

Don't Go it Alone:

The Restorative Power of Peer Relationships in Mid-career Librarianship

Jamie L. Emery, Rebecca C. Hyde, Amanda B. Albert, and Sarah E. Fancher

Introduction

Librarian career trajectories are varied and unique, but the cultivation of nurturing peer relationships among library professionals can prove essential on the road to professional and personal fulfillment. Far from a work distraction, the intentional building and maintaining of personal relationships can be truly professional acts. In this chapter, we discuss the ways in which our relationships with peer librarians have helped us identify and unlock opportunities, grow intellectually, prevent boredom and mid-career stagnation, and resist the diminishing effects of burnout. Through the informal communities of practice we have forged for ourselves, we have been introduced to new ideas and inspired to take on challenges and experiment professionally. We have found trusted sounding boards and collaborators and, at times, support for making tough decisions about career opportunities to pursue (or not). We have learned that accepting the support of others makes us stronger and more resilient than we are alone and that genuine care for each other as whole persons contributes to both professional and personal growth.

In this chapter, we examine our experiences with professional peer relationships through the lens of feminist theory. We will also share the benefits of peer relationships for mid-career librarians and acknowledge the ways in which being white, middle-class, heterosexual, and cisgender women (the majority identity in librarianship)¹ has allowed us to circumvent some challenges to peer relationship-building experienced by our colleagues with marginalized identities, especially our Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) colleagues.² These are areas in which we continue to learn, make mistakes, and challenge ourselves to do better. Finally, we offer practical suggestions for mid-career librarians who wish to cultivate developmental peer relationships.

Our Peer Relationship

Over time and with intentionality, our peer group of (now) mid-career librarians has grown into an informal community of practice, with a shared identity, expertise, and craft.³ Our relationship began with our time as research and instruction librarians at Saint Louis University, where all four of us worked together for ten months and where Jamie and Rebecca continue to be colleagues after more than ten years. During this period, we discovered that we collaborate well, spark motivation in each other, and inspire each other's best work. While we did not all continue to be employed by the same institution long term, our common experience gave us a reference point from which to understand and grow in relationship with each other.

All four of us are married mothers of small children who have achieved traditional markers of success in our careers (the rank of full professor, library directorship, and program directorship). Various combinations of us have co-authored journal articles, book chapters, and papers, co-presented at conferences, and served together on the governing board of a professional organization. We have supported each other professionally, serving as accountability partners and intellectual doulas for research and writing projects that risked running out of steam without patient and persistent extrinsic encouragement.⁴ We have engaged with intellectual issues and pushed each other to think critically, question our assumptions, and continually learn and grow. We have affirmed each other in times of doubt and work frustration and gently corrected each other when necessary.

We have also supported each other in personal and emotional ways, planning each other's birthday parties and baby showers, caring for each other in times of injury and upheaval, and regularly engaging in in-person (when possible) and virtual meetups in which we share everything from work and family dilemmas to cocktail recipes and guilty-pleasure TV recommendations. With an equal balance of power, our peer group is feminist in nature and facilitates the integration of our intellectual and emotional lives in a space in which both our paid and unpaid work are valued.⁵

The acts of connection and ethics of care in our peer relationship have been restorative practices. Ethics of care were conceptualized in recent decades by second-wave feminist theorists such as Gilligan, Held, and Noddings.⁶ They imagine a model of moral reasoning based on care for others (as contrasted with ethics of justice), arguing that it fits the moral lives of women. Though there has been extensive multidisciplinary debate in the

succeeding decades about the theory and its claims of feminine virtue, ethics of care as a philosophy affirms our desire and tendency to nurture each other.

Our peer relationship also reflects feminist Relational-Cultural Theory. Originating in the late 1970s by counselors Miller, Stiver, Jordan, and Surrey, Relational-Cultural Theory posits that people grow through and toward relationships throughout their lives.⁷ Acknowledging our basic interconnectedness and the inevitability of needing one another, it “gives us a model for creating meaningful, egalitarian, feminist connection in our work, and fostering it in others.”⁸ Unfortunately, we, and others situated in the academy where the culture emphasizes individual accomplishment, are expected to engage in ways that do not fully serve us and within hierarchical power structures that can leave us feeling disconnected. This is especially true for individuals who are, as feminist scholar and activist bell hooks frames, forced into the margins through racism, sexism, classism, and other isms.⁹ By taking a relational approach through connection with colleagues at a peer level, we are subverting the academy’s individualistic view of the self apart from others and fostering meaningful connections. Our growth-fostering relationships may not be totally symmetrical but do involve a mutual investment in the well-being of each other and the relationship as well as a desire to participate in the growth of others.

In practice, our feminist ethos is reflected in the way we choose to write and present scholarship in collaboration with others. We aim to be egalitarian in assigning first authorship, variously taking turns or drawing names to determine authorship order. We strive to share rather than hoard opportunities and to seek ways to encourage and empower each other. We aim to encourage junior faculty by being open about our own experiences, challenges, and lessons learned. We endeavor to be generous with our time, advice, and resources and to support each other and other women in going up for promotion or pursuing other goals. We believe that this feminist ethos is not only available or valuable to those who identify as women, rather it provides an alternate ideological approach to professional relationships for all and may be particularly beneficial for those with any marginalized identity.

Benefits of Peer Relationships

Peer relationships, especially those in which participants have a mutual desire to help each other, can provide stability amid turmoil and help produce the vision, clarity, understanding, and agility required for coping effectively with change, navigating upheaval, and continuing to learn.¹⁰ Indeed, “close peer relationships are especially meaningful to people in later career stages, because they provide a sense of continuity and connection while creating a protected forum for discussing significant work and life transitions.”¹¹ For BIPOC librarians, peer relationships have additional tangible benefits, such as better onboarding experiences into new jobs and/or the profession and increased professional development, promotions, and collaborative research experiences. Also valuable is the exchange of ideas and experiences of people with varying perspectives, the freedom to bring their authentic selves to work, emotional support and camaraderie, and the disruption of traditional academic values such as neutrality, authority, and competitiveness.¹² Although the benefits of developmental

peer relationships are myriad, we have identified the following as major contributors to the professional growth, satisfaction, and well-being of mid-career librarians.

Peer Mentorship

While librarianship typically focuses on the mentoring of new librarians via formal or informal hierarchical mentorship channels in which junior and senior librarians are paired, mentorship also benefits experienced librarians.¹³ These benefits are derived from the two main elements of mentoring: instrumental support such as career advice, promotion guidance, joint brainstorming, and idea sharing, and psychosocial support, such as affirmation, counseling, and friendship.¹⁴ The significance of psychosocial support for mid-career librarians is notable as they are frequently challenged with caring for children and/or aging parents while simultaneously assuming extra responsibilities at work. Academic librarians Holder and Lannon even describe the “challenge of maintaining a work-life balance” as “the defining characteristic of librarians in this phase.”¹⁵ However, not every mentoring relationship or mentor is equipped to provide psychosocial support; “intimacy and a deeper relationship” are required.¹⁶

In 1985, organizational behavior scholars Kram and Isabella argued that peer relationships can meet both the psychosocial and instrumental needs of those in mid-career and described these relationships as developmental, based on mutuality, enduring, and more accessible than traditional mentoring relationships.¹⁷ The peer relationships Kram and Isabella described were essentially peer mentorships, though not labeled as such in their influential work. Acknowledged to be more effective than traditional mentoring relationships for those in mid-career,¹⁸ bi-directional, non-hierarchical peer mentorship relationships remove the fundamental power dynamic of traditional “men”toring¹⁹ and can serve as an act of resistance and resilience to systems and structures faced by women and minoritized identities in libraries and academia more generally.²⁰

While peer mentorships can be formal in nature, informal mentorships like ours often develop out of existing peer relationships²¹ and have been found to be more effective and enduring than formal ones.²² Like many mid-career librarians, we have developed and maintained networks of peer librarians throughout our careers that provide fora for discussion and reflection;²³ however, one cannot assume this is true for *all* mid-career librarians. Our BIPOC colleagues may face additional challenges in finding suitable mentors and peers—or otherwise. Many authors have noted that normative whiteness in librarianship is hostile and presents barriers to entry into the profession, impacts retention, decreases opportunities for mentorship, and prohibits access to wealth and the availability of free time to pursue personal and professional interests.²⁴ As academic librarians Quiñonez, Nataraj, and Olivás summarized, “Our small numbers in the academy as a whole, but especially in academic libraries, contribute to a lack of opportunities to mentor and be mentored by folks who share an understanding of life as a marginalized person. If we are mentored at all, we are often given advice that runs counter to our cultural values or are told that we have to cover or hide aspects of ourselves that don’t conform to what a scholar or professional looks like. No mentorship in research and teaching means that our pedagogies, teaching identities, and research methodologies go unsupported.”²⁵

In our peer relationship, we have found each other to be important sounding boards in discussions and decisions large and small related to professional opportunities and career paths. These include decisions about whether and when to serve on particular committees, pursue specific scholarship opportunities, and seek job or career changes. For example, Jamie sought advice from our group about whether she should apply for an open chair position within her department while working from home (at times without childcare) during the COVID-19 pandemic—a decision she felt conflicted about. Amanda, Sarah, and Rebecca assured her of her capability, discussed potential positive and negative impacts this position could have on her life (professional and personal), and ultimately supported her decision to not apply and instead to prioritize her personal happiness and well-being over potential career advancement at this time.

In 2017, Amanda moved on first to another institution, then to a role in instructional design outside of libraries. She maintained personal and professional working relationships with Jamie, Rebecca, and Sarah during both of these transitions. Presenting and writing with them helped her maintain personal relationships while building upon professional interests that eventually led to a strategic career change. Their guidance and mentorship had and continues to have a generative effect, supporting Amanda to expand her critical thinking around issues in librarianship, teaching, and higher education.

Personal and Professional Empowerment of Self and Others

The communitarian approach in psychology, developed by psychologists Johnson et al., emphasizes the development of a community of mutually beneficial professional relationships with a focus on the whole person.²⁶ These relationships improve not only one's professional competence and sense of identity but also resilience and quality of life and should be part of one's self-care strategy.²⁷ They help create a sense of professional and personal responsibility for the success of the community rather than a singular focus on oneself.²⁸

While this idea is less well-developed in the library literature, there are examples of developmental peer relationships designed to enhance productivity and reach professional goals while also recognizing each other as *whole* people with multifaceted lives and needs. Practitioner researchers Fancher and Emery describe their accountability partnership as motivating, emotionally and professionally supportive, and the key to their writing productivity.²⁹ Ferguson and Marvin discuss a similar support model and insist that one does not need an existing friendship to form such a partnership but simply “mutual respect and concern” and a willingness to meet regularly and support each other in meeting professional goals.³⁰ Quiñonez, Nataraj, and Olivas describe the power of peer relationships with other WOC in libraries as one that fosters true authenticity,³¹ as opposed to deauthentication, which Kendrick describes as the “cognitive process that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (PoC) traverse to prepare for or navigate predominantly White workplace environments, resulting in decisions that hide or reduce aspects of [their identities] ... to avoid macro- or microaggressions, shaming, incivility, punishment or retaliation.”³²

Intentional professional relationships and communities focused on professional support and empowerment may evolve into more personal relationships over time that allow for the support of colleagues as whole people. Sarah found this to be true when she left our mutual employer in 2016 to take a position as library director at a community college in another part of the state. This move was both socially isolating, as it took time to build connections in a new place, and professionally challenging, as it took considerable energy to grow into an effective leader. Fortunately, maintaining a connection with Jamie, Rebecca, and Amanda served as an emotional ballast during this transition and a boon to continued professional productivity and growth. Sarah found it invaluable to be able to honestly discuss her difficulties and frustrations with knowledgeable and sympathetic friends who encouraged her to persist in doing hard things.

Rebecca is grateful for the way our peer relationship has allowed her to participate more fully in the scholarly conversation. While presenting was something she'd long felt comfortable with, the focus necessary to move from idea to finished publication had proved difficult. Being part of a community of practice in which writing projects are regularly discussed and encouraged and having willing coauthors created an environment that made writing easier and finished products more robust. The encouragement of Jamie, Sarah, and Amanda recently helped sustain her first solo writing project, which required multiple rewrites while working from home with no outside childcare. It is hard to imagine similar success without compassionate peers who understood both the personal and professional struggles during such a project.

Coping with Burnout

Research has shown that a culture of “companionate love”—that is, one in which workers feel and express affection, caring, and compassion for each other—can contribute to protection against burnout, improved job performance and collaboration, and increased job satisfaction.³³ Social connection even has physiological impacts, regulating heart rates and respiration, influencing immune responses, modulating stress responses, and altering emotional activation in our brains.³⁴ Psychologist Surrey describes the internalized and sustained process of empowerment in a peer group as one that can help individuals in that group increase “energy, power or ‘zest’ and a sense of effectiveness based on their ability to contribute to everyone’s greater awareness and understanding.”³⁵

While no industry is immune to occupational burnout, librarianship is too often characterized by under-compensation, comparatively low prestige within the academic enterprise, continuous job creep, and expectations of performative emotional labor³⁶—all conditions ripe for experiences of burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a decreased sense of accomplishment or professional efficacy).³⁷ Though these pressures may affect us all, they are often felt exponentially by our BIPOC colleagues who experience microaggressions, tokenism, direct or implied challenges to their expertise and authority,³⁸ and the pressure to perform surface and deep acting in regard to their actual emotions.³⁹

We agree with academic librarian Tewell who, in a 2021 conference presentation, proclaimed that “calling it burnout focuses on worker feelings, calling it exploitation focuses on the system.”⁴⁰ Workplaces are systematically problematic, and individuals’

actions, coping strategies, and “self-care” do not effectively outweigh those structural issues. As noted by academic librarian Kendrick, those affected by burnout and low-morale experiences often engage in various coping strategies to reduce these harmful effects, but such individual actions “do not affect the offenders or the trajectory of workplace abuse.”⁴¹ Since we have minimal power as individuals to alter these dysfunctional and exploitative systems, we must do our best to cope with experiences of burnout. At the same time, we should remember to exercise our privilege to improve these systems where we can while being mindful of our emotional reserves at any given time.

We have come to think of burnout as a deep-rooted condition to be managed, much like a chronic illness rather than a temporary and reversible state. We realize burnout is not experienced or mitigated in the same way for everyone and that there is not a single answer to avoid or solve it, even for an individual. However, we believe strong peer relationships and communities help, if nothing else by guarding against feelings of isolation.

Burnout at mid-career is so common as to almost be expected and can be even worse when stressors in your daily life mean your reserves of emotional energy are already reduced. Having close peer relationships with colleagues dealing with similar struggles outside of the workplace is especially important in these instances. As noted by clinical psychologist Johnson and colleagues, “Successful relational mentoring may bolster career success but it is as likely to stimulate a stronger sense of professional identity, enhanced competencies, resilience in the face of personal or medical challenges, or more effective work-family balance.”⁴²

All four of us became new mothers within a six-year period, which added a layer to our overlapping identities. Rebecca found support and discussions around this transition particularly useful when, as a new mother, she suddenly needed to spend more emotional and mental energy at home, rendering the amount of emotional labor she normally invested at work unsustainable. Culture- and connection-building, which had felt fundamental to her work persona and a relatively easy way to make incremental improvements to the workplace climate, now felt overwhelming. Pulling back, even for the purpose of self-preservation, was difficult; her decision to do so was reinforced by our group’s reminders about the importance of self-care.

Amanda’s experience of our group as generative and empowering was acutely felt during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, she may not have experienced “increased energy” much of the time, but regular Friday afternoon meetings helped sustain her energy for the many months spent at home under the same daily routine. Moving through the pandemic toward a less restrictive though still stressful state of being, relationships with Jamie, Rebecca, and Sarah continue to contribute to a greater sense of professional growth and a vehicle for personal sustainability.

Peer Relationship Network

In this chapter, we highlight our relationship with each other, but we each have separate peer relationships that provide support in professional and personal realms and represent all levels of closeness, illustrated in figure 18.1. These relationships float between levels

over time, either toward or away from the inner core. All tend to start with collegial acquaintances and potentially grow stronger over time. In a library setting, one might find the following as a part of one's constellation or mosaic of peers: colleagues (including paraprofessionals) at one's home institution, colleagues at other institutions and in professional organizations, fellow graduates from one's degree-granting institution, and, in academic settings, those such as teaching faculty, educational developers, administrators, and other staff persons.

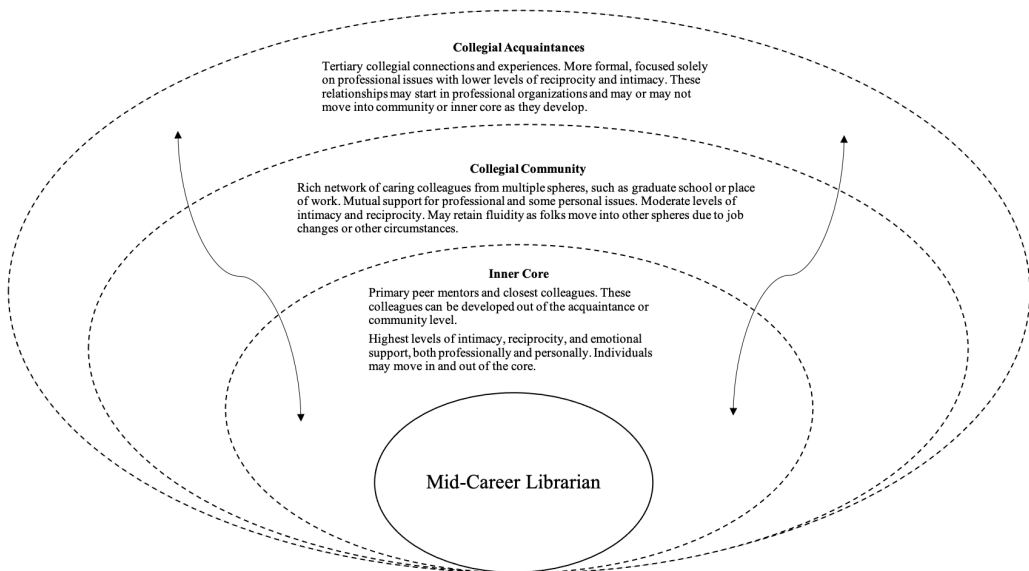


Figure 18.1

Example mid-career relationship constellation, adapted from Johnson et al., "The Competence Constellation Model," 349.

As mid-career librarians, we have intentionally cultivated a network of relationships that bolster our careers and provide various types of support, including personal and professional development. Many studies can speak to our personal experiences, finding that women often cultivate various types of connections with multiple people rather than relying on hierarchical or individual 1-to-1 mentoring relationships.⁴³ As we have found in our relationship with one another, these "high quality collegial network[s] or constellations[s] ... bolster resilience and competence in the face of personal and professional challenges."⁴⁴

As we cultivate our networks, we should evaluate our inner core and collegial community circles to determine who we include and don't include in our groups. When groups are imbalanced in membership (who is in and who is out), this can lead to inequitable outcomes, with those in the outgroup losing access to benefits.⁴⁵ We should build or rebuild our inner core by cultivating mutually beneficial peer relationships with groups of diverse colleagues. When white people, in particular, recalibrate our networks to be more inclusive and equitable, we must be willing to examine our own positionalities,

have difficult conversations, be held accountable, and stay engaged when being called in/out. Ultimately, we should listen to and affirm BIPOC colleagues in our relationships, regardless of the inner or outer circles in which they reside.

Hathcock and Sendaula offer the strategy of “micro-affirmations [or] small verbal and behavioral acts of encouragement, support, and confidence most often done publicly, to show that a marginalized colleague is a valued and integral part of the team.”⁴⁶ Another way for white librarians to foster critical relationships in collegial networks is to become accountability partners in order to uphold our anti-racist and anti-bias values. Holding each other accountable to racism and bias, both explicit and unintentional yet still harmful, is a way for us to practice calling in and calling out each other as well as preparing for the ways in which we responsibly respond and repair when being called out/in.⁴⁷

Reflection on Privilege and Responsibility

As we have contemplated our specific peer relationship and its feminist underpinnings, we have also reflected on the privilege we hold and how we have been systemically enabled to build and sustain relationships. We acknowledge that the peer networks we have cultivated mostly reflect the homogenous nature of the profession—overwhelmingly white women, many of whom are mothers with similar life trajectories. These identities undoubtedly grant us advantages in building our communities of practice, including having family and financial circumstances that grant us the ability to travel to and gain funding for conferences to extend our in-person network of colleagues and find peers in comparable roles with similar life experiences.

Recognizing that it is not enough to reflect on the advantages our privilege affords us, as Freire notes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, we can take steps to transform structures as they currently exist to something that we aspire to.⁴⁸ White librarians can take steps toward dismantling whiteness in librarianship by building mutually beneficial inclusive networks and supporting others in building theirs. So, what does it mean for us to build equitable and inclusive peer networks and relationships that focus on reducing harm while centering BIPOC? We admit that we fall short and are not experts; rather, we are deeply grappling with the ways in which we can do better. Below we have outlined suggestions from BIPOC authors that we have found particularly instructive for white librarians and how we are personally engaged in this work.

In her book, *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor*, author and activist Saad uses prompts for reflection and suggests ways to take action without enacting white saviorism, engaging in relational tokenism, or participating in performative allyship. She calls on white women to educate themselves, show up for BIPOC, financially support BIPOC, uplift and center BIPOC, and uphold commitments to living with integrity in anti-racist values.⁴⁹ Educating ourselves is one place to start. For example, we can read about BIPOC experiences in libraries as well as how whiteness impacts all librarians through resources such as *Disrupting Whiteness in Librarians and Librarianship: A Reading List*.⁵⁰ We must also be mindful that

reading alone does not often go far enough to dismantle racism and white supremacy in our professional cultures and individual/peer relationships. We must acknowledge our own white supremacy,⁵¹ counter the tendency to intellectualize racism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, monosexism, and cissexism/genderism,⁵² and become mindful and present about the lived experiences of our BIPOC colleagues.⁵³ For example, we have called upon one another when subtle or overt racism, sexism, or ableism comes up in our workplaces to reflect on our responses and get ideas for how to push back with more effective, constructive language the next time it happens.

Academic librarian Williams asserts that mentoring and support systems are essential and that mid-career librarians who have not yet cultivated enriching peer relationships within the field must be supported in establishing them.⁵⁴ This is especially true for BIPOC librarians who may have to reach outside their home institutions to connect with peers who have similar life experiences. Saad and other Black authors posit the idea of offering reparations as a way of specifically supporting Black colleagues.⁵⁵ Interpersonal reparations can be a way of supporting BIPOC colleagues to foster their own peer mentoring relationships, separate from relationships with white colleagues.⁵⁶ White librarians can offer financial support via library organizations and institutions making it more possible for BIPOC colleagues to participate in conferences, meetings, and other spaces that feel supportive to them and their safety. For example, white librarians can advocate for the (re)allocation of institutional conference and travel funds so that BIPOC colleagues can participate more broadly in professional development. We can also address financial barriers by donating to scholarship funds or library organizations that provide safe and supportive spaces for BIPOC colleagues, such as the ALA Spectrum Scholarship Program and the We Here Patreon Community.⁵⁷

Suggestions for Cultivating Peer Relationships

We believe it is never too early (or too late) to begin cultivating a supportive peer relationship network. Based on our research and own experiences, we have constructed the following list of suggestions for librarians who seek to grow the kinds of professional peer relationships described in this chapter. They include concrete actions librarians can take to build mutually beneficial peer relationships across the library profession.

- Approach colleagues who share common professional goals and propose formal peer relationships. These may be easier to initiate than informal ones and could eventually lead to closer and increasingly personal relationships. Frameworks for librarians interested in creating and maintaining developmental peer relationships can be found in academic librarians Ferguson and Marvin's chapter on critical friendships and Fancher and Emery's chapter on accountability partnership.⁵⁸
- Seek out small professional groups that align with your interests; these might be local organizations or smaller round tables or interest groups within a larger national organization. Groups with fewer active members are easier to get involved with and more conducive to getting to know people. For example, librarians often

talk about American Library Association (ALA) conferences, and the organization itself, as being overwhelming and a place where it's easy to get lost, but Rebecca has found a home in the Government Documents Round Table that has allowed her to build close peer relationships across multiple institutions.

- Consider what you can do as an individual to facilitate affinity groups for marginalized communities, especially if you are in a position in a professional organization that involves planning developmental and social events for members.
- Follow interesting librarians on social media, especially those who work in your geographic area, and/or have similar expertise. This is a long game, but regularly “seeing” each other and interacting even in small ways can slowly build relationships over time. You are welcome to follow the authors of this chapter on Twitter: @fanchidon, @altair77, @amandabalbert, and @jamielemery.
- When you find peers who challenge and inspire you to become a better librarian, make a concerted effort to work with them. Collaborate on conference presentations, articles, chapters, papers, and book editing, or serve on professional committees together. These growth-fostering relationships can help you ward off mid-career stagnation and boredom and keep you engaged in the field.
- Recognize that relationships need “facetime” but that the deepening of bonds does not have to occur in person. One needs to create intentional time and space for relationships, but that space can be anywhere—physical or virtual.
- Note that not every relationship needs to be part of your inner core. Even casual peer relationships can help support one's career and identity within the profession. Creating networks of diverse colleagues, in both identity and expertise, can broaden perspectives and opportunities.

Conclusion

The work of relationship-building and maintenance is traditionally seen as gendered labor and therefore devalued in libraries (and elsewhere). These culture-building tasks tend to fall to mid-career librarians. When combined with vocational mythologies that insist on only intrinsic satisfaction for this work, we are oftentimes rendered invisible or ghostly.⁵⁹ Our peer relationships render us visible again when, relying on each other for support and affirmation, we share both positive and negative aspects of our work and home lives. Thus, building our relationship with each other was not the result of a need to build connections in our workplaces to “get things done.” Rather, this particular relationship evolved out of a need for socio-emotional support for both our professional and personal lives. Our institutions are not capable of providing us with the support we have identified as crucial to helping us develop professionally, empower ourselves and others, and cope with burnout. We have reclaimed the aforementioned gendered narrative as one that allows us to be seen and reminds us that “as the relationship grows, so grows the individual.”⁶⁰ Not everything worth doing needs to be in direct service of our institutions or our patrons. *We* are worth the investment of time and energy.

Notes

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