MLS students who are members.
- Continue to periodically collect data about the demographics of OLA members so we can monitor where we are going as a community.
- Assist our OEMA colleagues as they confront the reality of the shift from degreed to non-degreed staffing of school libraries.
- Work with career counselors in the state to ensure that librarianship is presented as a viable career option on college and high campuses.
- Stay alert to other groups working on recruitment issues as we are all facing the graying of America. 

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