

# Negative library work experience survey – result summaries (of 349 responses)

The survey was open from January 17 through February 17, 2023. 373 people shared their experiences, but 24 responses were set aside because they represented one-time occurrences (9) or were so negative that they did not seem likely to include constructive advice (15).

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**Survey questions (linked questions lead to summaries and excerpts; questions without links are summarized elsewhere or, in the case of questions 5 and 33, excluded because I ran out of energy and time.)**

1. What type or types of libraries have you worked in? Select all that apply.
2. How many years have you spent working in libraries?
3. Do you currently work in a library?
4. Do you have a master's degree in library science (MLS) or equivalent?
5. If you have worked in various positions over time, please summarize your career progression in a few sentences.
6. What type of library was the setting for your negative work experience?

*This is where you will find detailed information by library type, and excerpts from narrative responses about negative work experiences. That means this section is long, so you can jump directly to a library type using the links below.*

Large public library

Small or medium public library

Large academic library

Small or medium academic library

School (K-12) library

7. How long did you work in that setting, or how long have you worked there if you are still there?
8. Are you still employed in the library where your negative experience occurred?
9. If you are still employed in the same library, why have you stayed?
10. If you are no longer working in the same library, how long ago did you leave?

11. If you have left the library where your negative work experience occurred, what were the circumstances of your departure?
12. Please provide a brief description of your negative work experience. What made it so unpleasant? How did it affect your feelings toward the job?
13. Human experience is complex, but many negative work experiences fall into broad categories. Please select any applicable categories from the list below, and add to the list as needed.
14. Was your adverse work experience bad from the start, or did it become bad over time?
15. If your work situation was bad from the start, with the benefit of hindsight, were there any red flags you wish you had noticed or taken more seriously before accepting the position?
16. If your work situation was bad from the start, what were the first big warning signs after you started the position?
17. If your work situation became bad over time, what changed?
18. Did your negative work experience affect your physical or mental health?
19. If your negative work experience affected your physical or mental health, please describe:
20. Did your negative work experience affect your personal life or relationships outside of work?
21. If your negative work experience affected your personal life or relationships outside of work, please describe.
22. If you have left the library where your negative work experience occurred, did you take any special precautions while planning your departure? These might include being secretive about your plans, carefully curating references, compiling evidence of your work performance, or other steps intended to improve your chances of making a smooth transition out of the adverse workplace.
23. If you took special precautions when planning to leave your adverse workplace, please describe.
24. Did your negative work experience affect future job searches? If so, please describe.
25. If you are still working in libraries, but your negative work experience is in the past, does it affect your approach to work today?

26. If you answered that your past negative work experience affects your approach to work today, how so?
  27. Do you feel you learned anything of value from your adverse work experience?
  28. If you feel you learned something of value from your experience, please describe.
  29. Do you have any advice for others about how to avoid an adverse work experience in the first place?
  30. Do you have any advice for others who find themselves in a library workplace that is really bad for them?
  31. Do you have any advice for others about practical steps for moving on from an adverse workplace?
  32. This questionnaire has been limited to a considering a single negative work experience in libraries. Have you had additional adverse library workplaces or work situations?
  33. If you answered yes, you have had additional negative work experiences in libraries, please describe.
  34. Is there anything you would like to share that has not been raised by the survey questions?
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**1. What type or types of libraries have you worked in (choose all that apply)?**

261 public  
213 academic  
56 special  
41 school (K-12)

When looking at individual answers:

123 respondents had worked exclusively in public libraries  
74 had worked in both public and academic settings  
72 academic only  
6 school only

**2. How many years have you spent working in libraries?**

7 (2%) less than two years  
29 (8.3%) 3-5 years  
75 (21.4%) 6-10 years  
72 (20.6%) 11-15 years  
63 (18%) 16-20 years  
103 (29.5%) more than 20 years

**3. Current work status?**

291 (83.3%) work FT in a library  
13 (3.7%) work PT in a library  
12 (3.4%) seeking a library job  
21 (6%) work in another field  
12 (3.4%) have retired

**4. Do you have an MLS?**

299 (85.7%) yes  
50 (14.3%) no

**6. What type of library was the setting for your negative experience?**

83 (23.7%) large public  
103 (30%) small or medium public  
62 (17.7%) large academic  
61 (17.4%) small or medium academic  
15 (4.3%) school  
25 (7.1%) other

...the "other" category included many additional library types (special, military, government, law).

Overall, respondents identified the following elements as part of their adverse experiences. This was a “choose all that apply” question, so the grand total is far higher than the 349 total responses:

<b>Problems with management/leadership</b>	323 (93% of all respondents)
<b>Problems with coworkers/team</b>	160 (46%)
<b>Poor communication</b>	199 (43%)
<b>Discrimination or harassment</b>	170 (49%)
<b>Favoritism</b>	150 (43%)
<b>Did not feel contributions were valued</b>	190 (54%)
<b>Ethical or legal concerns</b>	127 (36%)
<b>Intellectual freedom challenges</b>	26 (7%)
<b>Compensation/pay</b>	94 (27%)

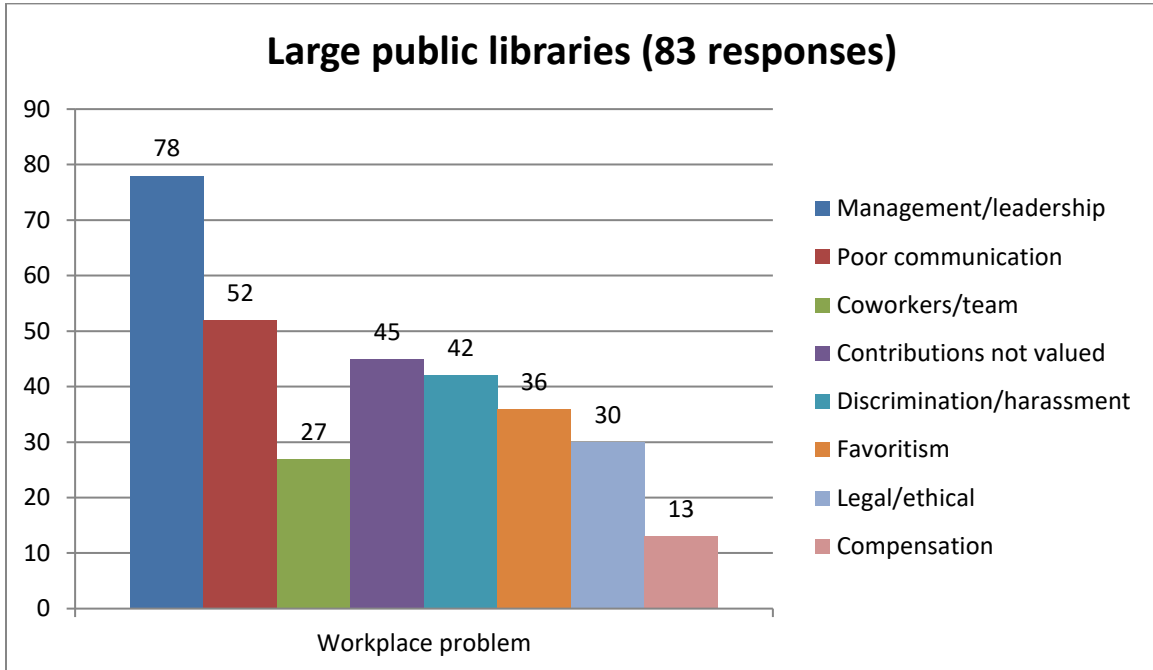
The following section offers more detail about the problems reported in each category of library, with selected excerpts from the narrative responses.

**Large public libraries (83 total responses, choose all that apply):**

**Problems with management (78), poor communication (52), problems with coworkers/team (27), did not feel contributions were valued (45), discrimination or harassment (42), favoritism (36), legal or ethical concerns (30), compensation/pay (13)**

**Often described in narratives:**

- Lack of funding, too few staff to cover required work
- Feeling leadership/management did not take safety concerns seriously in general
- Feeling unsafe during COVID
- Among people in management positions, concerns about a lack of training and support in being an effective manager.



**On bad management and management structures:**

“I loved the work, the public, and the colleagues, but the library director over the course of 8 years created a stressed, micromanaged, demeaning, and demoralizing environment.”

“Management was cruel, staff was regularly stressed enough they cried in their offices. When reported, I was told that nothing could be done.”

“First the leadership was absent during the pandemic - then when they emerged from their hibernation, we were subjected to an entire restructure of the department without any stakeholder input.”

“In trying to defend staff I met a brick wall; it became morally and ethically repugnant to remain employed there.”

“My manager was the library's ‘missing stair’ who everyone else worked around or believed couldn't change, so they didn't try.”

“When the county HR department investigated and found her guilty of bullying, the library director didn't accept their findings and had them re-open the investigation. The results were the same. The library's way of dealing with it was to

transfer both of without any acknowledgement of the bullying. That supervisor is now manager of one of the largest libraries in that system. I chose to find employment elsewhere.”

“I progressed quickly from librarian to supervisor to manager, but I did not receive adequate management training or support from administration. I got in over my head and I kept asking superiors for help, training, and support. They all assured me I was doing a great job even though I knew I was drowning...”

**On COVID:**

“We were understaffed, under-resourced, and afraid for our lives, and all we ever got was a quarterly email with links to webinars about stress management. I’ve never felt so betrayed by an employer. I’m not a librarian anymore. I can’t be. This library ruined me for the profession.”

“Administration extended public service hours and weekend hours midpandemic while we were drastically short staffed. It was a real kick in the teeth to public service staff who were already working at risk to our own health and taking heat from customers who don't want to wear masks etc.”

**On other safety concerns:**

“I was being sexually harassed/stalked by a patron, and the branch manager told me I deserved it because I didn't say "No" the "right way." Also, they put out poison for rats, and many died in the vents, but they refused to take care of the smell, so we were surrounded with rotting rat carcass smell all day long for months.”

“I have had customers and coworkers make sexual comments about me, I've had customers take pictures of my body without my knowledge, a shooting occurred outside my branch, there have been bed bug instances and outbreaks throughout the years.”

**On discrimination or unfair treatment of staff or patrons:**

“I was hired into a newly-created position, and found myself one of THREE librarians of color in the ENTIRE organization. Unlike previous roles, this one required supervisory/management duties, with which I had NO experience. There was a steep learning curve, organizational politics/language to learn, and otherwise unclear expectations as to what my job duties really were.”

“director only wanted "nice" people in the library and implemented policies that were blatantly discriminatory to unhoused patrons and minority patrons, and would punish staff for not aggressively enforcing the policies.”

“...manager said ableist things (I have invisible disabilities, so didn't feel safe speaking up), library leadership didn't listen to the feedback of its queer and BIPOC staff (in general, staff feedback was dismissed if leadership didn't personally witness/experience it), etc.”

“Harassed staff for using FMLA; refused to provide work from home accommodations for immunocompromised staff”

**On having an MLS (or not):**

“people treat those of us without MLS degrees as ‘not worthy.’”

“Moreover, those that are promoted within the system do not have an MLIS and recently, the requirements for Librarian I have been changed to not require an MLIS. This makes me feel like the profession is being dumbed down or that knowledge in library practices doesn't matter.”

**On compensation/pay:**

“As the head of children's services, I made significantly less (\$10,000+) than the adult service's head made. Children's services serves more people, do programs on their own, and it is just wildly horrible to make less for a job where you do more.”

“The county library system was the lowest paying the entire county, nicknamed ‘the training ground.’”

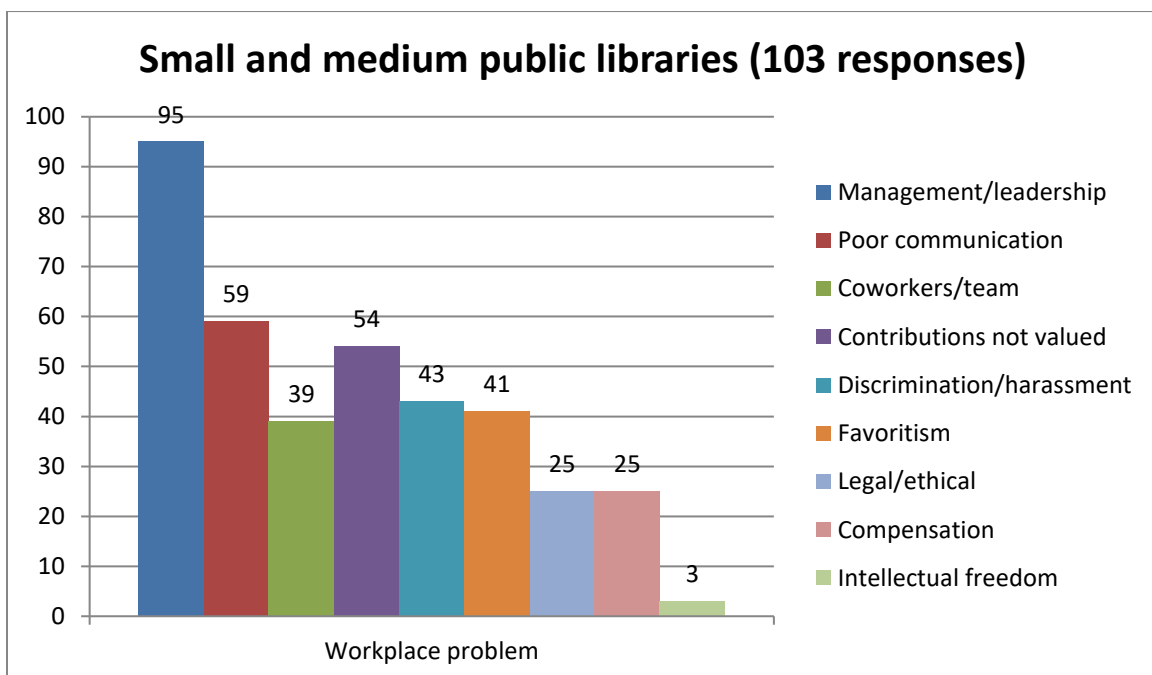


**Small and medium public libraries (103 total responses):**

Problems with management (95), poor communication (59), problems with coworkers/team (39), did not feel contributions were valued (54), discrimination or harassment (43), favoritism (41), legal or ethical concerns (25), compensation/pay (25), intellectual freedom challenges (3)

**Often mentioned in narratives:**

- Feeling unsafe during COVID
- Feeling leadership/management did not take safety concerns seriously in general
- Lots of mentions of town politics, cronyism, nepotism
- Lack of recourse (HR, union, employee assistance programs) to help address problems.



**On bad management and management structures:**

“She created an environment of fear and control. I sometimes felt she was using me as a tool to abuse other staff. It was extremely uncomfortable. I became focused on avoiding abuse rather than approaching my work with any kind of enthusiasm or curiosity.”

“I spoke up [about mistreatment of other staff] and then gathered all of my personal belongings in a box under my desk and left them there until I resigned because I knew she could decide I was next one day.”

“Good employees that came, didn’t stay for long due to a toxic work environment. When I finally decided to leave for a better paying position I was treated with hostility; the director oscillated between ignoring me or yelling at me. This was my first professional Library position and I frequently have to remind myself that I’m no longer in that toxic environment; where I might be called to the director’s office to be yelled at or for them to gossip about another employee.”

“A lot of the negative aspects of my work experience stem from a lack of communication. There's always a lot going on, and when something comes up that needs to be communicated to all staff members it is initiated through osmosis: the branch manager tells one person (or whoever is around) and expects the information to get to everyone else without any follow through.”

“I loved working in libraries but I was terrified of being there with her and knowing she [the manager] hated me.”

“When I started at my current library, the director had been there for forty years and the staff were terrified of her. She talked negatively about them in front of them and micromanaged everything down to the color of paper clips we were allowed to use. I started looking for other positions elsewhere until she surprised everyone by announcing her retirement. Things improved tremendously after she left.”

“My director & immediate supervisor were awful. The director was highly controlling, which led my supervisor to being scared to make any decisions on her own. The City's rules were byzantine and there was an assumption that no one wanted to be there & that we would only do a proper job if we were forced to through rules & regulations. I was miserable, and angry that anyone would assume that I had just gone through grad school - and taken on thousands of dollars of debt - for a job I didn't want to excel at. For years after I left, I would feel a knot in my stomach when I drove through that city.”

“We did not feel safe with him [a supervisor] in the building and had to resort to things like checking his Instagram to see what kind of day he was having. Since we

were a small library, there were often only 2 staff present, and we often needed to text each other to see who could get there quickly if need be.”

“Too many confusing layers of supervision, dysfunctional or total lack of communication, unpredictable micromanagement, normalization of unhealthy work/life balance, unspoken expectations...”

“On my last day, I was read the full catalog of every reason I had never been good enough to promote, many of them things that had never before been addressed with me. I felt targeted and has a hard time caring about that job and having any confidence in myself moving forward.”

“Information was treated as a commodity and was not shared.”

“Expectations and communication from my own manager (the Town Manager) were conflicting and I increasingly felt like I was expected to do multiple incompatible things. He talked a lot about how important work-life balance was, and as my own mental health deteriorated he kept telling me how I needed to find work-life balance, but there was a semi-informal expectation that department heads would regularly work 60+ hour weeks...”

“The director seemed to not like me personally for some reason. I was left out of meetings and was told that I could be fired at any time. She would roll her eyes at me when I walked in with a question. I was told that she did not respect me because I had worked for one library for more than 10 years and was not ambitious enough.”

“Our team had a micromanager who played favorites. We couldn't make any decisions without prior approval. When we made decisions out of necessity (the manager wasn't there to make them), the decision was wrong unless it was made by the favorite. I was the favorite. My quality of work was consistent with my peers but, for whatever reason, I was better liked. I was told things in confidence about other employees that I never should have known (and didn't want to know). As soon as I had the opportunity to leave, I did. I loved the work and the community but disliked the leadership.”

“We'd ask for decisions or priorities to be set and wouldn't get them. Communication was awful and staff turned on each other.”

**On COVID:**

“When we closed for the pandemic, they announced that all hourly workers would be laid off and the full time employees would have their salaries cut 40%. When we asked them their reasons for this the first reply was: "You are not offering as many services as you have before, so you are not working 35 hours a week. (They were right, I wasn't working 35 hours a week. In order to redesign our entire programming series to go online, I was working 50 to 70 hrs. a week.)”

“Being in a conservative county public library during Covid-19 when our health wasn't really respected or taken into consideration despite having known risk factors”

“After covid, the library's mishandling of covid programming, the lack of strong caring leadership, the lack of fulltime positions with benefits, and going through three dept heads in three years, many of the librarians were burnt out. There was a total lack of empathy for staff despite buzz word filled emails and rallying calls from HR and admins. As fulltime positions at other libraries around metro-area opened up, at least six librarians left in past six months.”

“We were forced to open up again during Covid before any other area libraries so that the director could say our library was first.”

**On other safety concerns:**

“While the job itself was amazing, there were very few protections for staff from unruly patrons. One patron actually stalked me for a few months. After bringing it to my director's attention, she told me that there was nothing she could do and I should be flattered.”

“As a supervisor in charge of the system's main library location, I was responsible for responding to incidents in the building, many of which involved patrons who had or seemed to have untreated mental illness and/or addiction issues. I was threatened, sometimes several times in a week...”

“Most of my negative experiences since the pandemic have been dealing with difficult library patrons, many with mental health issues and/or extreme poverty. The lack of support from the city government has been incredibly frustrating because we are not given the tools to deal with issues that frankly we are not trained or compensated to handle. I have often felt unsafe at and exhausted by the mental and emotional toll that my work exerts on me.”

**On discrimination or unfair treatment of staff or patrons:**

“I was largely happy with my job for 10+ years. Then I started to transition. My name and pronouns were not respected and my supervisor would constantly dismiss my complaints and concerns. [...] It culminated in my receiving my first ever negative performance review, after more than a decade at this library, in the first year I began medically transitioning. I dreaded going to work, I didn't want to see or speak to my coworkers, I just tried to get through each day and get out...”

“She started expressing disparaging and discriminatory comments about the community - "those people" don't live here (meaning LGBTQ+ and BIPOC folks). Things the powerful wealthy white men she thought she had to cater to to win the vote [on a funding measure] would want her to say. I AM LGBTQ+ but was never out at work.”

“She (a white woman) had a condescending attitude toward race, once telling a Black employee that the employee had an obligation to "represent your people.””

**On being under-resourced:**

“After the pandemic started, two of my direct reports left for better opportunities. I was delighted for them! I still am, but it's also true that their two full-time positions were replaced by a part-timer who works 3-4 hours/week. I've been doing three jobs for nearly a year. My director spent the salary savings on consultants for special projects and big-ticket items, high-profile items...”

### **On politics and cronyism:**

“Eventually, our mayor replaced almost our entire board with his friends who were intent on running the library as a business. Once I became Director and was no longer insulated from dealing with them directly, they made my life a living hell to the point where I became physically ill. I was constantly micromanaged, threatened, and bullied by board members. I almost gave up librarianship entirely but fortunately was recruited by a neighboring library that was a much more positive and respectful environment.”

“I was working as the Chief Administrator for a small city library. A new board was elected about 18 months after I had begun working there. There were 3 new members, who became bullies, and harassed me consistently for over 18 months. They also terrorized several staff members and fired the Youth Services Coordinator while I was out for 2 weeks. She filed with the state board for harassment and hostile work environment. The assistant director was also harassed, and she was eventually fired and also filed harassment and hostile work environment documents with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.”

“Small town cronyism infiltrated our library board and allowed my director to behave unprofessionally and abusively for 30 years with no repercussions or accountability. Library staff finally banded together in 2021 to bring awareness to the board and when they didn't have our backs, 80% of the staff left by being fired or forced to resign.”

“Members of the board micromanaged and stirred up distrust, disrespect, and resentment between some staff members and myself. I am not the only director that [had this type of experience with] the same board members.”

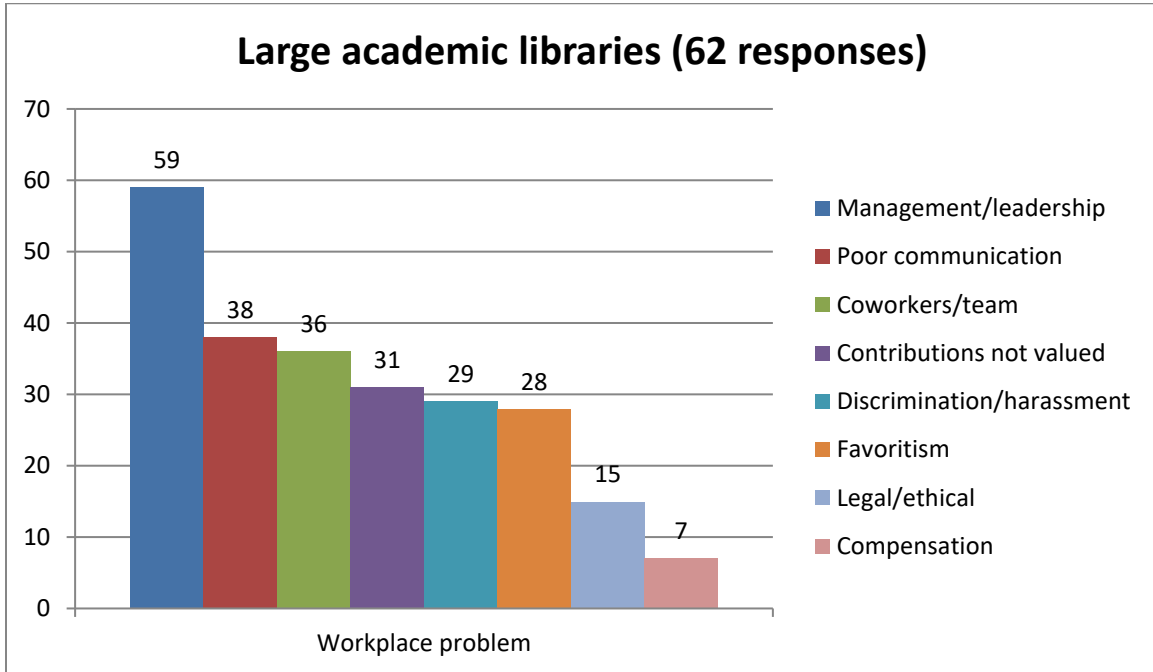
### **Large academic libraries (62 total responses):**

**Problems with management (59), poor communication (38), problems with coworkers/team (36), did not feel contributions were valued (31), discrimination or harassment (29), favoritism (28), legal or ethical concerns (15), compensation/pay (7)**

### **Often mentioned in narratives:**

- Bullying from leadership and/or coworkers

- Divisions between faculty/staff positions and professional/paraprofessional
- Problems with tenured faculty (often within libraries) who seemed untouchable



**On bad leadership or leadership structures:**

” Too many fake staff input sessions on major changes (decisions were already made, the sessions where pure fig-leaf theater).”

“Our campus was reorganized so that the library no longer had its own director. We answer to someone who is not a librarian and who has little time for us.”

“The library had a very negative environment. I felt bullied by my department chair who had a lot of sway with the other librarians who acted very clique-y. This person was also on my tenure committee and I felt targeted in that I had to always be perfect and go above and beyond not to step on their toes.”

**On problems with coworkers (including lots of bullying and mobbing):**

“On the whole, most of the other librarians were very territorial about their areas of responsibility and as someone that was hired to coordinate an area that at times intersected with other areas, it was a political nightmare. Office politics made me feel unmoored and unsupported.”

“A colleague in another unit in the library was deeply competitive and highly ambitious. She felt the best way to get ahead and make her mark was to denigrate me, attempt to supervise me (despite the fact we were equals in the hierarchy), and rally our leadership against me. I am fairly clueless about workplace/Art of War strategy, so really didn't understand what was happening to me at the time”

“I have been repeatedly insulted by a co-worker who is a known problem in this area. Besides calling me and my work "stupid", this co-worker sighs, rolls their eyes, pretends to sleep, and/or comments that they have "stopped paying attention" any time they dislike someone (almost always a woman) who is speaking in meetings.”

“I was bullied by a coworker. Management was aware but did nothing to alleviate the situation. I dreaded going to work every day.”

“I was told by a tenured male coworker that he couldn't help but stare at my breasts and I should cover up more.”

” Multiple colleagues had my emails forwarded to a folder and did not read or respond to them. I always suspected this but one finally told our boss.”

**On safety concerns:**

“There is always some risk involved in working with the public, but the utter lack of concern from management for my personal boundaries, safety, and well-being was soul-crushing.”

**On being under-resourced:**



” We are severely underfunded and the fight to keep the show on the road has been grueling. After several years of making improvement we were finally at a point where positive change was happening. Unfortunately at that point leadership changed and with one unconsidered decision years of work were undone in an instant and a lot of the positive impact lost. The impact on staff morale was devastating.”

” The Library became terribly dysfunctional and experienced senior colleagues started retiring early, then more resignations followed. Positions left vacant due to such resignations and departures were filled with non professional grade administrative personnel. Librarians were time again told that they had not enough work to do. Colleagues who had not left were given additional jobs or even asked to cover another FTE's role for the 'interim' which had no end date.”

#### **On high turnover:**

“At one point there were so many vacant positions that the HR person wouldn't advertise them at once because "applicants might get the wrong idea about the library." I cried in my office every day. By 2 months in I knew this was the most horrible place I could ever work, but I tried to stick it out for an entire year so that my CV didn't look awful.”

“Our institution has a negative employee culture where there is no communication among departments, no institutional knowledge and there is a disconnect between positions of power and regular staff positions. This is part of why there is a high turnover rate in the library. Due to the amount of people leaving, we have multiple employees holding many roles without appropriate compensation which has led to employee burnout and more resignations.”

#### **On managing a dysfunctional team:**

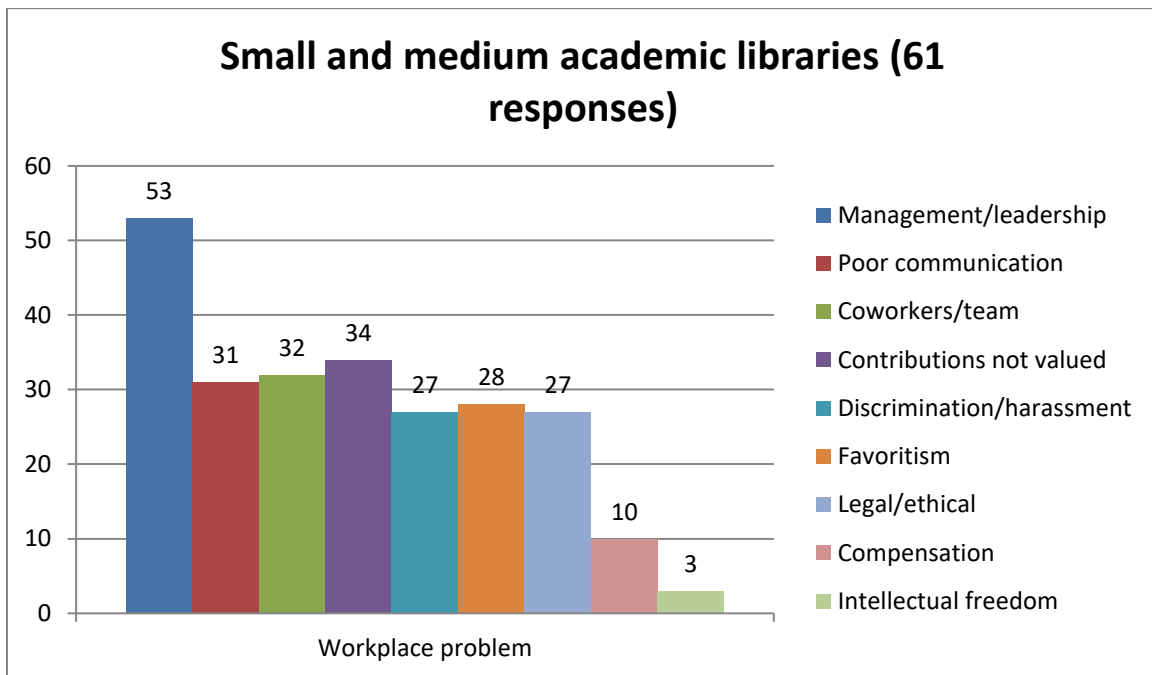
“They were constantly at each other’s throats and many of them were resistant to doing essential parts of their job or to working as a team (among themselves or with others in the library). I couldn't devote attention to any parts of my job other than management because there was always a problem.”

**Small and medium academic libraries (61 total responses):**

Problems with management (53), poor communication (31), problems with coworkers/team (32), did not feel contributions were valued (34), discrimination or harassment (27), favoritism (28), legal or ethical concerns (27), compensation/pay (10), intellectual freedom challenges (3)

**Often mentioned in narratives:**

- Bullying from leadership and/or coworkers
- Problems with tenured faculty (often within libraries) who seemed untouchable
- Being under-resourced
- Library professionals being sidelined in decision-making



**On bad leadership and leadership structures:**

“My supervisor took all my direct reports away and isolated me. She regularly held a librarians meeting with all of the other librarians on staff and excluded me. I had to post on my door what my schedule was; no one else was tasked with doing this.”

“Change was anathema. Group meetings were nearly silent other than the person leading the meeting talking. No input, no feedback, no collaboration unless assigned. We had a couple of new hires during my time there, and they tried their best but eventually succumbed to this stultifying culture.”

“Once he was finally let go (theft and sexual harassments of a student), we were scared he was going to come and kill us for "getting him fired."”

“When I was hired the acting director was verbally abusive to all employees, including myself, and yelled at others in the public areas in front of students.”

“My boss would not allow me to do things that I felt were my job as electronic resources librarian, like speak with vendors, solve access issues, and make available on the website. All things I had done at previous position. I was only allowed to pay invoices- submit paperwork to college's finance department. That consisted of an hour or two of work a week.”

**On being under-resourced:**

“Messages from above by president and deans were to continue to make our department lean, and there was not fat or meat left, only bones, but kept hearing that message. Culture of fear, demoralizing, no one advocating for us.”

**On problems with coworkers (including lots of bullying):**

“We were often treated more like grad students or librarians-in-training, rather than professionals in our own rights (despite all having our MLS degrees before hiring) [...]One of the worst examples was the regular library faculty meetings - at my first meeting, the leader of the meeting mentioned that they'd be moving onto the final piece of business and then just stopped talking. I'm an awkward person and didn't read the cues - I saw the other adjuncts getting up to leave, but I thought they had other appointments or something. I was sternly asked to leave the meeting as well, as this last portion was "no adjuncts allowed". There was some awkward laughter - it was really unprofessional and demeaning to be kicked out like that, and for every meeting after that we left on cue, as expected”

“Significant bullying, harrassment, and gaslighting from librarian colleague who had tenure so was basically untouchable. Had forced several other people to leave before I decided to go. Since I left, three more people have left due to the extremely toxic environment...”

“I was in tech services, which is a cooperative enterprise. I and my department would do our share (ordering, processing), and cataloging simply.... wouldn't.”

“There were many aspects of my job that I loved, but the bullying coworkers made it unbearable - I avoided working with them, and dreaded groups where we had to interact. After another workday that involved crying, my partner suggested I seek another job.”

“I was the director at a small liberal arts university library and the library staff and faculty bullied me. The library was decades behind in their operations and modernization of processes and procedures was sorely needed. I was careful not to make changes right away, to first get to know the library, the university, and the people, to try to bring everyone along with me, but once I started making changes I met with pure resistance.”

**On discrimination or unfair treatment of staff or patrons:**

“I witnessed discrimination based on age, race, and health, and my attempts to raise the issues were largely ignored. As more and more of these incidents occurred, I felt more and more powerless, and more cynical toward the job, the institution, and librarianship as a whole. When my job description and duties were changed one day without warning, I knew I had to leave before the job took what was left of my mental health.”

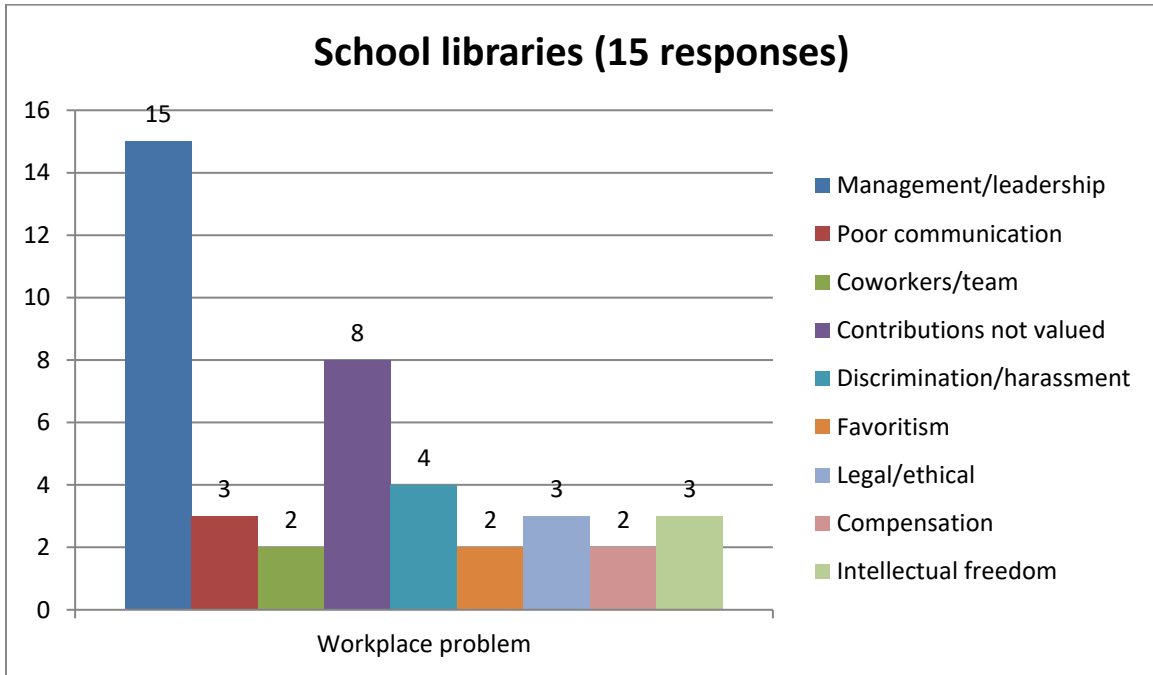
“I, along with about 80 faculty members, were shown the door after we refused to sign a statement condemning homosexuality, among other things. Up to this point, the school, although affiliated with a conservative denomination, had been quite tolerant.”

**School libraries (15 total responses):**

**Problems with management (15), poor communication (3), problems with coworkers/team (2), did not feel contributions were valued (8), discrimination or harassment (4), favoritism (2), legal or ethical concerns (3), compensation/pay (2), intellectual freedom challenges (3)**

**Often mentioned in narratives:**

- Having to sub/cover other classes and areas without compensation
- Library spaces commandeered for other uses, ongoing budget cuts and attrition
- Jobs that were much different than they signed up for (in charge of all technology, an evening study hall supervisor not a circ position)



**On bad leadership and leadership structures:**

“Got a new principal after the first successful year there. She was a micromanager who didn’t like anything I did and wanted me to do everything her way, although she had no library experience whatsoever. If I did succeed in any task she gave me, she accused me of having someone else do the work or cheating in some way. I ... had to quit to literally save my life. I felt like a was a complete failure.”

**On intellectual freedom challenges:**

“In my first year as a middle school librarian I faced a challenge to a book. My school's principal was unsupportive and wanted me not to fight for the book. I took it up to the district level anyhow, and the school board voted to retain the title, with no restrictions. It was to remain on the shelves. Not long after the board's decision, my principal and one of the district administrators came to me and told me that I had to remove the book and keep it behind the counter..”

” The elementary principal demanded that I remove a book from the collection without following the policy of which he was aware because he wrote the policy.”

**On compensation:**

“At my previous school, I was compensated above my base salary if subbing was required due to an emergency. When I let the principal know this, he laughed.”

**7. How long did you work (or have you worked) in the library where you had your negative experience?**

33 (8.8%) less than one year  
50 (13.4%) 1-2 years  
95 (25.5%) 3-5 years  
92 (24.7%) 6-10 years  
41 (11%) 11-15 years  
29 (7.8%) 16-20 years  
33 (8.8%) 20+ years

**8. Do you still work at the library where you had your negative experience?**

211 (60.6%) no  
138 (39.4%) yes

**9. If you are still at the library where you had your negative experience, why?**

39 (24.4% of those who answered) do not see other viable options  
38 (23.8% of those who answered) say the work experience has improved  
24 (15% of those who answered) say they are actively planning to leave  
15 (9.4% of those who answered) are nearing retirement and plan to tough it out

The remainder gave a wide range of other answers.

**10. If you have left the library where you had your negative experience, how long ago did you leave?**

52 (22.9% of those who answered) less than one year  
44 (19.4% of those who answered) 1-2 years  
51 (22.5% of those who answered) 3-5 years  
52 (22.9% of those who answered) 6-10 years  
Remainder were evenly split between 11-15/16-20/20+ years

**11. If you have left the library where you had your negative experience, what were the circumstances of your leaving?**

139 (60.2% of those who answered) resigned after securing another job  
39 (16.9% of those who answered) resigned without another job  
9 (3.9% of those who answered) retired  
13 (5.6% of those who answered) were terminated  
5 (2.2% of those who answered) were laid off

**14. Was your negative work experience bad from the start, or did it become bad over time?**

218 (58%) became bad over time  
101 (27.1%) bad from the start

**15. If your work situation was bad from the start, with the benefit of hindsight, were there any red flags you wish you had noticed or taken more seriously before accepting the position?**

**Often mentioned in narratives:**

- High turnover
- Disorganized hiring process
- Gossiping, complaining, bickering during interview process
- Staff who seemed nervous, fearful, or hostile
- Interviewers uncomfortable answering questions

“At my interview, after my presentation, the future mean colleague said something to the audience like “this was just basic information, I could do this in my sleep.””

“Associate Dean A started badmouthing Associate Dean B during the interview. If I'd been a little more experienced, that would have tipped me off.”

“...when opportunities for more hours/higher pay came around, I did not feel I was in a position to turn them down. I also believed that despite the red flags that I could affect positive change in my role.”

“I had worked there part-time for a year before being hired full-time, tenure track. I should have trusted my instincts because I noticed some of the dysfunction but thought I could overcome it and make a difference. It was also my first position out of library school, so I didn't have much library experience to draw on (though I'd worked in another field before that).”

“I knew from talking to a former teen librarian there that it would be bad, but they had just hired a new supervisor & we hit it off, so I thought I could manage it - at least long enough to get some experience & move on. A week or two after I started, the supervisor I liked was fired by the director, and I was reassigned to a woman I had predicted from the interview would drive me bonkers.”

“I recognized that something was wrong from the interview. I took the job anyways due to lack of options at the time, and justified it by telling myself that I could avoid the director since they would not be my first line supervisor.”



"I suspected that boss would be toxic from the start, but it was a large pay increase and a shorter commute. I ended up taking a large pay cut to leave."

"I wanted to relocate back to my home region from across the country. I saw the red flags but was desperate for the location. I told myself it wouldn't be so bad. It was worse."

"I was so new, I didn't see red flags till several weeks in."

"I was the 5th library director in 5 years."

"I wish I had heeded the warnings coworkers in the system had given me before I took the job. My attitude was "how bad could it be? people exaggerate, I can deal with anything". Now I know better."

"In my interview, I was hardly permitted to speak because the director talked the entire time. A general lack of organization about the interviewing process, staff on the floor didn't know interviews were occurring and didn't know who to notify that an interviewee had arrived."

"Nervous staff. High turnover."

"On my first day of work, I came in and introduced myself and the staff had no idea who I was or that I was starting. I said, "Well, I'm excited to be here" and a co-worker said, "Well, that's not something we hear here often.""

"People were complaining about the job during the interview. I know now that this is a red flag."

"The high turnover in my role prior to my accepting the position."

**16. If your work situation was bad from the start, what were the first big warning signs after you started the position?**

"I was told on my first day that I was the second choice, and they had already hired the first choice. The only reason I was there was because they were given money for a new position, and they didn't want to bother with another search."

“If people are very careful about how they talk about the organization, certain people, or how things work then you should probably be worried. Things are so bleak here that we try to ease in new employees gently because if we were honest from day one then they'd run screaming.”

“Instant miscommunications and basic misunderstandings on the simplest of task/events/programs/schedules which led to multi-hour private one-on-one meetings at which nothing got resolved. This started right in my first week.”

“My department chair bad mouthed the library director and current and former coworkers while orienting me.”

“On second day was told by leadership that "when they hire a real librarian" then things would be different and their plans fulfilled, even though I had had my degree for 4 years by then. Should have left then. It only got worse. I guess that I was only a stopgap, filling the position until they found who they really wanted.”

“Several people warning me, seeing the director treat children and old people with impatience.”

“When i asked what all the keys were for they told me i should know because i had a degree. Anytime i asked a question they said that...”

“When I started, I noticed a lot of staff members seemed fearful. I was also immediately not taken seriously and treated like I had no experience. Then a coworker bullied me for needing an accommodation for a disability, but it was laughed off as "that's just how she is.””

**17. If your work situation became bad over time, what changed?**

- New director/new manager/new board
- Lots of people left and replacements were not hired
- Suddenly assigned to a new position or location
- Expansion of hours/services/building size without added staff
- COVID

“Administration and management staff changed over time, good people left and bad management/admin stayed and have caused a horrible work environment.”

“As I went up the ladder in levels of responsibility, I was allowed to see more and more of what admin prioritized. I suppose those things were true the whole time, but I wasn’t in a position to know it until I joined management. It started to feel like admin was more interested in maintaining their PR image than in doing good in our community.”

“As soon as I had been there a couple of months, my manager dropped any pretenses and I started seeing how people were treated throughout the system.”

“Drastic layoffs, and unrealistic expectations from admin with staffing left”

“Getting [into] management brought me closer to the source of the issues. Also, moving from a branch to our Main library kept me less insulated.”

“i think the director's mental health was declining”

“Nothing changed, I was just there long enough to notice.”

“Over time I learned more about the inner workings of the library and did not like what I saw and heard. Opportunities that were discussed during hiring and the beginning of my employment turned out to not be options.”

“The city council proposed cutting our budget in half in 2018 and the director couldn't handle the stress. He couldn't attend council meetings and started calling out sick a lot. They eventually cut 12% after public outcry, but it was never the same after that. We had to cut two full-time jobs in a stand-alone city library with less than 20 employees and everything that was kind of a manageable problem before worse, and then the pandemic further exacerbated the problems.”

“The library expanded but staff did not.”

“The pandemic seemed to exacerbate a lot of interpersonal issues. A lot of conflict between coworkers, especially around unequal work from home arrangements. my boss was not equipped to lead us through the pandemic with vision or emotional intelligence.”

“The services offered grew out of proportion with the people hired. Our head would brag about how “value for money” we were without taking in the toll it took on all of us to keep the ship afloat.”

**18. Did your negative work experience affect your physical or mental health?**

Yes 317 (90.9%)

No 23 (6.5%)

...plus lots of more specific answers

**19. If your negative work experience affected your physical or mental health, please describe:**

- New or worsening depression, anxiety, lack of confidence

“I had daily anxiety attacks, episodes of uncontrollable crying, nearly daily vomiting, and felt traumatized overall. I lost 20 pounds in one month.”

“I began to drink more and would wait for my spouse to go to sleep before drinking”

“I was a wreck. It was just constant stress and I was exhausted and depressed from dealing with it.”

“I was horribly depressed, I was short with my partner. I was under a tremendous amount of stress. I would dread Mondays like little children hate going back to school. I blew at least two job interviews which I couldn't really focus on enough or prepare adequately for because of the stress I was under, both from the exigencies of the job itself and the desperate sense that I had to get another job because I was drowning at my current one.”

“A pre-existing combination of anxiety and depression - which had been under control - got exponentially worse.”

“I felt powerless and trapped. I tried to get out numerous times, but I had my elderly parents just a few miles from me and of course, had a house and roots invested in the community. I had anxiety, depression and a sense of hopelessness.”

"I just was miserable all day at work; a very different experience than my norm. Got sick easier; always felt stressed; dreaded the work week."

"depression, anxiety, heartbreak"

"Headaches, fatigue, Sunday night scaries"

"I started to doubt my career choice and whether I was competent at my job. I could not leave because I was making decent money for my small city and I was a caregiver for my mother. The job situation increased my already present feelings of worthlessness and I contemplated suicide. I am now in therapy."

**20. Did your negative work experience affect your personal life or relationships outside of work?**

Yes 234 (63.2%)

No 112 (30.3%)

...plus quite a few "other" answers

**21. If your negative work experience affected your personal life or relationships outside of work, please describe.**

"I was impatient with my family, cried often, and was expected to be on call for work 24/7 which impacted my ability to attend my child's activities."

"Rarely see family and friends. They have commented that my overall disposition has changed and that I no longer seem happy, positive or outgoing but melancholy, negative and short tempered."

"Had less patience and empathy at home with family (spouse and young children). Spending 9 hours in a negative space, then coming home and trying to brush off was hard. Guilt for using more emotional reserves at work than I used at home. Also, felt like I wasn't good librarian and that is why I was stuck in bad situation, so self-doubt, poor professional self-image, no confidence professionally. Affects your identity! That clearly impacted my roles as spouse, parent, friend. "

"People got tired of me talking about the problems at work all the time."

“My partner didn’t know how to help me and it was a strain on our relationship”

“I have become more withdrawn and need to spend more time at home alone, recharging. But I never feel recharged, so I just end up spending a lot of time alone.”

“it’s the only thing I could talk about, because it weighed so heavily on my mind. My anger is still pretty consuming and I talk about it a lot. It also makes me nervous about trusting my new colleagues.”

“I’m still married, bless him, but it was a hellacious year. Kept one good friend from the experience, at least.”

“I fought with my husband more at home because I felt like I wasn't getting any respect anywhere, I also felt like I suffered a lot for the money I was trying to bring home and that it wasn't recognized, which made me snap at everyone in my house. I was exhausted, couldn't trust anyone, and humiliated, which made it very hard to interact with anyone. I would cry on the way home and feel depressed a lot of the time.”

“I am filled with self-doubt.”

“It put a terrible strain on my marriage.”

“Stress and anxiety flavored my entire life”

“Struggle to not be short tempered with my children due to my depression”

“I was depleted and filled with dread”

**22. If you have left the library where your negative work experience occurred, did you take any special precautions while planning your departure? These might include being secretive about your plans, carefully curating references, compiling evidence of your work performance, or other steps intended to improve your chances of making a smooth transition out of the adverse workplace.**

Yes 127 (52.5%)

No 86 (35.5%)

...plus lots of “other” answers

**23. If you took special precautions when planning to leave your adverse workplace, please describe.**

“All of the above! Being secretive about my plans, carefully curating references, and compiling evidence of my work performance.”

“All of the staff being bullied had a whisper network of sending each other job posts and acting as additional references. Our branch manager actively helped us find internal jobs when they sensed nothing would resolve quickly.”

“Applied in secret. Someone I worked with for a year who had moved to a different system told me to apply for a position in their system where they were the hiring manager. Since they understood the situation they informed me when they would be calling for reference check so that I could officially announce my resignation first.”

“Afterwards, staff wanted me to share my experience with the director's higher ups, but I was always afraid that if I did that she would find a way to poison my future job prospects. I never spoke up and almost a decade later still have a lot of shame for not having the courage to do so.”

“I curated people who I knew I could trust as references, and swore them to secrecy. I let only a few people I trusted know about my interviews and job searches and told them first when I found out I was accepted at another library I told them a week before I let leadership know, and seeing them being happy for me was incredible for healing me mentally.”

“I didn't share my plans for leaving, and I did not include that work experience in any of my resumes.”

“I didn't tell anyone about applying to jobs or going for interviews, despite getting in trouble for taking time off to go to them. I didn't use anyone from this workplace as a reference. I was careful not to disclose my new workplace...”

“I didn't tell anyone I was interviewing or leaving until I had an offer letter in hand. I did not use any references from that position.”

“I gathered references from my supervisors who had quit the week before I did so that no one at the library would need to serve as a reference. The staff that left (three-

quarters of the entire staff) spent months swapping job opportunities with each other so we could all get hired. We helped each other write our resignation letters. We coordinated on making sure everyone used up their sick time before leaving. I submitted my resignation at closing on Saturday night (my last shift of the week) so that the director would have several days before my next shift to calm down.”

“When the institution where I work now offered me the job, they said they needed to do a quick ref check with my current immediate supervisor as part of their process. I expressed concern about retaliation, and luckily they accommodated me by contacting my previous department head, who had generally been very supportive and who stepped in to provide that reference. I also made certain that other colleagues were present when I gave my notice because I was concerned about verbal abuse.”

“I was entirely secretive about looking for other jobs. I did not use any references that currently worked at the adverse workplace (I listed a former supervisor, who had left shortly before I started looking). “

“I was secretive about my plans, used a sick day to interview for the new position, got references from people who could not relay information back to my former supervisor - and even since then I have been cautious because when I left my former supervisor made it clear she would make getting new work difficult. “

**24. Did your negative work experience affect future job searches? If so, please describe.**

“Yes, I was afraid to apply for the job I have now. I did not think I was qualified for it. Friends encouraged me to apply and I'm so glad I did!”

“Yes, I began applying for any and every job and interviewing without being truly prepared because I was just so desperate to get out. I think I interviewed very poorly due to stress; I wasn't quite acting like my usual self.”

“I no longer trusted myself and my abilities.”

“I had to explain to my now employer why I left my job so quickly. They were very understanding, but not all places are.”



“Yes. I was strictly looking for careers outside of libraries, which limited my transferrable skills. I looked for 2 years before the right opportunity came along. I'm not sure I will ever return to libraries, and I still have \$40K in loans for my MLS.”

“It was extremely difficult to go through interviews when my confidence was so shattered. I often did not even apply to jobs that I previously would have considered myself qualified for.”

“No - the director of that library was well known in the area; no one questioned my short stay.”

“I sought out a Library with a positive Culture Statement posted on their website, with a director with a reputation for authenticity, and a management team that appeared to collaborate well.”

**25. If you are still working in libraries, but your negative work experience is in the past, does it affect your approach to work today?**

Yes, in ways that feel both positive and negative 175 (58.9%)

Yes, in positive ways 53 (17.8%)

Yes, in negative ways 43 (14.5%)

Not very much 13 (4.4%)

...plus some “other” answers

**26. If you answered that your past negative work experience affects your approach to work today, how so?**

“While I have been able to maintain my professional veneer, the early part of starting a new job is still incredibly stressful for me as I have not yet been able to share my hypervigilance. It leaves me exhausted for weeks to months until I am able to get to know people and build the trust that they're decent and the workplace is healthy. This mostly impacts my personal life; I come home too tired to do much.”

“When things get bad, I remind myself of how good they are now rather than when I was a target. I also try to remember that I never want to accidentally treat any of my employees the way I was treated.”

“The negative work experiences have taught me to set better boundaries with both coworkers and patrons, and how to better handle difficult situations.”

“Positive : It showed me how NOT to behave as a manager and that communication and making employees feel valued is extremely important. Negative: I am more cautious about taking risks unless there is a solid business case for it. Or maybe that is a positive thing :)”

“No institution is worth the burn out. I work exactly 40 hours and that's it. I take all my PTO. I keep my work as far from my home life as I can.”

“Makes me acutely aware of my own leadership practices and how I interact with faculty and staff. I try to make each encounter positive.”

” It took me a couple of years to feel secure in my new position. Took almost that long to get used to being treated as an adult. Several of us here are "recovering" from bad public library experiences.”

“It makes me grateful for what I have now. It also affected my strategies and questions asked during the job search that led to my current position - trying to ferret out red flags. It definitely left some scars - I still find myself being defensive and afraid to step on toes or come anywhere near someone else's area, for fear of being bullied. These are things I'm trying to unlearn.”

**27. Do you feel you learned anything of value from your adverse work experience?**

Yes 320 (89.9%)

No 36 (10.1%)

**28. If you feel you learned something of value from your experience, please describe.**

- How not to manage/lead others
- Things to watch out for in future positions

- Feel better equipped to handle difficult situations

“I have learned to ask more questions about workplace culture, supervisor style, and employee relationships during interviews. I've also learned to allow myself time to decompress after an interview and meetings with new people to write down my feelings and thoughts. If I feel uncomfortable with someone's behavior, I pay attention to my feelings and try to stay aware...”

“Don't have a potentially confrontational discussion without having another staff member come along.”

“I learned a lot about what to look for during an interview and to carefully weigh the risks.”

“I do whatever is opposite of what my toxic boss does. I think about what she would do in a situation then immediately do the exact opposite.”

“To be realistic in my expectations for leadership, to look around for mentors and unexpected leaders in work situations.”

“I am more proactive in coaching my reports to tell me if something I am doing (or not doing) is negatively impacting their work. I appreciate my colleagues, administration, and my current work culture. I make the most of my time with my family.”

“It showed me how not to treat my staff, and how to be a better director.”

“No job is worth putting up with abuse. My health and wellness are important.”

“It taught me a lot about the kind of leader I want to be and the kind of leaders I want to work for. And about the importance of cultivating a healthy, collaborative, respectful workplace culture.”

“I've learned what not to do and how not to act”

“Not to quietly tolerate inappropriate behavior.”

“Document EVERYTHING”

“I feel that I learned that people are not always so black and white - people are complex, and we don't really always know people fully. I understand now that leadership shouldn't be about controlling every situation but trusting others to do their part. Soft skills, such as communication, are vital for leadership roles.”

“This is vague, but I learned what some of my toxic traits can be and how they were brought out by the stress of the situation. I learned from my mistakes, and I learned about the kind of workplace I want to be in.”

“I gained resilience, self-knowledge, and an ability to deal much better with stressful things now - even if something horrible happens I can always say "it isn't as bad as [ex-job]!””

“Work doesn't love you back.”

“I learned that some situations aren't fixable, and the best thing I can do is advocate for myself and my own well-being. That said, I also learned how toxic certain behaviors can be, and have a new drive to avoid imposing that kind of pain on anyone in my life.”

“I gained a great deal of experience that helped me secure my current job. Additionally, it provided me with good guidance on what to look for in a work environment and in a management team.”

“Stick with the union”

“Most people work in libraries because they want to be there; it's their dream job. While someone may need coaching to excel, I trust that they sincerely want to be here and to do well.”

“I learned the importance of boundary setting, resisting overcommitment, and ensuring that the employer has organizational values that align with my individual values.”

“I feel better equipped to deal with difficult situations, with both coworkers and patrons.”

**29. Do you have any advice for others about how to avoid an adverse work experience in the first place?**

- Do your research
- Watch for red flags in hiring/interview process
- Ask questions (and look for subtle clues) about organizational culture

“Research the leadership before you take a job. Talk to people where they used to work because job references are unreliable. Use the WayBack machine to see what the staff level used to be. If there have been cuts and no attempt to fill the positions avoid that place.”

“Ask about culture and unwritten rules and expectations.”

“Ask questions of the current staff about the library culture before you accept a job offer.”

“Ask your director how they became director, what their management style is, and how they learned management, and what they do to improve their leadership over the years. A boss that can't answer those questions is a red flag, even in a librarian. So many terrible directors were decent librarians that had no way to move up but into management.”

“Be careful in interviewing. When interviewing you tend to hear the responses that match your interests/ and needs. (You hear what you want to hear). Reflect on everything that is said - and do your research...”

“Build a strong support network early in your career. Be involved in professional associations that support their members/ provide benefits.”

“Candidates can ask questions in the interview about the work environment, but people are rarely candid about a toxic workplace. I think you have to listen carefully to coded messages people might be trying to tell you. Also, it's good to observe how they interact with one another. Before a presentation, are they talking, laughing, getting along? Or, is the room quiet with small groups sitting together that might be cliques?”

“Do not ignore the red flags because it seems like a great opportunity, or position or is at a major institution. Don't think that just because it's an R1 or nationally recognized organization that there won't be massive issues to go with it. And if you've never

worked in a toxic environment, know that a toxic job can ruin every single part of your life and mental health.”

“Don't be desperate for a job? Haha”

“Don't work for anyone named \_\_\_\_\_.”

“I try to check turnover rates. If they're really high, there's probably a reason”

“I wish I knew. I really, really, wish there was a way to tell.”

“I would say, if you have a bad feeling about a situation at all, trust your instincts!”

“Interviews go both ways. People should be mindful that they are interviewing potential employers.”

“Trust your instincts; if it feels wrong, it IS wrong”

**30. Do you have any advice for others who find themselves in a library workplace that is really bad for them?**

” Get out. Unless you have a strong union that can help the situation will not get better.”

“Document everything!

Communicate everything to HR

Develop support systems that can help you navigate the difficult times

Familiarize yourself with the organizational policy”

“It's easier to leave and find a better situation than to fix your current situation -- cultural change is not impossible, but it's very difficult.”

“Get out if you can. It is not worth the heartache”

“You ALWAYS have the choice/power to leave, even if it doesn't feel like it. Just looking for another job puts the power back in your hands. Depending on the situation, work

with your Human Resources department and definitely try to keep it factual, not emotional in order to get the best results.”

“Look for another position, speak to your coworkers (they probably agree), always maintain references and contacts that support you”

“Get out fast. Remember only you can save yourself from bad situations. Staying in a bad work environment is like staying in a bad marriage.”

“It may take many resumes before you find something else don’t give up”

“If you can, find at least one person you can trust at the institution. I was lucky enough to have a colleague who helped me through a very difficult time, and we remain friends. Also, reach out to former colleagues and/or mentors for guidance. See if they can connect you with new opportunities.”

“Start applying for other work ASAP, and be flexible in where you can see yourself being in the future. And focus on self care while you wait for a chance to move on.”

“Don't be afraid to get management/HR involved and then don't be afraid to leave. Don't accept bad or toxic behavior. Keep a log of questionable interactions.”

“Start looking. It is easier to find a job when you have a job.”

“There are a lot of really great libraries out there. Do not settle for working in one that isn't a good fit for you. Find another job.”

“If you do not foresee the situation improving, leave if you can. I know this is easier said than done, but your mental health is so important. I was fortunate that I had tremendous support from family and friends. I sucked it up and dealt with it until I could take over and make needed improvements. MAJOR IMPROVEMENTS. :)”

“speak up! It was really helpful to me to make friends with directors at other libraries who I could commiserate with and who helped to reassure me that I was experiencing wasn't normal and wasn't okay.”

“I see a lot of people stick with the same job for 25-30 years. Often, I think, this is a bad choice. I'm 64, so it's different for me, but I think younger people should always keep

their resumes up to date--and make sure they're doing things that will actually help them get other, better jobs.”

“Quit. Just get out. Your mental health is more important than any job. It's too late for me, but you should save yourself.”

“Don't quit until you find other employment, but start looking. Give me your resume and cover letter, I'll look it over for you. Let's go job hunting. Don't stick it out until it gets better b/c chances are, it won't.”

“Move on. Library skills are valued all over the place.”

“Know your rights. Use the company EAP. If you cannot run, take up running as a coping mechanism.”

“Put in your time doing things that will build your CV and enable you to leave. Look to the finish line of getting out and not the stage of the race.”

“Focus on getting better and getting out. Find ways to improve your resume, either through your daily projects or by taking advantage of your institutions resources to learn new marketable skills. Be polite but don't engage - small talk only, and practice greeting someone happily and then immediately excusing yourself to take care of something else, so you can give a good "happy worker" impression without having to actually share anything about yourself. You owe them nothing but the work they pay you for - don't allow them to take up space in your brain unless they start paying you rent for it!”

“Find your allies, don't eat lunch at your desk- get out of that environment at least once a day. Stand up for yourselves and others when you can. Remember that quitting or giving up can be the best option- you have to save yourself too. You can only change so much about a workplace if administration is unwilling to do anything. You can't care more about their problems than they do.”

“Organize.”

“Get out as quickly as you can.”



“You know in your gut when something is not right. Don't feel like you have to stay in a bad situation just because you need to put in a certain amount of time, or the community needs you.”

“1. Read the research about bullying and other problems in libraries! For me, knowing you are not alone really helps. Sadly, there is more and more out there about this. 2. Find something outside the library that you love to focus on. It really helps to try to compartmentalize the library. And helps to stop taking any of it personally (hard to do!) 3. Get out the popcorn. Try to imagine that your workplace is a ridiculous play being staged for your amusement and mentally tell yourself you are eating popcorn and enjoying the stupid show (Ask a Manager advice). It is not easy but I kept thinking that and eventually I could do it. 4. Set yourself up to move on. Learn skills that you can take to the next library (I got my MLIS while working in the toxic place, joined statewide library committees to network and show my skills, and I got published bc I knew all that would help me get another job). If you are place-bound and there are no other libraries, look for skills you can develop that will transfer and study how others transferred to different employment.”

“If you can access therapy or another type of emotional support, please do so. Do your best to manage your stress and emotions. It will help you be successful in making a complaint to the proper channels or making a plan to leave, if need be.”

“Get a therapist. No, really, this is the best tool you can have - an outsider who is ethically bound to protect confidentiality to tell what is happening to you. If you are thinking about leaving a library, you are probably six months too late to protect your mental health. Trust your gut; if something is telling you to run, then run! Don't waffle. Also, document EVERYTHING.”

“Identify what makes the workplace bad for you -- and see if there is any chance of it being fixed. If not, move on. If you can't move on immediately, prioritize self-care. You have to take care of yourself first or you can't help anyone else -- that's what I finally realized. Build healthy workplace relationships with colleagues that you can trust. They can help act as a support system. But also don't forget your other potential support systems: family, friends, hobby buddies.”

“Try to stick it out 6 months to a year so your resume doesn't take a hit for moving on too quickly. If it is soul-sucking, can you replenish your cup outside of work? Start interviewing for jobs elsewhere as soon as you can and just say that you found it "wasn't

the best fit." Do NOT complain or gossip in new job interviews. As a director, I know who else in my library system is known to be a hard or bad boss. If you say "fit" I know what you mean. If you complain or gossip, that then looks bad for you. Practice talking about it in neutral tones with friends so you can keep your emotions in check during a job interview."

"Leave. Immediately."

"Get therapy if you can. (Contact your EAP!). Find allies and friends who will boost you up. Disconnect COMPLETELY from work when you don't have to be there, and invest time and energy in things that soothe and re-energize you. Job hunt and be aware it may take time"

"It's not worth it to stay in a bad situation just to work in a library. Do not give in to occupational awe. It's okay to move to another field or another library to find something healthy. Personal health is more important than career."

"Focus on doing things that will make you marketable for your next job."

**31. Do you have any advice for others about practical steps for moving on from an adverse workplace?**

"Focus on what you can do to have a positive impact and highlight that. Work with people outside your institution who can be a good reference."

"This will depend on individual circumstances. If you're still in the job, document, document, document. Reach out to your union rep, if you have one. (These are two things I had failed to accomplish.) Make a list describing everything what you actually do/have done in this role, as this may help in selecting the relevant skills to list in future job applications. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, take some time to \*not\* think about work, even if only for 5 minutes."

"Once you have decided to leave, stop expressing your discontent. It serves no purpose and will only impact your reputation."

"Document everything and get a therapist"

When you leave work for the day, leave the issues behind as well. While it does feel good to vent and rant, don't dwell on it or it will only continue to haunt you."

"Learn from your experiences and be proactive in making sure you do what is necessary to avoid putting yourself in a similar situation again."

"Find your strengths and figure out what you want from a position. There may be skills that you need or can pick up from your adverse workplace; take stock of what they can do for you or what you can get out of the experience while you're working on an exit plan. Be open to relocation if possible--I moved 2800 miles from a library that broke my heart to a library where I am valued, have opportunities for growth, and have the ability to use a diverse skillset."

"Network. Attend a conference, join a committee, partner with another library to present something. Get yourself out there and build relationships. You can lean on other professionals to route job postings to you, list as a reference, and/or review your resume."

"Be collegial and frame your departure as seeking growth. Do not burn bridges in the midst of your departure."

"Take some time, collect your thoughts, review your accomplishments and move forward. Do not in any way bad mouth past employees. There are ways to explain departures. I actually ended up with a very good reference from leadership in the library I left."

"Not every place is like the last one."

"Sometimes adverse workplaces can make for great responses to interview questions. Make sure you contextualize things correctly so that you don't come across as overly negative. Focusing on what you did and what you learned from the situation, rather than the behavior of others, can help with that."

"You may have to relocate or seek training in a different field/niche. It can be beneficial and allow you to improve your finances in the long term, although temporarily difficult."

"Network - become active in regional or state associations, join local committees where you can work with librarians from other systems. Ask people out for coffee dates to talk about their career journeys."

“Ideally, line up another job before you submit, in writing, your resignation. Do so according to your hiring contract. Maintain professionalism and grace, no matter what. Consult a lawyer, if necessary. Do no harm, your profession is to be of service.”

“Even the smallest project or experience can go a long way when seeking out positions. Do not be afraid to seek out positions that may be a little out of your experience range. The right places will train you/give you the space to grow.”

“Accentuate the Positive. Eliminate the Negative. Latch onto the Affirmative. Don't mess with Mr. In-Between. Sorry to Bing Crosby and Willie Nelson. That is great advice.”

“Read workplace advice columns (e.g. "Ask a Manager") and be in awe that workplace behaviours you thought were totally normal are actually not okay. Do whatever kind of therapy that works for you so that you can process the negative experience for what it often is - trauma. Grieve your job/career - you've lost something, and that's tough. Forgive yourself for your behaviours while you were in that toxic job/workplace because your calibration of appropriate was probably skewed by your environment. Be kind to yourself for any perceived "failures" - you didn't fail because you weren't "good enough" to stick it out, you survived an abusive environment and YOU GOT OUT.”

“Talk with colleagues from other libraries - people you know from library school or committee work - and learn the culture of any potential employer before making a move. If possible, find the right job - don't just escape to the first thing available. It will be better for your health and your career in the long run.”

“Find those people who will be a good reference for you. If you are in education, make sure you keep contact info from previous principals or ask them to write you a reference before they leave. Old references I had almost forgotten about got me my current job, which has been a good place to work.”

“You will probably have baggage from that workplace. Take the time you need to get to know and trust your new colleagues if you leave for a new role. Remember that you can learn from bad experiences, and they can help inform your choices and preserve your health in the future.”

“You have to retrain your brain that things you were conditioned to expect are not normal or okay. It can be really difficult.”

“Participate in conferences, either through poster presentations or by giving sessions. Create an electronic portfolio if you don't have one already. Be ready to move on when something better presents itself.”

“Cultivate a professional network. My friends in the field reminded me that I was not crazy, that what I was dealing with was unreasonable and unfair, and helped me combat the gaslighting that was happening at work. They helped me find my new job.”

“Don't "burn your bridges." Play by the rules and leave with dignity.”

“Always keep an updated CV. Always watch job ads, even if you aren't searching. (This helps you stay current in your own job.) Always maintain a list of people who are willing to serve as potential references. And once you resign and start at a new workplace, don't discuss the toxic workplace.”

“The longer you stay, the more bad treatment you will accept. This makes harder to leave because you feel like you are only qualified to work in your job and that you are “lucky” to have it. Take proactive steps in your personal time - update LinkedIn, set alerts for jobs, update the CV, take some online interview skills training (it is easier to get a job when you are still employed) but tell no one at work (this will make you a target and can force your hand before you are ready).”

“A friend once told me "It's easier to steer a moving boat" as opposed to one that is sitting still. Meaning, do the best you can, and fate/God will steer you in the right direction. That has been my experience, although I'm always hesitant to say to everyone "it will be okay." Because its not always. Or maybe another friend said it better, I think he got it from Frozen II, that when things really stink, just focus on the next best step. I think that applies to everyone.”

“Take it slow. Be kind to yourself.”

“If the bad workplace undermines you or makes you feel that you don't have any skills, keep a list or a portfolio of all the work that you do. Create some evidenced-back success stories and capitalize on that when you need it”

“One of the best things that I ever had after leave that place was having friends from there (so they understood who I was talking about), that I could vent to. I was absolutely livid when I left and was for several months afterwards. And to be honest, I'm still angry even though it's been over 7 years. I'm nowhere near as angry as I was, but I do keep hearing about it as I still have friends who still work there so I still have my ear to the rumor mill--which does keep the anger alive. But I did recently begin to realize that I probably have PTSD from my supervisor, so I probably need some therapy to work though the workplace trauma that I experienced.”

“Find a therapist and mentor to help with bad experiences. Give yourself time.”

“See if you can have a good working relationship with someone there who can act as a reference, always do the best work and have projects/accomplishments to point to, and get out as fast as you can. BUT if you are willing to speak up and work with HR, go for it.”

“I'm still trying to figure that out”

“Keep your ear to the ground and take note of what you learn about the work culture at other potential libraries, especially if you want to stay local. Try to develop connections with library staff at the places you hear are more functional/positive.”

“Start building and maintaining a network. Keep in touch with non-toxic colleagues from prior jobs who can speak to your work. Keep your skills up to date and participate, if you can, in a professional organization. If you have a good network, you're less likely to internalize the negative feedback from your toxic environment. And they may be able to alert you to a better job opportunity! I got my last job before retirement (a nice job) when a colleague saw a posting on a job board and thought I might be interested.”

“I moved on from an adverse workplace fairly early in my career. It really helped not to burn bridges. Even my former boss, whom I clashed with at the time, has kind words to say now that I've moved on. Don't frame your departure as a bitter separation; instead share it with colleagues, even the ones who may have driven you away, as a positive step forward. Once you're no longer working together, they may make much better professional acquaintances than they did coworkers!”

“1. When I quit my first library job out of grad school, I still had the strong feeling that academic libraries were where I belonged. Take the time to evaluate your own feelings about the field as a whole, separate from your bad experience. You may find that you don't think librarianship is where you belong, and that's valid. But don't let your trauma win if that's the only thing stopping you from trying again.

2. Some employers are just toxic, but in my case, I bore some of the blame for what went wrong. And there were many (non-toxic) employees who were happy and functioned well under the department head who I had so much trouble communicating with. It's healthy to acknowledge (if it's the case) that there is no one in your story who's strictly the villain. Don't gloss over your employer's wrongdoing (there probably is some) but don't ignore your own. Analyzing your behavior might break you out of cycles that would have affected future work experiences.”

“I haven't been able to. All I do is work. I have no one to talk to about this.”

“Again- find your folk: coworkers, friends, partners, etc, people who will boost you up and remind you that you are qualified and capable. If accessible therapy is great. Remind yourself that while every workplace has problems and will have people you don't love, not every place is toxic or abusive towards employees.”

“Network, network, network. Just being visible can help someone get out of a toxic job.”

“No. I am going to retire in 18 months. I don't plan to ever set foot in my current workplace or engage in any activities related to the profession except maybe writing an occasional book review for Notes (and I am not a music librarian, so that might not even count). I plan to be so busy doing amazing things that I will seldom think about my former career.”

“Read the "Ask a Manager" blog daily, [askamanager.org](http://askamanager.org) . It gives great advice on worklife and job searching.

I found the Gallup Clifton Strengths tests valuable to remind me that I DO have skills, I DO have talents. They helped me to focus on what I would be able to do once I left that suffocating job.”

“Revise CV. Read Ask a Manager about job searching. Look for library adjacent jobs”

“At least in my area most librarians know each other. Working for one like I had, everyone knew why I had quit and didn't hold that against me. So go ahead and leave, on the best terms possible - at least with the manager above your manager and the HR department.”

“LinkedIn is your friend! Stay in touch with people who leave your organization. Also, don't feel that you have to stay in library work - you have skills that could transfer to many other fields.”

“After you've accepted the fact that you won't be able to change your boss or your situation, polish up the resume, start applying for jobs, and read the [askamanager.org](http://askamanager.org) blog for more advice about how to move on successfully.”

“Always learn new things, stay connected with the library community beyond your library, don't look for support where you will not get any.”

“One bad experience doesn't mean the next one will be bad. Go in with an open mind and open eyes. You now know what to look for, but it might not be there at all.”

“Apply to everything. Even if you don't feel qualified. And dig deep for why you still love libraries, because you'll want to show it in interviews.”

“No. I wish I had some. It's been hard for me to come back from this. I feel damaged.”

“Don't feel obligated to stay any longer than you have to, simply because librarianship is vital. The idea of librarianship as a calling, with its accompanying vocational awe, can cause as much harm as the adverse workplace, because it encourages sticking with the harmful job.”

“Therapy, learning more about vocational awe and recovery from it, learning more about management best practices (shoutout to Ask a Manager!) and the green flags of good management vs just the red flags of bad management”

“Set yourself up to move on. Learn skills that you can take to the next library (I got my MLIS while working in the toxic place, joined statewide library committees to network and show my skills, and I got published bc I knew all that would help me get another job). If you are place-bound and there are no other libraries, look for skills you can develop that will transfer and study how others transferred to different employment.”

“Be strategic. Your current workplace doesn't need to know what moves you're planning. Be prepared for retaliatory measures, as well; if you're in a position to save, give yourself a financial buffer in case toxic colleagues make it too difficult to stay until your actual end date or a difficult boss tries to let you go out of spite.”

“Don't let the experience make you bitter. Learn from it and move on as a sadder but much wiser professional. Do not stay in a job out of convenience, familiarity, or loyalty”

“Seek professional help, it matters”

“Consider leaving librarianship if you aren't flexible with moving to another city, etc. When you walk out of that door, leave all the misery and nastiness in the building.”

“Value yourself and your abilities. Look at other industries, what do you like about libraries - helping people, document management, organization, community engagement- these are also found in other places.”

“Value yourself and your abilities. Look at other industries, what do you like about libraries - helping people, document management, organization, community engagement- these are also found in other places.”



“What has helped me the most was to remain in touch with a few colleagues who also quit and semi-regularly gather to catch up. Hearing how they've found success after our mutual experience has done a lot to help me see the ways I've also improved and recovered.”

“It happens to all of us at some point. It's not your fault. (Unless it happens to you at every workplace in which case it might be you. Just sayin.) If it's not you, then work on doing self-care, find a mentor, talk with friends and colleagues to help process the experience and to find new positive experiences elsewhere they will eventually help outweigh the negative experience.”

“Talk to people you trust about your decision to leave on. You will be surprised who lends you a hand.”

“Work it out elsewhere and not in your new workspace. Go to therapy, talk to someone you can confide in who isn't connected to either workplace, take up kickboxing, whatever. But process the trauma, commit to your own growth and healing, and get yourself to a place where you can let go of the charged emotions around what happened so you can show up in your new workplace without carrying that hurt with you into that new space.”

“Cast your net wide; don't rule out positions that you think may be beyond your experience or ideal. You are more capable than your present circumstances make you think. And sometimes it's worth taking a year or two in a job that's not quite your ideal, if the workplace is healthy overall, to give yourself time to heal.”

“Have a good explanation for why you are looking for a different job. Know it well and be able to say it quickly without sounding over-rehearsed. Don't go into too much detail about all the problems at your job - hiring managers who don't know you won't be able to tell if the job is really that bad or if you have difficulty coping with/adjusting to normal challenges.”

“It's worth seeing a therapist for at least a few sessions if you can, or starting a journal if therapy isn't available. Working in an unhealthy workplace can warp your perception of what's normal and okay. If you're going to bounce back from an adverse workplace experience, you have to find a way to reset your expectations and boundaries so you can have a healthy workplace experience in the future.”

**32. This questionnaire has been limited to a considering a single negative work experience in libraries. Have you had additional adverse library workplaces or work situations?**

Yes 225 (62.2%)

No 138 (37.8%)

**34. Is there anything you would like to share that has not been raised by the survey questions?**

“It’s important for managers and administrators to realize the impact their decisions make on staff. Being heavy-handed and micromanaging only results in high turnover. I wasn't the only employee to resign from this job. Managers need to be more willing to hold themselves accountable for their actions instead of projecting onto the employees. Don't expect staff to be loyal if you're not loyal to them”

“In a profession that is a majority female, and does not require a doctorate, men with PhDs tend to get hired for leadership roles, although they lack leadership skills. This makes work in academic libraries frustrating. Also, the issue that drove me out of K-12 libraries has only gotten worse with state governments banning entire lists of books!”

“Good luck. I hope this helps librarians maintain their professionalism and values and to stand up for themselves and the profession they love.”

“These problems are not unique to library work. I don't think that libraries have any more adversity that other types of work- in fact they have comparatively fewer in my experience. They are all just as prone to issues as libraries.”

“Public Libraries need to reconsider their structures - if a Director is creating a toxic workspace, there is very little that can be done by anyone. In many smaller libraries, the HR person (if there is one) reports to the Director, so that line of communication is compromised. A Director review should always include a survey of staff, just as managers' reviews do. Board members need to use the Library in order to sense a shift in culture.”

“The game changer for me was when our director retired. I know a lot of systemic toxic behavior starts at the top and when it's top down, it is hard to fight that. When many of his favorites found out I was applying for the position, they retired or left. Those who did not, when I was hired, I had a discussion with them about gossip and bullying. I also had to do a few written reprimands and they soon left as they could not sustain good

behavior. We had new staff, a new direction and a director who held people accountable for poor behavior.”

“It took me years to move beyond the hostile work environment. At times, my old feelings still come up (and I have an amazing Director now). I do not have the confidence I had before the horrible job.”

“I never thought this would happen to me. I’m a hard worker and a caring person. I’m so sorry to anyone experiencing a similar situation; I know how painful it is and I hate that any of us have to experience it.”

“More questions focusing on the impact of library funding on positive or negative situation.”

“I’m looking forward to the survey results! Even though it’s difficult to revisit bad work experiences, I have found it very healing to hear about what others have dealt with.”

“Everything is a learning experience. I am often amazed at some of the terrible management stories and administrative decisions/directives I hear about in the field, and am even more amazed that library workers feel that this behavior is ok. I think more of us in managerial/administrative roles need to model boundaries, appropriate scope, reasonableness, demand for respect, and "saying no" to our teams.”

“I attended an ALA webinar about negative work experience. The speaker (current ALA president) advocated for Unions. I wrote in the chat to ask if she had any advise other than to form a union. I got called to a special meeting with the director for discussing unionization in a work webinar for typing the question.”

“I don't know how to make it possible, but there has to be some way to protect public library employees who are out there trying to make their communities better. Library boards are made up of people who don't have to have masters degrees in library science or any degree at all--yet they are the boss of library directors who often have to have that degree. Public library boards need to be held accountable so poor management situations like this one don't happen as easily.”

“I hope I don't get any backlash from participating in this survey”

“My situation wasn't serious enough to warrant intervention by any university employee advocacy group, but future iterations of this survey might want to include a

question about whether the respondent ever sought out or used institutional resources to support them while they experienced an adverse workplace action.”

“There is a facebook group called Renewers: Recovery from low morale libraries that is the most supportive place. They have been helping me realize that I'm not alone and that we can help each other dig ourselves out from the pit of abusive work places that we don't deserve.”

“Targeted questions for different types of libraries would be helpful.”

“I did six months of coaching with Kaetrena Davis Kendrick that really helped me process my workplace experience while I was hanging on through leadership changes. I highly recommend her work.”

“Arizona needs a union of library employees”

“I'm not sure if any library work experience can be truly healthy. Even if you library is a positive work environment, we are living in a time of constant attacks on the profession and the larger organizations seem largely unprepared to support library workers.”