

# Not Just for the New Librarians:

## Mentoring and Professional Planning at Mid-Career

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### Introduction

As our profession changes and our careers grow, opportunities arise for new roles, sometimes in unexpected ways. How can librarians prepare themselves for when the door opens or when they want to open the door themselves? Mentoring and professional development recommendations often focus on early-career librarians, but a person's needs might change just when they have “graduated” from that helpful guidance. However, not all librarians in their mid-career are offered support and guidance or continue to explore their future career paths with intentionality and self-reflection.

The phrase “mid-career” is, by its nature, somewhat ill-defined, but it is generally true that mid-career is the longest period of one's professional trajectory. Baldwin et al describe mid-career as “after the distinct hurdles that characterize entry to an academic career and before another challenging period when aging

and looming retirement confront senior academics with questions about their relevance, legacy, and revised identity as emeritus faculty.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, mid-career can encompass many different decision points in one’s career or potential professional goals.

Many organizations have robust systems of mentoring and support for new librarians, much of which is either officially or unofficially withdrawn at mid-career. Yet, it is at this point that librarians often find that their professional narrative changes unexpectedly, requiring shifts in job responsibilities that might redirect their professional attention in a way that requires a new plan for growth and development. Mentoring and career planning should not stop just because an individual is no longer new to the field. Changes to the profession mean many librarians need and want to learn emerging areas of librarianship in order to remain current and engaged in their position. Additionally, it is critically important to the field as a whole for mid-career librarians to prepare for advancement into senior leadership. Even without a significant career change, promotion in rank can pose daunting challenges for mid-career librarians who must face those challenges without guidance and mentoring.

## Mentor Mapping

The term mentor usually inspires the image of a singular person who will guide your career trajectory. For academic librarians, this might be a senior librarian inhabiting a similar role or someone who holds a role to which you aspire. These mentors are seen as a guide to shepherd an early-career person through acculturation and assist them in learning the ropes. Reliance on one person for career support can provide valuable guidance but can be limited in scope and assumes that what is successful for one person at one time will prove successful throughout one’s career. As Rockquemore argues, we should shift our thinking from a singular, all-knowing person to act as our guide to a model that draws on a network of people to provide a wide range of support.<sup>2</sup>

Mentoring literature and practice provide a number of examples of other types of mentoring. Peer mentoring, in which a peer group provides support and guidance, has increased over the past decade in libraries.<sup>3</sup> Peer groups allow for people to share lessons learned and identify common barriers but often lack the guidance of senior colleagues.<sup>4</sup> For those who are juggling family caretaking responsibilities with career advancement, having the support of people who also were or are caregivers can provide much-needed guidance to navigate challenges, resources, and adjustments. Additionally, mentoring can also be found through

leveraging your network of colleagues. For example, a mentor who provided guidance for the first few years of your career, even if they no longer provide the same level of support, could provide access to a network of people who in turn could provide the guidance you need for the next stage of your professional life.

Shifting your perspective about who could act as a mentor provides an opportunity to consider the support roles numerous people play in one's success. Those with a network of mentors reported greater career satisfaction than those with no mentors or with a single mentor.<sup>5</sup> Additional studies on faculty mentoring note that those who expand the definition of mentor to include a network of people who provide support, coaching, and guidance report greater career satisfaction.<sup>6</sup> As we work to shift our thinking of who is a mentor in our professional lives, consider the people who support your personal and professional life. Take a moment and think about the following questions:

- Who has a career trajectory that you would like to emulate?
- Whom do you go to for advice? What type of advice (work conflict, navigating tricky situations, tenure/promotion, interpersonal relationships, etc.)?
- Who provides accountability?
- Who are your cheerleaders?
- Who is going through similar challenges (could be similar work challenges or life challenges such as caregiving responsibilities)?
- Who in your field do you admire for qualities that they demonstrate? (It could be their leadership, the way they intertwine a professional life with parenthood, the role they play in a professional organization.)
  - What are those qualities?
  - What would you like to know about how they do it?

Add the names of these individuals to the mentor map provided in appendix 30A.<sup>7</sup>

After you have mapped your mentoring network, reflect on those career areas or mentor roles where you feel you have a strong support network. Then identify areas that need additional support. Where might you find those supports? Do not worry about filling all of your areas right away. Consider which strategies or mentors have served and supported you in the past, which will continue to grow with you, and areas where you would like additional support or guidance. Those who have acted as mentors so far in your career may still be relevant, but you may need their guidance in a new area. Using your map, you will identify areas of career growth and development that will act as a starting point for discussing your career trajectory with others. This allows for conversations to occur with existing or potential mentors about the support you need.

Taking time to map your network can illuminate the supports in place that are instrumental to your success. It can also highlight gaps in your individual network and/or ways your current work environment is not supporting your success. Being aware of these gaps is the first step. Next, you need to think about what you can do to address these gaps. Is there a person who might be able to fill an area of needed mentoring—someone, for example, whom you can ask to be your accountability buddy to check in on research progress or project status? Or is there a person you could invite to an informal chat to talk about a sticky work-related problem? What is available through your professional organizations or societies? Often, mapping our networks illuminates larger structural issues. These maps can help us identify those structural problems and explore ways to mitigate them. This map might also help you recognize when it is beyond your individual ability to make lasting change. Then you can ask a series of questions, such as: Can my network help me make that change? Do I need to build up this part of my network to make this change? Or is this needed change one that will require a number of networks coming together? By shifting to thinking of mentoring as a network or constellation, you recognize the diverse supports necessary for professional success.

## Career and Professional Goals: Planning and Reflection

Developing a robust mentoring map and an expansive mentor network are good starts, but in order for these mentoring tools to work for you, a valuable next step is to reflect on your career and professional goals. Identifying your professional goals can be beneficial for a number of reasons. Articulating your goals prepares you to take advantage of opportunities when they arise, especially if they are unexpected. Goals can help you determine your path rather than simply floating along at the mercy of circumstance. Additionally, career planning will help you identify the materials, actions, support, and structure needed to help you prepare for and reach your goals.

The challenge of creating a career plan can sometimes be intimidating, so it can often be useful to engage in a structured thought exercise. We invite you to think about the following three prompts and enter your responses to each in the Map Your Career/Professional Goals worksheet in appendix 30B.

First, think through “In my career, I wish I were able to...” This prompt helps us identify and reflect on where our career currently is, where we’d like it to be,

and where we have professional gaps. There can be more than one response to this prompt, encompassing numerous aspects. Examples from colleagues completing this exercise include the following:

- Balance meetings and workload in a sustainable way.
- Get supervision experience.
- Be more confident saying “no.”
- Have more control over the responsibilities I am assigned and my own professional development.
- Move to a larger institution.
- Improve accessibility.
- Retire.

These examples clearly span a wide diversity of career activities, depths, time commitments, and other characteristics. Some goals are about oneself, some are about one’s context, and some are about opportunities. Take a moment to identify three of your professional or career goals.

Second, ask yourself, “If I could change one thing about my career path, it would be...” This prompt is designed to inspire reflection about what might be holding us back from accomplishing our career goals or the ways in which our career is diverging from where we hoped or intended it to go. Examples from colleagues completing this exercise include these:

- Be more assertive/confident.
- Be more honest when I am overwhelmed.
- Avoid allowing myself to become isolated at my institution.
- Avoid getting “tracked” in my career by the first position out of school.
- Give more energy to my non-work life.

These answers again show a wide variety of types of responses. Take a moment to ask yourself what you would change about your career path if you could.

Third, describe “The thing that has benefited me most in my career...” This prompt is to help identify the positive and helpful things that have moved us toward meeting our goals. These might be individual people, chance opportunities, personal characteristics, or more. Examples from colleagues completing this exercise include

- attending a year-long leadership program at my institution;
- participating in study abroad;
- co-teaching with liaison discipline faculty;
- being willing to change and adapt;
- asking for help;
- developing the willingness to accept constructive feedback;
- having supportive colleagues/mentors; and

- meeting others in the field who can vouch for me when I'm changing jobs.

Take a moment to reflect on your career trajectory so far and identify what has benefited you the most. Were those benefits that you sought or cultivated? Chance opportunities?

Having considered your professional aspirations, what you wish you could change, and what has helped you, think about your career and professional goals. What is a big or long-term career goal? What is a short-term goal? Think of several potential career goals and select one goal to focus on. The next section will walk through steps to help you identify and articulate your roadblocks and your opportunities to reach or strive toward your goal. As you focus on your goal, compare it with your mentoring map. Which of the mentors you have identified might be able to help you move toward this goal? Remember to consider your goals as having more than one aspect. Is there a mentor who can help you with a particular element of this goal that might make it more possible? Think about what you have already done to work to achieve this goal. Next, we will reflect on identifying and overcoming the potential barriers.

## Navigating the Barriers

As you have already engaged in the exercises of mentor mapping and identifying mid-career goals, you may have had a voice in your mind whispering, “This is never going to work because...” Identifying and overcoming, or perhaps circumventing, barriers is a significant step toward career planning. It is as important as building your mentor network and identifying your career goals. In our final activity, you will identify and categorize the barriers and roadblocks that you face and consider your opportunities for coping with them productively. While roadblocks to career goals are specific to individuals, they can often be grouped into categories that might each call for a different coping strategy. We group them into the following categories of barriers: structural, personal, experience, educational, or connections. As we explore each barrier, make notes on appendix 30C, Roadblocks and Potential Solutions, about how these barriers might apply to you.

### *Structural Barriers*

Structural barriers include circumstances you encounter in your organization that present obstacles to reaching your goals. The category of structural barriers would include:

- Pervasive bias
  - “Women never get promoted here.”
  - “People of color are held to higher standards here.”
- Process
  - “Opportunities are only handed out to the director’s favorites.”
  - “It’s frowned upon to take a sabbatical.”
- Personnel
  - “My only choice is to just wait for \_\_\_\_\_ to retire.”
  - “I could get so much more done if \_\_\_\_\_ would contribute even a little bit.”

Structural barriers, as insurmountable as they feel, may have solutions that hide down unexpected avenues. Instead of biding your time waiting for a senior librarian to retire so you can adopt the responsibilities they hold, there may be ways to change your focus or direction, collaborate with the senior librarian to work on shared goals, or partner with other professional groups who are engaged in similar work. Thinking flexibly about circuitous paths to reach your goals might bring these options into focus. Perhaps an avenue may be to build up a mentoring culture (starting a structured group mentoring program, for example), establish a writing support group, or otherwise foster the environment you want or need to bolster your own success.<sup>8</sup> If you are part of an organization with shared governance, perhaps you could employ the governance system to build structural changes to benefit the whole group.

Instead of waiting for the circumstances around you to change, find allies you can work with to identify small or large ways to create change. Even small changes can have a pervasive effect on the system as a whole over time, so even if you can’t change everything, changing one thing might be worth the effort. Look to your mentoring network to seek advice and support for creating change.

### *Personal Barriers*

Personal barriers include your own traits or circumstances that make it harder for you to meet your professional goals. A common example is caregiving. It might feel insurmountably difficult to pursue professional goals while you are also the primary caregiver for one or more children or dependent or ill adults. In addition to caregiving, there are numerous other personal commitments that might compete with professional aspirations: perhaps you are a triathlete who needs considerable time for ongoing training, you prioritize travel, you love a time-intensive hobby, or you face a chronic illness. These responsibilities, attachments, and commitments can often be good for your relationships as well as

your physical and mental health, and in many cases, working very long hours is detrimental to one's overall satisfaction.<sup>9</sup> So in addressing these personal barriers, it becomes important to consider how to structure one's professional goals to align with one's personal priorities and realistic options. If a professional goal is promotion that requires publication, it can be challenging to carve out time to devote to research and writing. Personal circumstances, on the other hand, might make it feel impossible to write after work, even if that is the norm at your workplace. It might be possible to identify structured ways to enable writing at work. Thinking about your schedule on a weekly instead of daily scale might be valuable in identifying times when work priorities can have your attention that are not in conflict with personal priorities.<sup>10</sup> Thinking of your professional goals as small steps instead of large ones might also make them feel infinitely more attainable—for example, setting a goal of outlining a chapter by the end of the week instead of thinking of the goal as “get promoted.” Mentors can be extremely valuable resources in helping you maintain your commitments and set healthy boundaries to achieve both your personal and professional goals. If your tendency is to subsume your personal balance in service to your professional interests, your accountability mentor might help you pace yourself. If your habit instead is to allow the overwhelming nature of personal demands to block out your perception of professional possibility, your cheerleader mentor might help you avoid the hopelessness and its attendant: giving up on your goals. If your personal barrier is the belief that personal and professional success are mutually exclusive, consider the possibility that you might be able to set a new norm: you can be the person who slowly but steadily pursues your goals without sacrificing the rest of your life to do it.

### *Educational Barriers*

Educational barriers center on matching your educational development with your long-term career goals. For some, this will be in the form of attaining additional graduate degrees. If a graduate degree is truly barring the door for your professional aspirations, discuss with one of your mentors what it would take to pursue the degree, even if the progress would be slow. But for many, the educational attainment that opens professional opportunities is smaller and easier to acquire and might come in the form of short courses, workshops, online classes, or certifications. Online and in-person certifications, institutes, and workshops are available in many of the sub-specialties in libraries, including cataloging, instruction, copyright, project management, and a wide variety of others. If there is a program that aligns with your areas of interest, that might be



the right educational approach to grow in your intended direction. This can be especially true for management and supervision, which tends to be a specialty in which it is hard to gain experience. Professional development related to leadership and supervision can demonstrate that you are both interested in and prepared for growth opportunities. If leadership is part of your professional goals, consider how flexible you can be in gaining experience. Supervision of students, volunteers, interns, and committees (both in your organization and through professional associations) might be relevant and help set you up for higher-level supervision. Extending interest in supervision that is temporary or outside of your subfield expertise might be possible for you to demonstrate your ability. Attaining the kind of professional development that might help you before it's needed doesn't necessarily have to be expensive. Investigating online or on-site training resources developed or made available by your institution might be a good first step. Conferring with one or more of your mentors about opportunities they know about or have used themselves might provide some good options as well.

### *Barriers of Experience*

Barriers of experience are often linked to, but still distinct from, barriers of education. These are the oft-maligned "How can I get experience if no one will give me a job without experience" circumstances and might be reflected in aspects of your position or your professional goals rather than your entire professional position. These barriers of lack of experience might be related to leadership and management or might be more specific, such as experience with teaching, project management, cataloging, or another targeted skill. As with education, opening your mind to a flexible vision of how to acquire experience might help nudge open an otherwise closed door. Informal or volunteer experience might be enough to cross the bar of "experience," and educational efforts as described above might demonstrate commitment in a way that will open the door to opportunity. Additionally, it might be important to communicate your interests to those with the power to offer you those opportunities. It is frequently true that members of leadership make unconscious assumptions about the aspirations of their employees, and even if they are less influenced by unconscious bias, they might still assume that you are not interested in certain kinds of professional opportunities unless you explicitly share your interest. Communicating to others your interest in specific kinds of professional growth will ensure that they have you in mind as a potential option when those opportunities arise. Do not simply assume that everyone knows your goals. Be sure to be explicit and think

of these conversations as opportunities to not only express interest but to bring that person into your network as someone who can help you reach your goals.

### *Barriers of Connections*

Barriers of connections are those in the form of “who you know” obstacles that are supposed to be overcome by the frequently mentioned but rarely defined “networking.” Barriers of connections might take the shape of “\_\_\_\_\_ doesn’t know I exist, so they definitely can’t admire my work” or “My role is unique in this organization, so there is literally no one else with whom I can connect about my responsibilities.” Even people who see themselves as mentors for others tend to gravitate toward mentoring others who look like them, remind them of themselves, or have a similar background. In most fields, white men are generally more likely to receive the mentoring they need than women or people of color. In the library science profession, performed overwhelmingly by white women, connections are frequently more challenging for our black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) colleagues.<sup>11</sup>

These connections can be overcome by proactively establishing deliberate ties instead of waiting for them to arise by chance. Thinking of your mentor map, you can build these ties in an intentional way to establish a stronger network in identified areas where you think stronger connections would help you. If your role is unique in your organization, it is likely that your role also exists in other organizations. Identifying who does your work at a different organization and then reaching out to those people directly and proposing occasional opportunities to share strategies might build your connections in your area of expertise. Visibility to others in your own organization might be possible through service appointments or interest groups, or if not, through a direct invitation from you for a coffee meeting in which you can tell that person more about yourself and ask more about them. Connections through professional organizations might be built through committee assignments or attending virtual or in-person events. For introverts, these suggestions may feel especially daunting. The fear of awkward interactions with strangers can be mitigated by planning, such as making lists of potential questions, discussion topics, or openers for group discussions. In cases where you know a particular individual who has a robust professional network, you might explicitly ask them to connect you with other professionals. Many professional organizations offer structured mentoring programs, which can also be an effective way to build your connections. Consider, as well, that you might serve as a mentor in some of these programs, which often struggle to find people to serve in the role of mentor, especially in

areas where you have a bit more experience and might be able to be a part of someone else's mentor network. Mentors also derive benefits from their mentoring, so this commitment of time would likely also benefit you.<sup>12</sup>

Underlying your opportunities to overcome all of these structural, personal, and educational barriers, as well as barriers of experience and connection, is the importance of broadening your definition of progress toward your goals and initiative in overcoming them. Openness to opportunities that are not directly in your professional goals but that might be reached through alternative paths might create entirely new avenues for professional fulfillment. Asking yourself specific questions about the people who might be positioned to help you take advantage of opportunities or overcome barriers and then deliberately cultivating a mentoring relationship with those individuals might result in having champions for you or your cause even if you are not in the room. Identifying the structural barriers that are within your scope of influence might give you a sense of empowerment to propose structural change via faculty governance or supervisory chains that would help you and others like you. Finally, your mentors can help you determine realistically if one of your goals needs to be broken into smaller parts, if it might not be attainable at this point in your career, or might be beyond your capacity.

## Conclusion

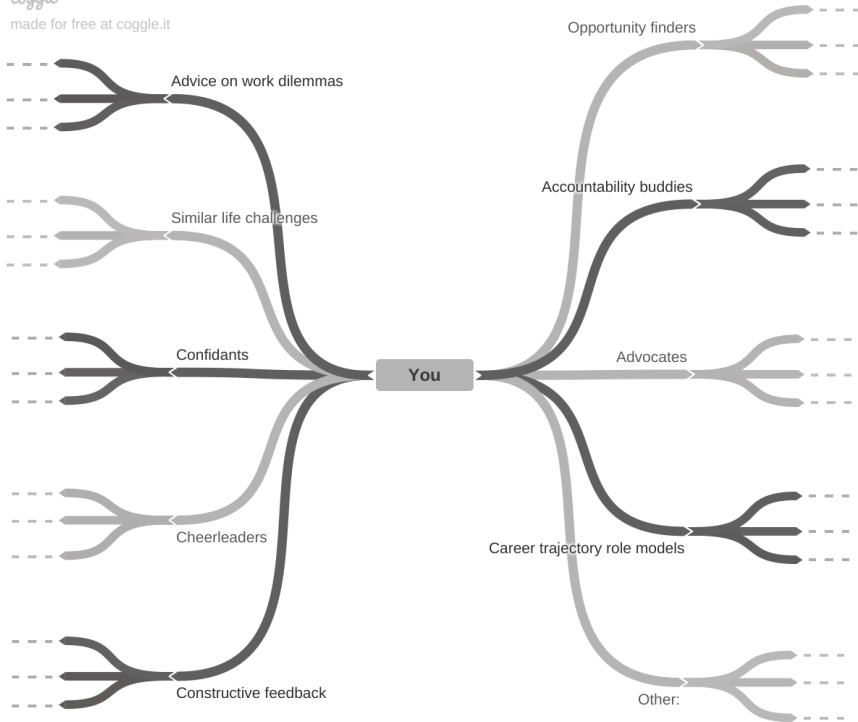
The professional needs of mid-career librarians frequently require identifying and overcoming nuanced, persistent, or structural barriers. Roadblocks to development or advancement are not always easy to anticipate; issues of race, age, and gender play into career growth expectations and institutional support in new ways for mid-career professionals. Libraries can implement or uphold structural conditions that promote or discourage career growth and advancement for mid-career librarians. Guided self-reflection, as provided in this chapter, may assist mid-career librarians in improving their career trajectories and in seeking appropriate mentors. Effective mid-career development requires moving away from a paternalistic, patriarchal vision of mentoring and toward a vision of individuals engaging with new and challenging responsibilities while interrogating and influencing broader professional contexts.

## Appendix 30A

# Map Your Mentoring Network

*coggle*

made for free at [coggle.it](http://coggle.it)



### *Definitions*

- Advice on work dilemmas: who has a great deal of knowledge and can help you disentangle a complex situation
- Similar life challenges: Someone who knows what you're going through outside of work, and how to deal with conflicts between the two
- Confidants: Someone who can hear you vent & keep it confidential
- Cheerleaders: Someone who encourages you to keep going
- Constructive feedback: Someone who will tell you honestly how you can improve
- Opportunity Finders: Someone who finds opportunities for you and brings them to your attention

- Accountability buddies: Someone who will ask you if you are meeting your goals, e.g. “what about that deadline?” or “how is that chapter coming?”
- Advocates: Someone who speaks up on your behalf
- Career trajectory role models: Someone who currently is where you want to go professionally

For a printable version of Appendix 30A see [https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/book\\_chapters/08612p497](https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/book_chapters/08612p497)

## Appendix 30B

# Map Your Career/Professional Goals

- In my career, I wish I were able to...
- If I could change one thing about my career path it would be...
- The thing that has benefited me most in my career...
- What is a big career goal? What is a short-term goal?

One Goal to Focus On:

For a printable version of Appendix 30B see [https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/book\\_chapters/08612p497](https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/book_chapters/08612p497)

## Appendix 30C

# Roadblocks and Potential Solutions

*Consider your roadblocks*

Structural	Experience	Experience	Personal	Connection Educational

*Identify potential solutions*

Structural	Experience	Experience	Personal	Connection Educational

For a printable version of Appendix 30C, see [https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/book\\_chapters/08612p497](https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/book_chapters/08612p497)

## ENDNOTES

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6. I. J. Hetty van Emmerik, "The More You Can Get the Better: Mentoring Constellations and Intrinsic Career Success," *Career Development International* 9, no. 6/7 (2004): 578–94. career satisfaction and intrinsic job satisfaction
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