

# Library Staff Morale in the Academic Hierarchy

Pennsylvania Library Association webinar  
20 April 2021

Morale Llama  
at UC Berkeley  
Library

## Presenters:

Bonita Dyess  
Celia Emmelhainz  
Natalia Estrada  
Ann Glusker,  
of the University of California, Berkeley



# Today's talk:

**Abstract:** *Academic librarians have increasingly gone public with their experiences of low morale and burnout, yet less attention has been paid to the workplace experiences of library staff. As Kaetrena Davis Kendrick notes in her work on the persistent harm of low morale among librarians, “the cost of silence can be high.” Our research team includes library staff, former library staff, a recent MLS grad and MLIS student, and librarians. Through 34 structured interviews with academic library staff nationwide, we seek to demonstrate how organizational culture, library hierarchies, and management style affect staff morale. In this webinar, we present our findings establishing that efforts to address equity in compensation, provide professional growth opportunities, and create more collegial work environments can all improve staff morale. Finally, we suggest how you can make changes in your own libraries to assess and improve morale across staff hierarchies.*

## We'll address:

- Why we're interested in staff experiences
- Our research process
- Who we talked with
- What they're saying
- What we'll do next

# Learning objectives:

1. Reflect on staff roles in academic hierarchies in order to better advocate for academic library staff.
2. Gain a better understanding of how the divide between administrators/librarians and staff can impact staff morale.
3. Understand the impact of professional development and career support on academic library staff morale.

# Background, Methods, and Interviews:



# The inspiration:

Kendrick's paper on  
low librarian morale →

We found other work  
on *librarian* morale or  
burnout...

...but no one was  
looking at *staff* morale!

Natalia and Ann got  
talking...

Articles

## The Low Morale Experience of Academic Librarians: A Phenomenological Study

Kaetrena Davis Kendrick 

Pages 846-878 | Published online: 07 Sep 2017

 Download citation  <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2017.1368325>  Check for updates

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### ABSTRACT

A dynamic body of knowledge about workplace bullying and burnout in academic libraries exists; however, there is a significant shortage of library and information science (LIS) literature regarding the related problem of low morale in any library environment; additionally, literature focusing on workplace bullying and burnout is quantitative, limiting insight into the animate experience of these events and inquiry into associated long-term effects. A phenomenological study was conducted to understand academic librarians' experience of low morale. Emergent themes connected workplace abuse, mental and physical health impacts, systemic influences, and the long-term consequences of low morale on LIS career trajectories.

# Our initial questions:

- Librarians with an MLIS sometimes work in staff roles... yet few staff make it to librarian roles. How easy is it to make this jump?
- What chances do staff have for engaging work at their role within the hierarchy?
- What happens if you want to “rise up the ranks” and take on more complex work, but can’t?
- Does library structure play a role in staff morale?
- Why so few studies on staff? Librarians are not the only ones running the library, and in many ways are less essential than staff.

# Developing our project:

- Natalia and Ann invited Celia to provide qualitative support.
- Natalia drew on her experience as staff, and invited Bonita to share her staff perspective as well.
- We won a statewide (LAUC) grant to buy software, hire a student to transcribe, and provide small gifts to interviewees.
- We applied for and received human subjects/IRB approval.



# Recruitment

We emailed *external* library listservs and state associations, and screened interested interviewees to ensure they matched our target group.

On campuses where the word spread, we had to turn people away!

We completed 34 interviews, and each participant received a \$25 gift card to Powell's Bookstore for their time.

12:29

Do you work at an academic library in the United States?

Yes

No

Is your position considered

A librarian position

A library staff position

Other (please specify)

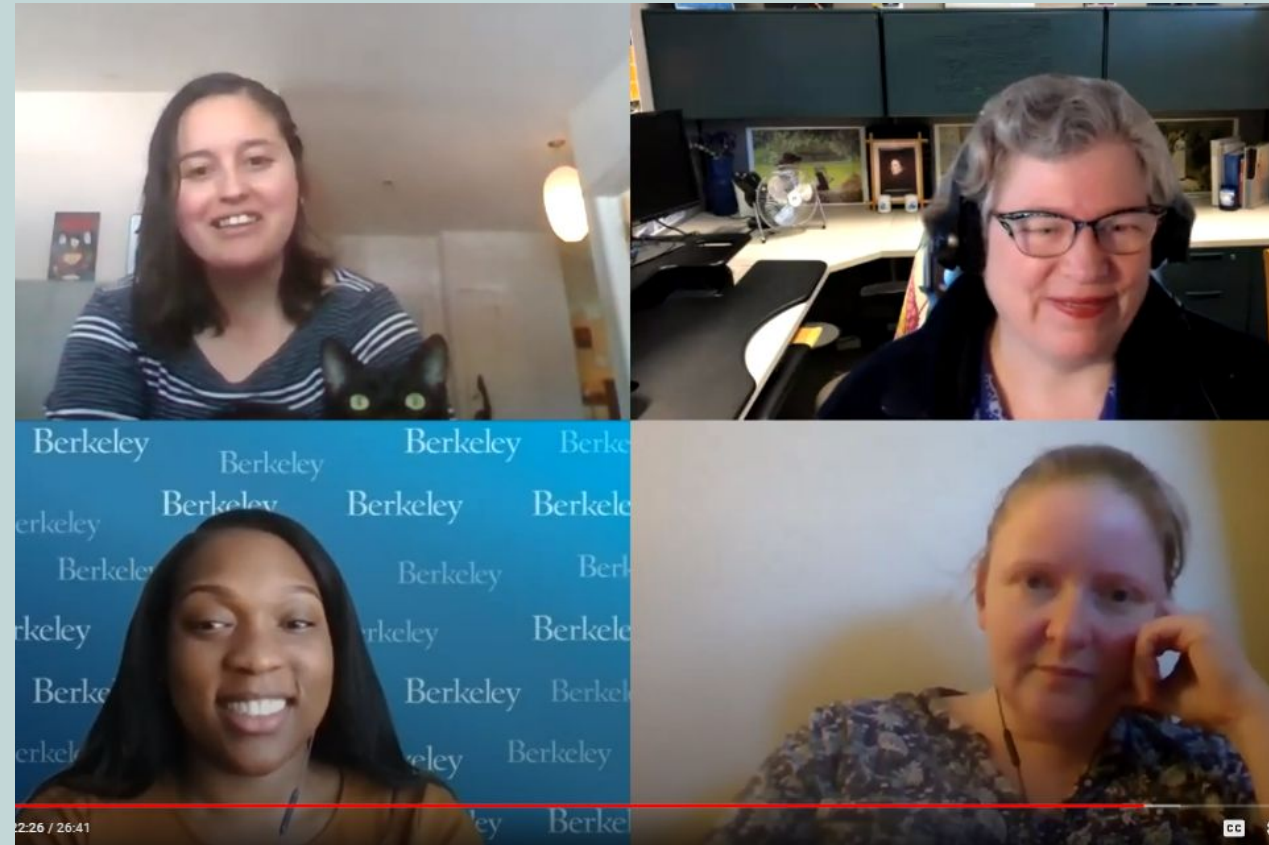
# Leading the interviews:

Colleague Dori Hsiao graciously let us try a test interview with her.

We interviewed by phone or Google Meet in May-June 2020 (during the pandemic shutdowns!).

One person asked questions and the other took notes/asked follow-up questions.

“Semi-structured” interviews meant that we had a set of questions, but flexed to staff interests.

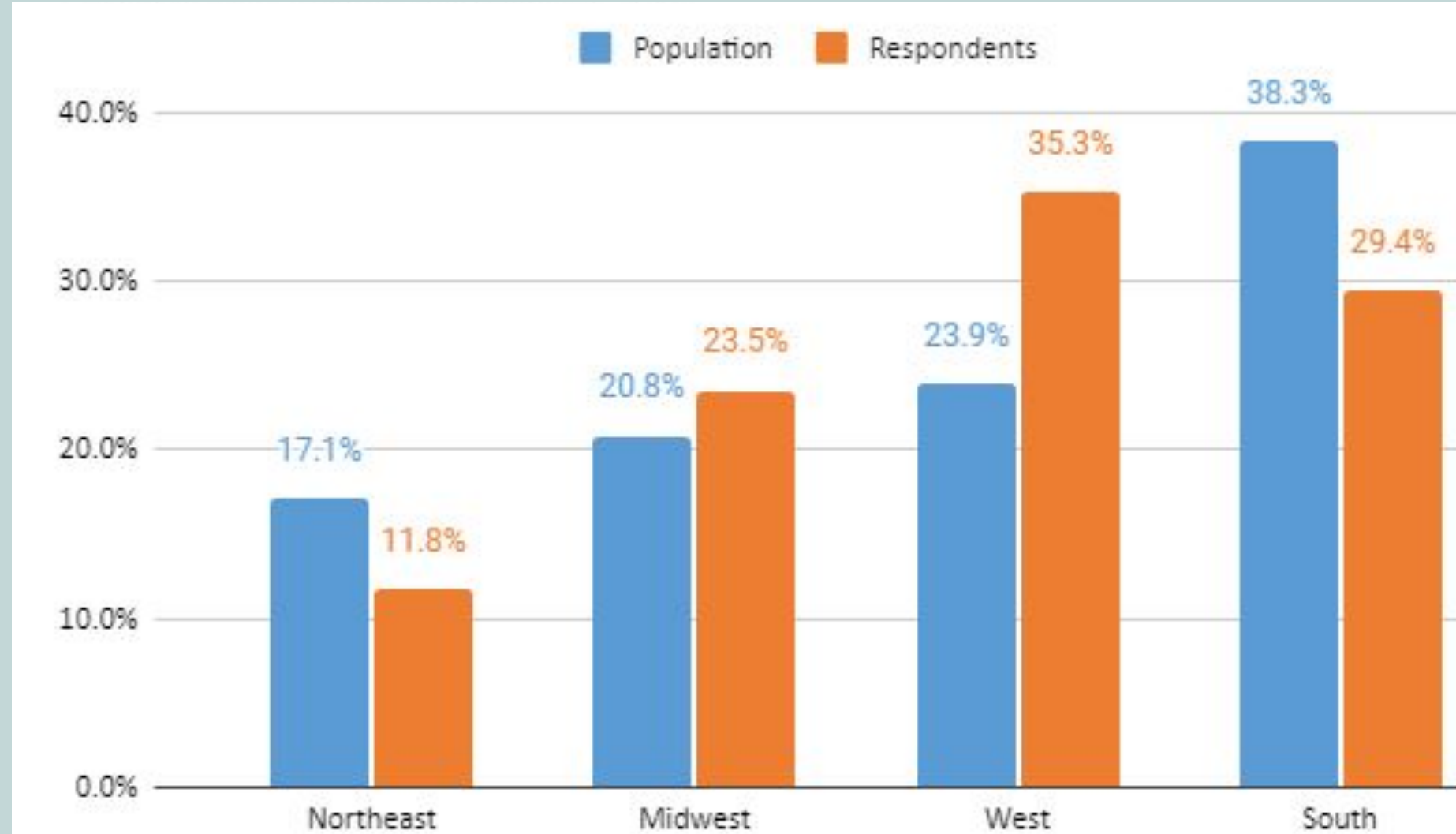


# Demographics: region and institution

Staff came from 23 colleges/universities in 16 states.

Public institutions were overrepresented

Enrollment & Carnegie classifications show larger institutions were also overrepresented



# Respondent demographics

## Gender:

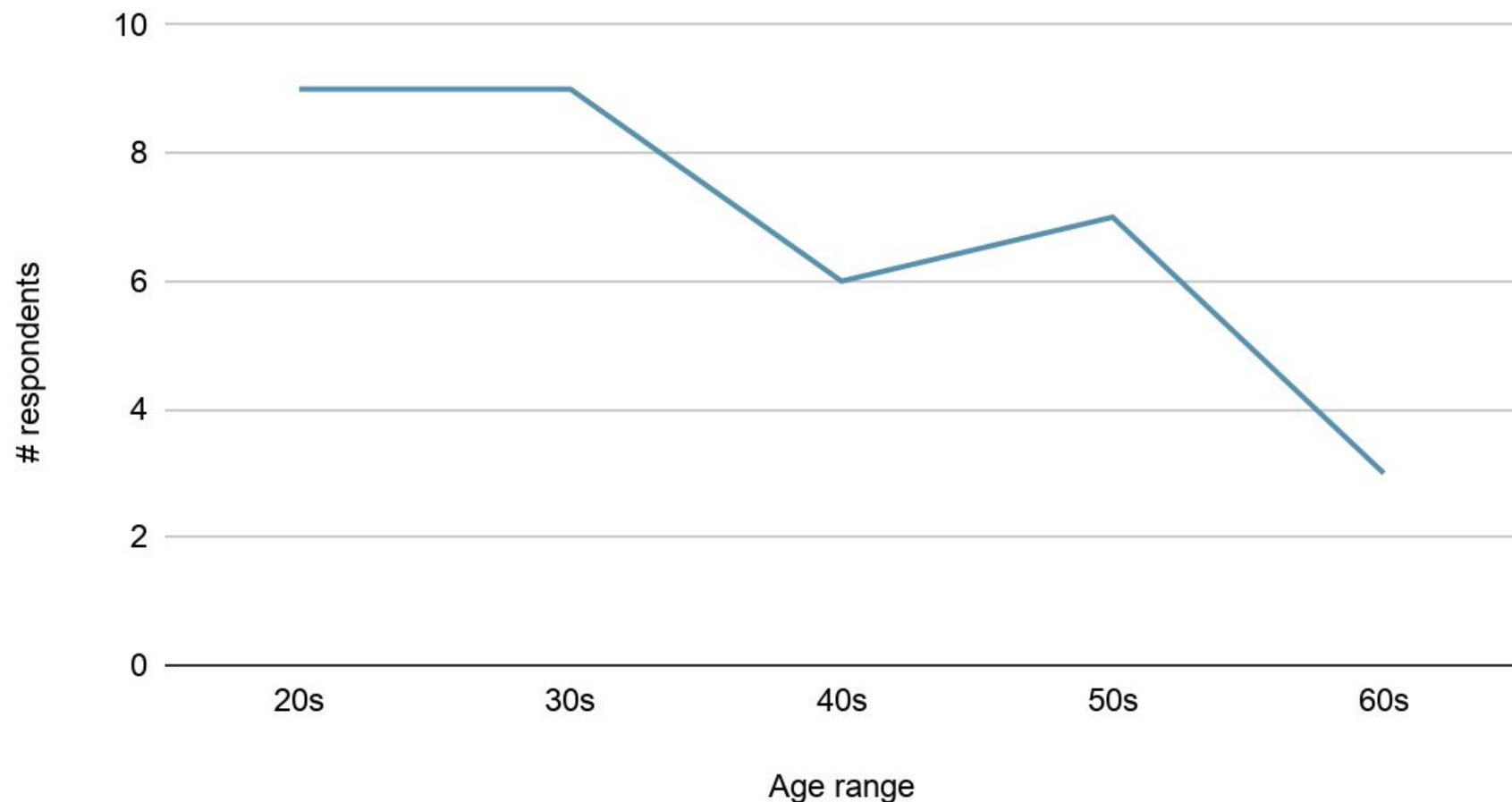
- 29 female
- 4 male
- 2 NB

## Race:

- 29 white
- 5 staff of color\*

\* Staff of color self-identified  
Black, African, Asian,  
Latinx/South American descent

# respondents in age range:



# From interview to transcript:

We recorded audio on *two* devices, to avoid data loss, then transferred to secure Box folder.

Student Tara van Hoorn transcribed the interviews, highlighting areas that might be identifying.

We then reviewed each transcript for format, and redacted identifying information, to produce a clean final transcript for coding.

# Coding themes

We used MaxQDA, a qualitative software, to highlight quotes of interest and explore themes

Each of us took a separate area, letting us dive deeply into the theme we were working on

The screenshot displays the MaxQDA software interface. On the left, the 'Documents' pane lists several files, with '05\_Samantha' selected. Below it, the 'Code System' pane shows a hierarchical structure of codes, including 'Workspaces', 'Flexibility', 'Impacts of COVID', 'Morale' (with sub-codes 'Low Morale' and 'High Morale'), 'Hierarchy' (with 'Room for Growth'), 'Faculty-Staff Divide' (with 'Perception of Staf...'), 'Disparities' (with 'Racial Concern', 'Gender Concern', 'Class Concerns', and 'Age Concern'), and 'Management' (with 'Senior Leadership' and 'Direct Boss').

The main window shows a document titled 'Document Browser: 05\_Samantha (145 Paragraphs)'. The 'Workspaces' code is applied to a paragraph starting at line 104: 'It depends on the librarian. The one one making purchasing decisions for faculty, that's what they are. They are in instruction, or things like that. So the'. Another paragraph starting at line 106 is highlighted in blue: 'Yeah. We have unit meetings like on versus the people that work at the d documents people are still at [the m of like internal things like thought bo cubicles, pretty much cubicles. The room deal. For the most part we're'. A blue lightning bolt symbol is drawn between the 'Faculty-Staff Divide' code in the Code System and the highlighted paragraph. A vertical bracket on the right side of the text area groups the highlighted paragraph under the 'Workspaces' code.



**Findings:**

# 1. The librarian-staff divide

A disconnect between staff and librarians caused **frustration amongst staff**. This was exacerbated when librarians held faculty status.

- Staff try to structure their work and influence their organization, but are often blocked by librarians. While some librarians are collaborative, others are dismissive, cherry-pick the good tasks, and dump “lower status” work on staff.
- Staff felt satisfied when they could work with librarians as peers on a team project.
- Staff appreciated that this project focused on *staff* experiences. Being seen and validated matters tremendously.

*“I think that morale is pretty low among our staff. They really feel that there’s a faculty-staff divide, for one.” -Joseph*

## 2. The impact of management

Staff with low morale were often in toxic settings or had micromanaging or unsupportive bosses.

Yet **feeling supported by and connected with an immediate boss** was critical for high morale. Managers who support staff growth and autonomy are crucial, as is transparent communication from management at all levels. As Opal commented:

*“My boss is very uplifting. He doesn’t seem to have a big ego, he just wants to get things working, to have everyone happy... he’s always asking what he can do to help us, and not meddling unless we ask for help. So we’re really free to grow, I gotta say.” -Opal*

### 3. The impacts of family and education

**Education:** The majority of staff we interviewed had an advanced degree, or were in a graduate degree program. Staff saw education as necessary--but it didn't guarantee career progression!

**Caregiving:** A majority of staff had a spouse or kids, and family needs often impacted their career choices.

**Class:** Many staff brought up ways that class impacted their career--either smoothing it, or challenging it through e.g. student loans:

*“Our director has volunteered to help me find scholarship money because I couldn't get any more loans to go back to school... I do wanna go back if I can get the financial assistance.” - Linda*

## 4. The impact of hierarchy

We expected a direct relationship between place in the hierarchy and morale. Instead, **morale depended more on organizational factors such as the ability to progress, workload, respect, and funding for new hires.**

*“The person who was applying for the [librarian] job said ‘Well, how long do I sit at the reference desk?’ and they said ‘You’ll never sit there more than two hours. We would never do that to you!’*

*“And I was thinking, what am I? Every person who’s pissed off at the world, I’m dealing with them 8 hours a day. And you can’t handle it for two hours?” -Amy*

# RECOMMENDATIONS:

## How to strengthen library staff morale

- Foster respectful *peer* collaboration between staff and librarians.
- Fight for fair pay and classification.
- Provide job security and flexible schedules that allow for caregiving.
- Provide professional development funds and paid conference leave.
- Ask staff for and use their comments on potential library changes.
- Invite staff to collaborate on committees and library initiatives.
- Ensure that those who can't afford an MLIS can still advance.
- Provide pleasant, well-lit workplaces and access to campus amenities
- Be a good teammate -- fill your own darn copier tray!



## Next steps:

- Share out this webinar (and our ACRL poster)
- Finish our literature review (we welcome suggestions!)
- Develop one or more publications

# Themes to explore...

- Dig further into staff experiences in the academic library
- Explore staff vs. librarian vs. faculty roles
- Consider what causes engagement vs. discouragement
- Look at staff opportunities for growth and development
- Explore how class and finances impact staff growth
- “Hierarchical microaggressions”: snubbing vs inclusion
- The impact of organizational (dys)function on staff

# Further reading

Artz, B. M., Goodall, A. H., & Oswald, A. J. (2017). Boss Competence and Worker Well-Being. *ILR Review*, 70(2), 419–450.

Kendrick, K. D. (2017). The Low Morale Experience of Academic Librarians: A Phenomenological Study. *Journal of Library Administration*, 57(8), 846–878.

Kennedy, S. P., & Garewal, K. R. (2020). Quantitative analysis of workplace morale in academic librarians and the impact of direct supervisors on workplace morale. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 46(5), 102191.

Nitecki, J. Z. (1984). Decision-Making and Library Staff Morale: Three Dimensions of a Two-sided Issue. *Journal of Library Administration*, 5(2), 59–78.

Young, K., Anderson, M., & Stewart, S. (2015). Hierarchical microaggressions in higher education. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 8(1), 61–71.

# See also: our ACRL poster

## #LibraryStaffLife: Improving Staff Morale in Academic Libraries

Intro: Others have studied librarian morale, but no one was looking at staff!

Method: We interviewed 34 academic library staff from 23 institutions by phone or online in May-June 2020, transcribed, and coded in MaxQDA.

### Findings:

- The strangleholds of hierarchies
- The librarian/staff divide
- Need for prof. dev. support
- Manager advocacy is central!



Library  
morale  
llama  
outside  
UCB Library

### WHAT STAFF WANT EVERYONE TO KNOW!

On the divide: "Librarians can protect themselves [from COVID], but we clerks could be out there interfacing with the students and touching everything, and they were willing to have that happen to us."

On good management: "He's the boss I've been waiting for my whole life...he's very uplifting and he knows he's putting a lot of money into people to get their training...we're doing really well since he got here." "I don't know that I'm as much of a fighter as some of my awesome supervisors have been."

On career growth: "Until I retire or die, there's not gonna be another staff supervisor position... I've either got to quit or die... the only way they could move is to move sideways. They can't move up."

### Ways to Systemically Break Down the Divide:

- Include staff in committees and leadership
- Foster peer collaboration between librarians and staff
- Fight for fair pay and classification for all staff
- Pitch in: fill your own darn copier tray!
- Provide professional development funds
- Share prospective changes and then use staff feedback
- Ensure that those who can't afford an MLIS can still advance

Bonita Dyess  
Celia Emmelhainz  
Natalia Estrada &  
Ann Glusker

BERKELEY  
Library  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Thanks to  
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grant & transcriber  
Tara van Hoorn

Check out our  
webinar:  
[https://is.gd/PaLA\\_](https://is.gd/PaLA_UCBMoraleTalk)  
UCBMoraleTalk

Questions? Email  
[librarystaffmorale@](mailto:librarystaffmorale@berkeley.edu)  
berkeley.edu



# Thank you!

Slides:

<http://is.gd/LibraryStaffMoraleFindings>

Recording:

[https://is.gd/PaLA\\_UCBMoraleTalk](https://is.gd/PaLA_UCBMoraleTalk)

Contact us:

Bonita Dyess [bdyess@berkeley.edu](mailto:bdyess@berkeley.edu)

Celia Emmelhainz [emmelhainz@berkeley.edu](mailto:emmelhainz@berkeley.edu)

Natalia Estrada [nestrada@berkeley.edu](mailto:nestrada@berkeley.edu)

Ann Glusker [glusker@berkeley.edu](mailto:glusker@berkeley.edu)

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Photo credit: [Johema](#)

# QUESTIONS?

\* We encourage staff  
to ask the first few  
questions!

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