

Thriving as a Mid-Career Librarian: Identity, Advocacy, and Pathways

Edited by Brandon K. West and Elizabeth Galoozis. Chicago, IL: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2023. 358 pp. Softcover and EPUB. \$92.00, \$64.00. Softcover ISBN 978-0-8389-3941-3, EPUB ISBN 978-0-8389-3942-0.

Almost twenty years into my career as an archivist, and five years after attaining tenure, I've found myself grappling with questions about what I want for myself and how to make changes in my life and my work. When I feel stuck, I look for resources that offer a solution and reassure me that I'm not alone. When I came across *Thriving as a Mid-Career Librarian: Identity, Advocacy, and Pathways*, edited by Brandon K. West and Elizabeth Galoozis, I felt that the subtitle could easily be "I Know What You're Going Through." As I scanned *Thriving's* table of contents, with chapters such as "Self Determination at Mid-Career: Perils and Possibilities," "Considering a Change in Mid-Career," and "Fighting Post-tenure Fatigue: Reclaiming Your Time and Redefining Leadership," along with references to plateauing, boredom, burnout, bad management, and advocacy, I immediately felt validated and less alone. I also wanted to know how others had navigated their mid-career crises.

West and Galoozis are both department heads at academic libraries. More importantly for the purposes of this book, they are both mid-career librarians (more about the murkiness of the term "mid-career" later). Both found themselves asking questions that came from having achieved a certain level in their career and wondering "now what?" or recognizing a need to reprioritize and downshift—to pull back from commitments in order to "concentrate on a smaller sphere of influence" (p. vii). West and Galoozis identify the questions and concerns they heard in their conversations with mid-career peers. Although some considered a move into management, West and Galoozis more often noticed their peers wrestling with questions about how to grow even if they chose not to seek a managerial role, how to decide whether to stay where they were or move to another institution, and how to sustain themselves in difficult environments—"facing burnout, constant change, wage compression, or even boredom" (p. vii).

The answers to these questions serve as the basis for *Thriving's* structure. The book's twenty-six chapters, written by a diverse group of librarians, are divided into four sections: "Staying Engaged in Your Career"; "The Role of Identity in Shaping Mid-Career Librarianship"; "Being Your Own Advocate"; and "To Lead or Not to Lead." The authors delve into these topics from different perspectives, sharing experiences on everything from creating a "commons" for librarians to interact with each other (Chapter 1) to the decision to leave librarianship (Chapter 26). Half the

chapters are coauthored, which allows for a nice balance of multiple perspectives on the same issue and deeper dives into individual experiences. In chapter 26, which focuses on leaving academic librarianship, one of the authors is anonymous. I also noted how many of the authors sought to acknowledge where they had benefited from privileges—that being white, male, heterosexual, cisgender, or not disabled—had helped them advance in the profession. Other authors discussed how they experienced extra barriers as BIPOC, LBGTQIA+, or disabled librarians. These accounts of different experiences of entry into and navigation within the library profession help this resource speak to a wider audience.

The authors' varying viewpoints and experiences and the editors' openness to different topics, writing styles, and approaches are some of the book's greatest strengths. Some chapters are anecdotal and light on citations (Chapter 22, on choosing to stay in management, has none), while others are grounded in theory and citation heavy (such as Chapter 9, on a community cultural wealth model for recognizing strengths in lived experiences). I appreciated the editors' receptiveness to the idea that personal experience and theoretical approaches are equally valuable. The former made me reflect on experiences I could share that would help others, while the latter led me to note further reading I wanted to do.

This book is situated in the literature that examines the experience of library professionals, particularly reflecting on low morale. Kaetrena Davis Kendrick's writings on this topic and Fobazi Ettarh's work on vocational awe are cited repeatedly.¹ In sharing their experiences, the authors provide advice that can help a burned-out, mid-career librarian find their way, such as how to gain clarity on personal and professional values and goals. They also examine self-care practices that they find restorative, such as meditation. I appreciated and felt validated by the authors' vulnerability. Their self-revelations about being stuck, not knowing, serendipity, and chance-taking—of not necessarily having the end mapped out when embarking on a path—reassured me that finding your way is a bit messy.

Although I appreciated the openness to different experiences, I found the inconsistency around the definition of mid-career to be problematic. I was initially impressed to see it described as “an ill-defined career stretch” in Chapter 4, coauthored by Galoozis and Caro Pinto (p. 38). They discuss finding different definitions in the research literature and question whether mid-career can be defined in terms of time or if it is more about mindset. However, at least two other chapters (17 and 23) use narrower definitions of mid-career (between eight and fifteen years in the profession, with at least five in the current workplace).² After seeing such an inclusive definition earlier, these pronouncements left me feeling excluded, pushed out of a group I see myself as belonging to.

I also disagreed with some authors' assertions about mid-career librarians, but felt it was because of differences in our experiences. For example, I agreed with a statement in chapter 17 that mid-career librarians are uniquely positioned to speak

up in combating toxicity and bullying. But my own experience has been that those who do not or feel unable to speak up can underestimate the emotional labor and energy speaking up involves for mid-career librarians, along with the possibility they might experience repercussions. The authors also state that later-career librarians might not feel they should speak up “because they are close to leaving the institution” (p. 209). I understand that possibility, but I hope such colleagues will feel an obligation to speak up so that the workplace can be better for the people who remain as they head out the door.

My sense in reading *Thriving as a Mid-Career Librarian* was that, as an edited collection, it would be better approached over longer stretches of time or “dipped into” rather than read sequentially over a short period of time. If I had not been reading for the purpose of review, I would have probably started with chapters that were most relevant to my current situation, reading others as my interests changed. For example, while I appreciated getting perspectives on the choice to pursue a PhD (Chapter 6), the chapter would have been more helpful if I were trying to make that decision. However, I found Marta Bladek’s advice on deciding to go up for a promotion to full professor (Chapter 10) very useful, and made me question some of my assumptions about navigating that process.

Although this book does not center on archivists, it has relevance and resonance that speak to our profession. Many archivists work in academic library systems and are classified as librarians for purposes of evaluation and promotion, so the issues of the structures and hierarchies we work in and of career progression are similar. According to the 2022 A*CENSUS II All Archivists Survey, almost 40 percent of respondents work at academic institutions and 20 percent are considering leaving the profession in the next five years, citing burnout and the need for a better salary as two of the top three reasons for this decision.³ Other reasons for leaving also speak to issues addressed in *Thriving*, such as the desire for better work/life balance and the lack of opportunities for advancement.

All the same, I wished I had seen some archivist authors. Several authors wrote about previous work in special collections departments, but I did not see archivist job titles or current special collections affiliations in the biographies section. Archivists have different viewpoints and experiences working in academic libraries. For example, many of us were among the first to return to working onsite with in-person researchers during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, something that furthered employee dissatisfaction and bolstered the need for self-care. As the library and archives professions grapple with their histories, current untenability, and uncertain futures, this book showcases practitioners’ ambivalence and negative experiences, with suggestions for how to move through them.

Thriving as a Mid-Career Librarian shows that after starting a career in libraries with enthusiasm and working to establish themselves professionally, many librarians have found they are bored or burned out, or they want something different but are

not sure what that is. I know I will refer to this book as I ponder my own career, and I appreciate being able to return to it as I change course or contemplate new paths. I would recommend the book not only to mid-career peers, but also to early-career librarians to get them thinking about strategies for future directions and to managers to give them insight into how they can support those they supervise. I very much applaud West and Galoozis for taking on this topic and the authors for their willingness to share their thoughts on how stuck and burned out mid-career librarians can move forward and even thrive.

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NOTES

- ¹ Articles referenced include Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (2018), <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe>; Kaetrena Davis Kendrick, "Low Morale in Ethnic and Racial Minority Academic Librarians: An Experiential Study," *Library Trends* 68, no. 2 (2019): 174–212, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2019.0036>; and Kaetrena Davis Kendrick, "The Low Morale Experience of Academic Librarians: A Phenomenological Study," *Journal of Library Administration* 57, no. 8 (2017): 846–868, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2017.1368325>.
- ² Chapter 4 and Chapter 17 cite Cory Tucker, "Development of Midcareer Librarians," *Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship* 13, no. 3 (July 10, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.1080/08963560802183146>, for this definition.
- ³ Makala Skinner and Ioana Hulbert, "A*CENSUS II All Archivists Survey Report," *Ithaka S+R*, last modified 22 August 2022, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.317224>. Figure 10 shows 38 percent of archivists work in the academic sector, and Figure 56 shows top reasons for leaving the archives field.