Kara Malenfant and Sian Brannon

2023 ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey

Highlights and Key Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Findings

Each year, ACRL's Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey asks academic libraries to report on academic library budgets, staffing, information services, collections, and more in response to 100 questions. This national-level data provides evidence so libraries can demonstrate their impact and value to their users, institutions, and communities. Findings from the 2023 survey continued this tradition while also supplying additional information about a trend, in this case via five questions about the current status of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) efforts.

Past instructions and worksheets, helpful links, historical findings, current survey information, and FAQs can be found on the ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics LibGuide.[1] The Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey Editorial Board thanks the more than 1,400 academic libraries that participated, especially first-time contributors. The response rate was nearly 43%, with the majority of respondents being from masters and doctoral universities.

The highlights and insights below are based on analysis of this data from ACRL's Benchmark: Library Metrics and Trends tool (librarybenchmark.org) unless otherwise noted. Academic libraries completing the survey have free access to their own survey responses and selected aggregate data. Benchmark subscribers can leverage data outputs to perform institution-specific analysis for benchmarking, self-studies, budgeting, strategic planning, annual reports, and grant applications. Academic libraries' responses to these longitudinal questions can demonstrate consistency, disruption, or, in some cases, a surprising combination of the two.

Of the 100 annual questions ACRL asks, a subset of 24 are required for all academic institutions via the Academic Libraries Survey, a component survey of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).[2] The ACRL Survey instructions and definitions are completely aligned, and libraries completing the survey can easily download their responses to share with their local IPEDS keyholder.

Standard Survey Questions

In October 2024, ACRL released a comprehensive report with findings from 1,414 US academic libraries' responses to the 2023 survey.[3] Readers may refer to that for detailed analysis and figures. Below are selected snapshots of recent trends over time in expenditures, staffing levels, financial commitments to subscriptions, and services.

Kara Malenfant is assistant professor at Dominican University's School of Information Studies, email: kmalenfant@dom.edu. Sian Brannon is senior associate university librarian at University of North Texas, email: sian.brannon@unt.edu.

Expenditures 2020–2023

Expenditures have, on average, slowly climbed above last year, with 2023 total expenditures up 6% over 2022. Spending on materials and services has increased by 5%, operations and maintenance has increased by 11%, and spending on salaries and wages are up by 6% year over year. Although the average overall expenditures have risen, the distribution of where the money is spent remains about the same, as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Expenditures as Percentage of Spending 2020–2023

	2020	2021	2022	2023
Materials & services	51%	50%	50%	49%
Operations & maintenance	10%	9%	9%	10%
Salaries & wages (excluding fringe)	39%	41%	41%	41%

Library Expenditures on Ongoing Commitments to Subscriptions

A specific metric to examine for expenditures is the comparison of how much academic libraries pay for subscriptions as a percentage of their overall expenditures. The percentage of budgets dedicated to ongoing commitments to subscriptions has been fairly consistent over the past four years, as seen in figure 1. The only significant change is in the average percent spent by Baccalaureate institutions, which has recovered from a dip in 2022. As noted last year, this could be an area for investigation, or an anomaly based on errors in reporting.[4] Given inflationary cost increases for subscriptions, this could mean that libraries are not able to purchase as many ongoing resources.
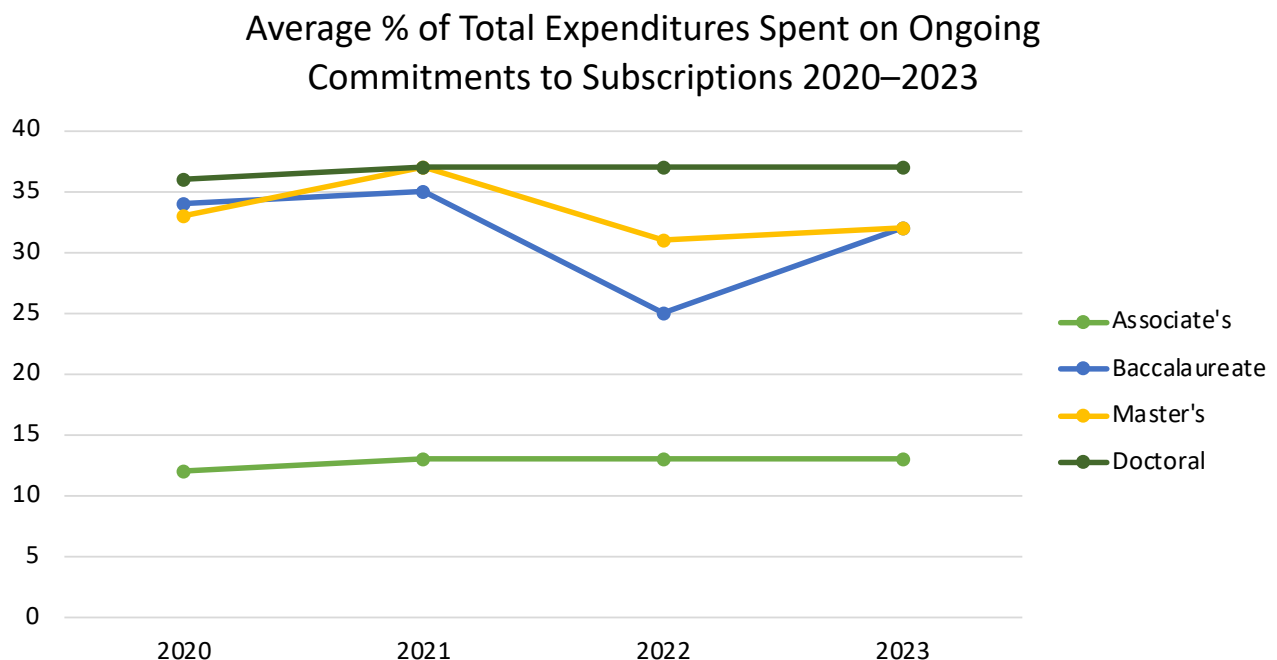

Figure 1. Average % of total expenditures spent on ongoing commitments to subscriptions 2020–2023.

Staffing Levels

Staffing is another area of growth. For most types of employees, the average number of employees per institution has increased. As shown in figure 2, the average number of librarians at an institution is up 2% over 2022, other professional staff have grown by 2%, and

the average FTE of student assistants is up 8%. Only the average number of "All other paid staff" decreased, and only by 0.5%. More breakdowns related to staffing can be found in ACRL's comprehensive report.[5]
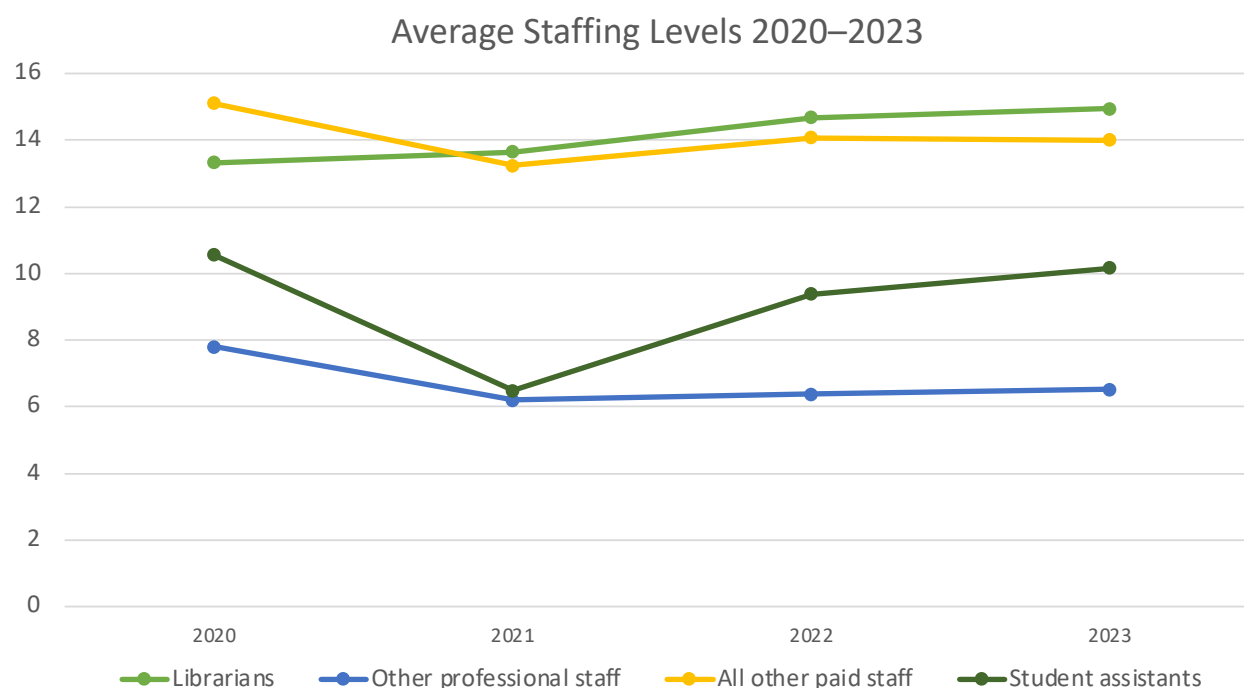

Figure 2. Average staffing levels 2020-2023.

Services

Information Services to Individuals

Data about transactions and consultations for 2023 had some interesting outliers that made comparison over time difficult. While the average institution data stayed below 10,000 interactions, there were at least three institutions that reported more than 477,000, and one that had almost 6 million. "Transactions and Consultations (if unable to report separately)" may contain some duplication with data reported in the Consultations or Transactions fields. It seems there may still be confusion about how to report, as brought up last year.[6] The editorial board will examine 2024 data next spring and review this for clarity in the instructions for the 2025 survey.

Average Annual Gate Count

In the interest of seeing how library visits have rebounded since COVID-19, figure 3 represents the average annual gate count over the past four years (not including data from institutions who only reported their gate count for a "typical week." It seems that the average gate counts at all institutions are slightly different than their 2020 numbers.
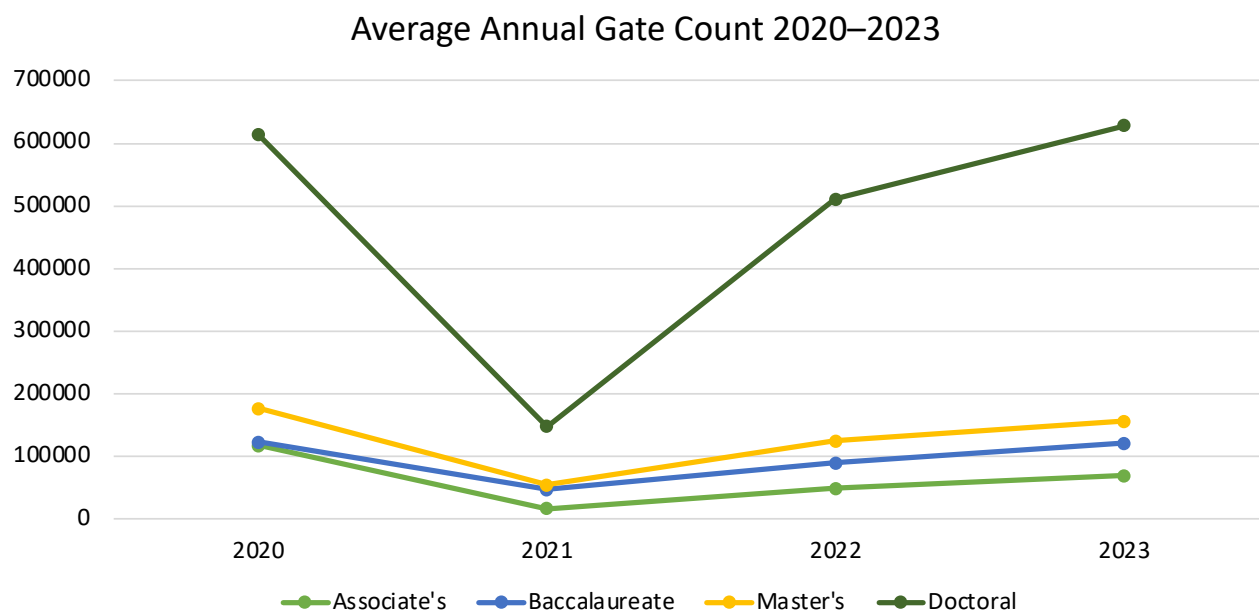

Figure 3. Average annual gate count 2020–2023.

Collections

Average Physical Collection Size

Because some campuses undertook aggressive weeding during pandemic closures, we were curious to see how, if at all, physical collection size has changed. When considering all materials and institutions in the aggregate, total physical collection size increased slightly, by 3%, from 2020 to 2023. However, when disaggregating by material type and institution class, some interesting differences emerged:

- The average Total Physical Collection declined at Associates, Masters, and doctoral institutions by 3-–4% and increased at Baccalaureate institutions by 10%.
- The average Physical Media Collection at Masters Comprehensive institutions changed from 41,149 to 28,128, a decrease of 32%.

Interlibrary Loan

On average, doctoral institutions are loaning and borrowing about two-thirds of materials through interlibrary loan (ILL) than they did in 2020. Baccalaureate institutions are the opposite, with a 33% increase in materials loaned, and an increase of 46% in materials borrowed. The average changes at Associates and Masters institutions were mixed. The average amount of ILL materials loaned is down by 20% and items borrowed are down by 29% from 2020.

Library Trends in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

The 2023 Trends questions replicated those asked in 2020 about steps academic libraries have taken to support EDI, a core commitment for ACRL, ALA, and many university and college campuses. The editorial board felt it was important to pose these questions without alteration to facilitate longitudinal data analysis. While this article reports highlights from aggregate national data, a forthcoming conference paper[7] more closely analyzes changes over time, differences among institution types, and—because state legislatures are attacking professional values around EDI—it also analyzes responses in affected states.

The five Trends questions were presented to respondents in three groups: first, goals: 1.1 whether the library has formal, written goal(s) for EDI (yes/no) and 1.2 the focus of EDI goal(s) (15 options); second, library activities related to EDI (18 options); and third, hiring and retention: 3.1 strategies to hire (14 options) and 3.2 retain (6 options) staff from underrepresented groups. To analyze this data more fully, we relied on tables in Tableau created using exported data from Benchmark.[8]

The number of academic libraries responding to any Trends question was 1,458 in 2020 and 1,331 in 2023. In summary, the changes from 2020 to 2023 were the following:

- 10% increase in the proportion of libraries reporting formal, written goals for EDI.
- 46% increase in the proportion of libraries reporting focus areas for their EDI goals.
- The top three EDI goal focus areas and top four EDI activities remained the same with declines in the proportion of respondents selecting each.
- The only EDI activities to increase were conduct periodic antiracism audits and incorporate EDI into library instruction.
- There were slight decreases in the proportion of academic libraries undertaking EDI activities (3%) and implementing strategies to hire (1%) and retain (3%) staff from underrepresented groups.

In 2023, 37% of academic libraries reported having formal, written goals for EDI, a 10% increase from 2020 when 27% of those responding said "yes." Doctoral institutions were again most likely to have formal, written EDI goals at 59%, followed by baccalaureate colleges at 36%, masters colleges and universities at 31%, and associates colleges at 27%. Interestingly, far more libraries indicated a focus for their EDI goals than answered "yes" to having formal, written goals in 2023. This would seem to indicate that many have informal, unwritten EDI goals. Furthermore, the 70% of libraries indicating a goal focus in 2023 is a substantial increase from the 24% of libraries doing so in 2020, as shown in figure 4.

The top three focus areas for EDI goals remained the same, with a decline in the proportion of respondents reporting each as shown in figure 5: library collections (from 88% in 2020 to 81% in 2023), fostering an inclusive climate (from 89% in 2020 to 73% in 2023), and accessibility (from 78% in 2020 to 73% in 2023).

Despite the increase in the proportion of academic libraries that reported having formal, written EDIs goals and a focus for their EDI goals, the proportion of libraries undertaking specific EDI activities—whether or not they had goals or focus areas—dropped from 93% in 2020 to 90% in 2023. Likewise, there was a decline in the proportion of libraries reporting strategies to hire (from 73% in 2020 to 72% in 2023) and to retain (from 64% in 2020 to 61% in 2023) staff from underrepresented groups, as shown in figure 6.

The top four EDI activities remained the same and the proportion of libraries undertaking each dropped from 2020 to 2023, as shown in figure 7: attend programming and/or events related to EDI (from 84% in 2020 to 83% in 2023), support textbook affordability initiatives (from 81% in 2020 to 74% in 2023), support staff participation in professional development for EDI (from 77% in 2020 to 72% in 2023), and collect and preserve materials related to underrepresented and marginalized groups (from 74% in 2020 to 72% in 2023).

Library activities declined for 16 of the 18 response options. Aside from an increase in the category "other" (from 5% in 2020 to 7% in 2023), the only EDI activities with an increase were conduct periodic antiracism audits (from 7.5% in 2020 to 8.2% in 2023) and incorporate EDI into library instruction (from 41% in 2020 to 43% in 2023). The decline in EDI activities warrants further exploration, given that the field espouses the centrality of EDI among its core values, competences, and ethical principles.[9] Additional data is required to explain why the decrease in activities occurred.
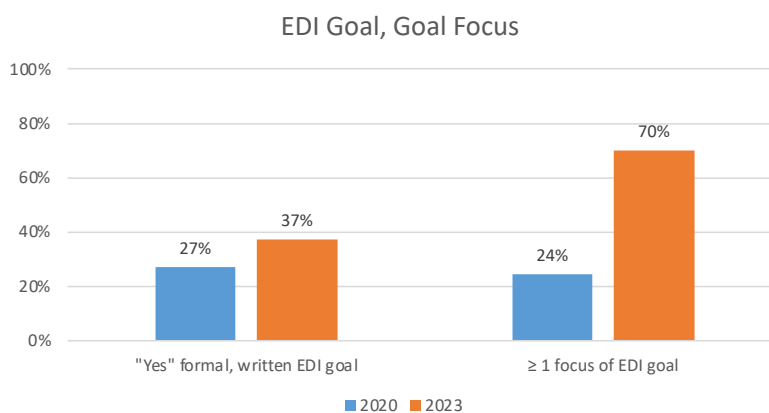

Figure 4. Proportion of academic libraries with EDI goal and/or goal focus, 2020 and 2023.
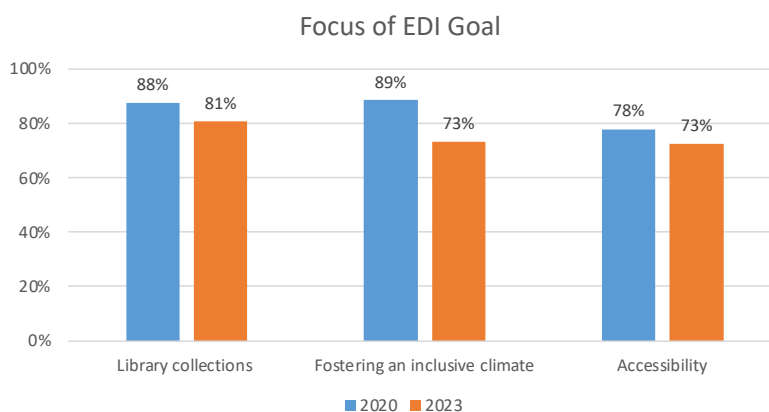

Figure 5. Top EDI goal focus by proportion of respondents, 2020 and 2023.
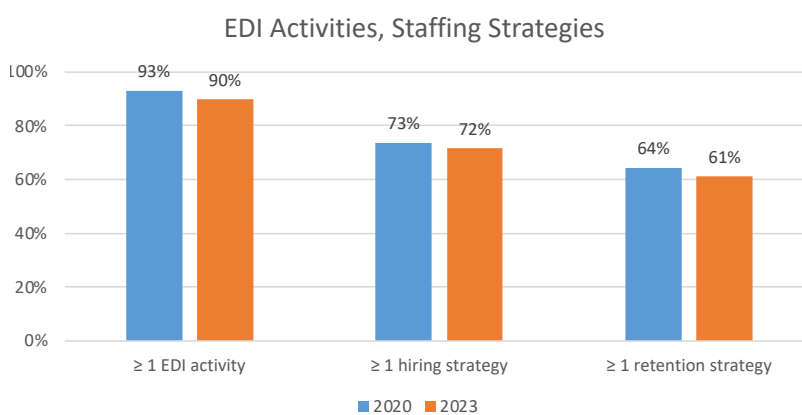
Figure 6. Proportion of academic libraries undertaking at least one EDI activity, hiring strategy, or retention strategy, 2020 and 2023.

A closer look at 2023 responses about hiring staff from underrepresented groups reveals that, of 14 response options, only one strategy was used by the majority: 60% posted positions to a diverse range of audiences. Other highly ranked strategies were including an explicit EDI statement in job postings (48%), training search committees on best practices for inclusive searches (which increased slightly from 44.5% in 2020 to 44.9% in 2023), and offering implicit bias and/or cultural competency training for library staff (43%).

Notably, these were also the top four EDI strategies for recruitment reported in 2020. In addition to training search committees, the proportion of respondents increased for two

other hiring strategies: rewriting position descriptions to encourage a broader pool of applicants (from 35% in 2020 to 41% in 2023) and requiring candidates to demonstrate support for EDI initiatives in their job applications (from 24% in 2020 to 25% in 2023). Additionally, a larger proportion of libraries reported no specific efforts have been made to hire staff from underrepresented groups (from 15% in 2020 to 17% in 2023).
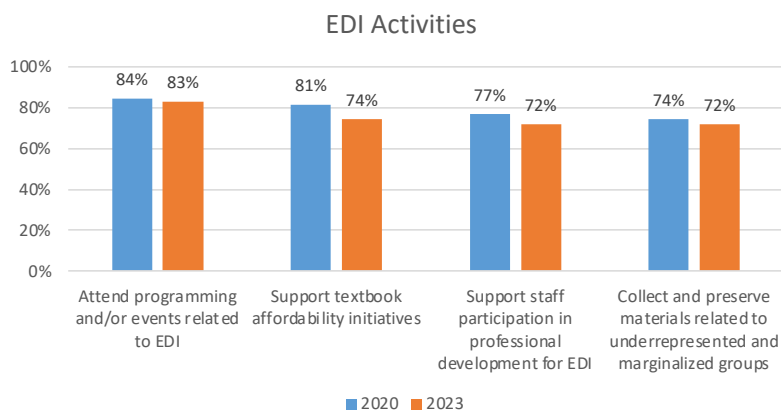

Figure 7. Top EDI activities by proportion of respondents, 2020 and 2023.

In terms of retaining staff from underrepresented groups, of six response options, the only strategy used by the majority of reporting institutions in 2023 was fostering an inclusive workplace culture (68%). The option with the next highest response indicated that 28% of academic libraries made no intentional efforts to retain staff from underrepresented groups, compared to 24% in 2020. The proportion decreased for all options, except "other."

The responses to these two questions on diversity hiring and retention strategies revealed that many libraries have taken few steps, if any, to address the lack of representation of minoritized racial/ethnic populations in the profession. Like the decrease in EDI activities, the low and declining rate of hiring and retention strategies warrants further investigation. Moreover, the decline in EDI activities and hiring and retention strategies concurrent with an increase in libraries that have EDI goals and goal focus areas deserves further investigation.

Conclusion: Using the Survey Results

The annual ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey is the largest of its kind and offers the most comprehensive picture of academic library budgets, staffing, teaching, services, collections, and more. These results can help libraries with planning, benchmarking, and advocating for the value of academic libraries. With a full subscription to ACRL Benchmark, a library can designate its own peer group and make tailored comparisons. For those new to benchmarking and unsure of how to identify peers, each year academic institutions choose their peer institutions when reporting their data to IPEDS, and this information is easily available.[10]

Beyond using the trends and statistics data, the Academic Library Trends and Statistics Editorial Board encourages all academic libraries to complete the 2024 survey, which launched in September 2024 and closes in Spring 2025.

The survey is developed and administered annually by the ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey Editorial Board[11] in collaboration with ACRL staff. The editorial board recognizes the many contributions of ACRL staff Gena Parsons-Diamond and Sara Goek and their valuable historic knowledge, helpful advice, and administrative support. ✄

Notes

1. "Academic Library Trends and Statistics: Survey Information," Association of College and Research Libraries, last updated December 5, 2024, https://acrl.libguides.com/stats/surveyhelp.

2. "Academic Libraries Resources Center," Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/report-your-data/resource-center-academic-libraries.

3. Association of College and Research Libraries, "The State of U.S. Academic Libraries: Findings from the ACRL 2023 Annual Survey," 2024, https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/2023%20State%20of%20Academic%20Libraries%20Report.pdf.

4. Devin Savage and Steve Borelli, "2022 ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey: Highlights and Key Findings," *College & Research Libraries News* 85, no. 5 (2024): 199–203, https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.85.5.199.

5. Association of College and Research Libraries, "The State of U.S. Academic Libraries," 6.

6. Savage and Borelli, "2022 ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey," 201.

7. Kara Malenfant, Sara Goek, and Elizabeth Brown, "Espoused and Enacted Values: Library Action to Support Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion" (paper accepted for the Association of College and Research Libraries conference, Minneapolis, April 2–5, 2025).

8. The authors thank Sara Goek for her talents in creating Tableau tables for the ACRL 2025 conference paper, also used for this article.

9. For example, one of five core values is equity (see "Core Values of Librarianship," American Library Association, January 2024, https://www.ala.org/advocacy/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues). One of nine core competences is social justice, which encompasses equity, diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism (see "Core Competences of Librarianship," American Library Association, January 29, 2023, https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/educationcareers/content/2022%20ALA%20Core%20Competences%20of%20Librarianship_FINAL.pdf). One of nine ethical principles affirms the need to recognize and dismantle systemic bias, confront inequity and oppression, enhance diversity and inclusion, and advance racial and social justice (see "ALA Code of Ethics," American Library Association, June 29, 2021, https://www.ala.org/tools/ethics).

10. Jacquelyn Elias, "Who Does Your College Think Its Peers Are?," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 16, 2024, https://www.chronicle.com/article/who-does-your-college-think-its-peers-are.

11. "Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey Editorial Board," Association of College & Research Libraries, last updated January 11, 2025, https://www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/directoryofleadership/editorialboards/acr-stats.