

Reflexive Essay

There Are Some Things Just Not Worth Doing Alone: A Reflection on Peer Mentorship among Librarians That Centers the Whole Person

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There Are Some Things Just Not Worth Doing Alone: A Reflection on Peer Mentorship among Librarians That Centers the Whole Person

Christina Bell & Gina Levitan

In this reflexive essay, we assert that truly collaborative work is built from supportive peer networks that are about more than professional development or successfully navigating the field, particularly in academic librarianship. Academic support departments and services like the library, tutoring, and the writing center have long encouraged students to develop supportive, collaborative relationships as part of their success. We now seek to consider how we can encourage similar structures for professionals that extend beyond the demands of professional growth to an ethos of professional care. This reflexive essay will present our experiences creating and sustaining such supportive peer networks at several levels of our careers. We will discuss what has and has not worked for each of us in both staff and faculty positions and how we propose that early career scholars cultivate their networks for sustainable, ongoing care and success.

Keywords: burnout, collaboration as care, librarianship, peer networks, whole person approach

In this reflexive essay, we share and contextualize our experiences of creating and sustaining supportive peer networks as a tool of professional collaboration and one of professional care.

The two of us met in graduate school and have been collaborators and friends but never actual colleagues. We are both white women who inhabit other intersectional identities: one is first generation/working class, cis, queer, and neurodiverse, while the other is a first-time parent, cis, able-bodied, and comes from a family where many members have pursued advanced degrees in higher education. Our research and career experience comes from the perspective of librarianship and its interdisciplinary nature in the context of the United States of America. We met in a dual degree program, where we focused both on the professional degree in librarianship and a second theory-based program in humanities and social thought (one which has since rebranded itself into something else entirely). While our work now is in libraries, our backgrounds are in the humanities, and we have always found a strong connection between the two. As we occupy roles best defined as 'midcareer,' our work centers largely on the multidisciplinary nature of research on peer support, lateral mentorship, burnout, and associated challenges, and collaboration at all professional levels as resistance to these challenges.

Higher education has shifted focus to a 'whole student' approach to teaching and learning but has not yet applied the idea of wholeness to

those whose labor upholds the institution. Collaboration, lateral mentorship, and peer networks are at the heart of professional success in the academe today, as they both influence one's career advance and function as a resistance tool against the neo-liberalization of the 'institution' writ large. The collaboration needed to survive exists within the things that keep you sane in your career—and not necessarily in the systems that, as we have been taught, will help you thrive professionally (authorship, conferences, etc.).

We believe the solution to the problems of burnout and overextending ourselves at work is found in your peers. But how does a peer network accomplish this? In our experience as academic librarians and college faculty (and perhaps this is something the reader has experienced as well), the role of the peer network is not to 'accomplish' anything. There is no quantified 'return of investment'—just an antidote to the isolation typically felt at work. Instead of constantly trying to reinvent the wheel, a peer network helps connect you to all the different types of already existing wheels that might fit your particular problem. Such support takes many forms: the monthly happy hour with a safe colleague to decompress from the usual workplace drama; the group chat that shares advice as much as baby and pet photos; the informal mentors who leverage their experience to help with no expectation of return—and become friends.

In what follows, we present how we avoid the inevitable burnout-induced crash by challenging vocational awe in workers and the aspects of the 'neoliberal university' favored by administration, first with a professional context of care and then with the establishment of a peer network.

A Professional Context of 'Care'

What does 'care' mean in a professional context, and why does it matter when we talk about authorship, the humanities, and higher education? When we first approached this question, it became clear to us in our reflection as both librarians and former humanities students and scholars that collaboration was the thread that brought all of this together. In a professional context, then, care is the act of creating community, connecting with peers, establishing peer mentor relationships, and forging supportive relationships. Specifically, a context of care in our profession represents, for us, a solution for burnout, devaluation, and demoralization—something that we know to be common not only in librarianship but throughout the higher education landscape, particularly in the humanities. We have witnessed a common experience of devaluation, when the general public has continued to question our usefulness, when the conversation has been that our work is not needed as much anymore, and when we constantly hear that new technologies will make our work obsolete (Noonoo 2019).

We do not define 'network' as a verb (that is, as a means for professional gain), but as community. We may use terms like 'community,' 'support,' 'mentorship,' and 'network' interchangeably because, for us, they

are all inherently linked to the types of collaboration we see as essential for success. Corporate-speak contextualizes networking and network building as a purely professional endeavor, necessary for status and growth (Cole 2019). However, we situate a network first as a community of care, one from which many kinds of collaboration can grow. It is also important to note that in the community of care, the care comes first; if some kind of professional development is to follow, that is an added benefit. It is not the defining principle or motivation for encouraging those networks in the first place.

The labor done in higher education is largely misunderstood and decontextualized by the wider world. Particularly in the United States, efforts to exert government control over the work in the academe—whether it be pedagogy, research, or curriculum—is further driving the burnout already exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is especially potent in library and information-related fields, and we hope that by outlining some of the available research here, we can show how it can resonate across disciplines. The many disruptions we have all faced in recent years have highlighted the gendered nature of work deemed as ‘care,’ whether personal or institutional. In the academe, women are more likely to take on service roles with affective labor responsibilities and spend more of their time engaged in this work, which carries additional burdens for BIPOC women (Docka-Filipeck and Stone 2020: 2160). Yet, women still hold less than half of the permanent positions in the professoriate (Berkeley Economic Review 2024).

From its professionalization in the modern academe, librarianship has been a ‘pink collar job,’ a largely feminized profession that sits alongside nursing, childhood education, and office support work as primarily service-oriented (Drabinski, Geraci and Shirazi 2019: 104). At the same time, traditionally masculine jobs are defined as ‘productive’ in a way that the so-called women’s work is not. This is seen in higher education, where men are more likely to grow as faculty engaged in productive research, while women align to teaching, mentorship, and service roles (Higgins 2017: 70–71). Roxanne Shirazi (2017: 88) takes this a step further and defines academic librarians as existing in a *reproductive* role in the academe—that is, as supporters of the *productive* work of others. This work is further devalued, as it does not fit the pinnacle of academic production: the ‘publish or perish’ model of knowledge creation (Shirazi 2017: 89). We see an imbalanced gender representation in who does ‘caregiving’ or affective labor in academic settings, both in the professoriate and service roles like librarianship (Docka-Filipeck and Stone 2020: 2160). This work goes largely unrecognized and unsupported, placing a greater burden on large sections of our workforce. This labor is outward (directed at students and colleagues) and inward (directed at the self), and even buzzy articles that discuss burnout and self-care acknowledge that the tasks of self-care can contribute to further burnout issues (Petersen 2019).

Burnout and Vocational Awe

The term 'burnout' entered the popular English-language lexicon in the 1960s and was first employed by teachers, social workers, and hospice caregivers (Wood et al. 2020: 4). The fact that burnout was first attributed to service professions, and largely feminized ones, demonstrates how little has changed over the last fifty years of feminist movements. Burnout is a syndrome resulting from unmanaged workplace stress. It is defined by three overlapping dimensions: 'feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one's job or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job, and reduced professional efficacy' (World Health Organization 2019). Burnout is not a specifically gendered issue, but research indicates that men working in librarianship specifically experience it at much lower rates than women or nonbinary people, and burnout rates are higher in younger professionals (Wood et al. 2020: 12).

Burnout is commonly assessed using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), developed by the psychologist Christina Maslach in 1981. Her research is most commonly applied in the high-stress worlds of health sciences and mental healthcare but has broad applications regardless of the occupation (Maslach and Leiter 2016: 104; see also Krasner et al. 2009: 1285). The themes of burnout outlined in the inventory carry over into the world of libraries and higher education. For some authors, we see it in overwork, the imposter syndrome, and low wages (Andrews 2020; Brown and Setfoducato 2019: 10–11; Geary and Hickey 2019; Lacey and Parlette-Stewart 2017). In other research, burnout also contributes to not only a 'weaponization' of work culture (Williams and Fife 2022) but also a cheapening of our labor (McLure 2021).

In 2017, Kaetrena Davis Kendrick (2017: 847) published a phenomenological study on low morale among academic librarians (spoiler alert: it is very common), expanding on other forms of qualitative research on burnout to understand the underlying and ongoing experience that drives workers to breakdown. The following year, Fobazi Ettarh (2018) gave a name to one of the defining characteristics of librarianship with her framework of *vocational awe* as 'the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique.' While Ettarh assigns the term 'vocational awe' to libraries, there are many ways in which the concept applies across higher education. Pre-pandemic, Davis Kendrick and Ettarh, both of whom are Black women and librarians, succinctly described what would be significant yet common experiences for many in the coming years. Ettarh has continued this work through the pandemic and notes that COVID-19 responses in libraries lead to 'uneven expectations of labor' in asking librarians to be all things to all people while serving the public in a crisis (Ettarh and Vidas 2022).

The saying 'do more with less' is a perfect example of how burnout and vocational awe coexist and manifest in libraries. Budget cuts, staff cuts,

low wages, low turnover of total available jobs *and/or* high turnover within a given institution, toxic workplaces (bosses and patrons alike), unsafe working conditions (from the psychological environment to the physical safety of library workers), and so on—each of these systemic issues have been repurposed as awesome feats to overcome with pride and grit (Harwell 2008: 382). Librarians working at different types of colleges and universities experience different types of pressures (issues further exacerbated in public or school libraries): burnout and low morale are as persistent as the vocational awe that keeps us coming back for more. In higher education in particular, librarians exist in a liminal space in the institutions where we work because our position changes depending on said institution. At one college, a librarian can be classified as faculty (either teaching or non-teaching), or they can be at-will administrative staff (meaning they can be let go at any time—something we have seen recently with our colleagues at Barnard and Duke) (Davis and Elikins 2025; Lin 2025). We the authors have each held roles that reflect this to the letter.

When we entered graduate school in 2010, professionals were complaining that the 2008 recession had delayed the long-anticipated wave of retirements in libraries (Wilder 2009). Demographic data of academic librarians in the United States show that the expected downward trend in age did not happen then and still has not. We are now considered a ‘greying profession’ as much as a female one (Wilder 2017). When we consider these trends on age alongside the research on experiences of burnout, it is no wonder that younger generations of librarians struggle to find jobs and to grow in their careers, and experience higher rates of burnout given how little support is available. In our own experience as early career librarians, very few structured support systems existed, particularly at the institutional level. Many of the professional spaces required time and money that were not available to us at the time. We found ways to build our own informal support communities precisely because so few options for collaborative care, mentorship, or professional partnerships were available.

Sometimes those peer relationships are individual, like between us the coauthors, and other times those relationships grow into larger initiatives. One example in libraries is the group We Here, founded out of a collection of informal networks to create more cohesive support for BIPOC workers (We Here 2025). We Here is ‘described as a support group, collaboration network, and mentorship platform’ that provides educational programming as well as a support network for the BIPOC library community. Tellingly, they specifically call out that ‘people in the private communities are doing the work institutions and professional organizations have not yet built into the fabric of our professions and We Here hopes to uplift, celebrate, and embed this work into our professional worlds’ (We Here 2025). We the coauthors, as white women, are not We Here members, but we support their work because they call out the very problems we have also experienced and are doing work to support those who are most affected.¹

Organizations like We Here and informal peer networks both utilize the ‘whole person’ approach. The ‘whole person’ approach is one way

to better coalesce the necessary community support to achieve a stronger ethos of collaboration. This approach is typically used in teaching but can be applied to the professoriate and other workers in the academe. Also called holistic education, this method considers not just academic success as the measure of education but how students find meaning, form community, and craft their own identity as learners (Lauricella and MacAskill 2015: 56). To consider this at the professional level, our output as researchers is not the sole definition of our success: we also consider how we contribute to our professional communities in supportive and collaborative ways.

The 'Whole Person' Approach

Academic librarianship uses the concept of the 'whole person' in teaching and learning, but it has not yet applied the idea of wholeness to those whose labor upholds the institution: the librarians. In fact, when we started looking at available research focused on the workplace, the first articles we found analyzed how *management* should adapt the whole person approach as a form of leadership development (see Lester et al. 2017). While this may serve to benefit the workers under that leadership, the end goal is for the benefit of the institution and not the workers as people. What research is available on more holistic faculty wellness, even in a post-COVID context, considers the job market and job satisfaction above the actual grassroots networks of care formed to resist institutional demands (Cruz and Atterholt 2024: 35–36).

The whole student approach demands much from those doing the work, as it places equal emphasis on physical, emotional, spiritual, social, and ethical growth alongside intellectual development (Mintz 2017). What works at one library might not work at another, depending on the student population and their unique needs and contexts. We have seen this in our own libraries. A commuter student who can only come to the library after they have finished a work day has very different needs than a residential student who can come to the library after their on-campus courses. Students who have to juggle multiple responsibilities outside of their course load are going to need different points of access to practically everything at the library compared to students who do not. In approaching library services with the whole student in mind, however, we are able to provide exactly what our students need. And they thrive as a result.

If we are able to provide services that can fully encompass the needs of everyone in our communities—our students, staff, faculty—then we can start to fix some of the systemic issues that lead to burnout and low morale for all of us. If we have seen the whole student approach lead to greater student success and increases in all the benchmarks that our institutions (typically) ask us to quantify, then why don't we turn that approach inwards?

We propose that early career scholars and graduate students cultivate their networks for sustainable, ongoing care and resulting success. While this can be achieved at any professional level, doing so at the outset

helps to mediate many of the stressors that drive early burnout. This is especially true for anyone in an underrepresented identity who, despite the claims of many politicians, do not receive special consideration or material support to succeed as professionals in higher education. The challenges of competition and burnout in the academe are further exacerbated by race, class, parenthood, caregiving, disability, and many other intersectional identities. This is further complicated by the demand for assimilation into white, middle class working culture as a precursor to success in the academe (Crist and Clark-Keefe 2022: 3). We have each experienced this in our own ways, whether in learning how to communicate 'professionally' or finding opportunities for growth while lacking formal mentorship. We do not define success solely as professional achievement, in climbing the ranks of faculty or institutional administration, or in contributing to the scholarly conversation. So many of these markers are defined as individual accomplishments, when in fact we are more successful through community and collaborative care.

A Network for Care

Many months have passed since we submitted our abstract for this reflexive essay. In that time, the world has changed—and it has changed in a way where everything feels impossible to navigate. Perhaps this feeling of isolation is the point. History demonstrates how organizing is effective to making social change, and institutions have long resisted too much collective organizing to centralize resource management. Having to 'do more with less' is a classic problem in librarianship, but having to 'do it all, but on your own' is a classic 21st century problem. Across all levels of the academe, we have seen the lack of institutional support and the unequal demands for affective labor. While those of us in student-facing roles are tasked with implementing whole-person approaches to student success, that work is rarely turned inward. We are left to find our own means of support where and how we can in the absence of structural options. While there is an expectation that hierarchies of support are available, this has not been the case in our experience. This is why we advocate for lateral networks of care. It is these peer support networks that we can begin to reflect, dismantle, and recontextualize our labor.

When we were thinking about what to write for this essay, the only solution that we kept coming back to is that we would not have gotten this far without each other or without our peer mentors/support network. We made an incomplete list of all the things that we have recently reached out to our networks about:

- Does this email sound weird? I have to send it to my boss/students/the entire faculty.
- Has anyone used this type of module before? How did you build it?
- I have a student who is interested in A, B, C, and D. Any ideas on with whom they can be connected?

- I am having an issue with a colleague and need to talk to HR. How can I protect myself here?
- I just saw a CfP that looks really interesting. Does anyone want to brainstorm ideas or collaborate?
- I am working on a new article. Does anyone have citations on this topic?
- I have been asked to take the lead on this project, and I don't even know where to start. How do I ask for help? Where would you start?
- How are you?
- What do you think about this job? Is this a red flag?
- And so on, and so on...

These types of questions are pretty run-of-the-mill for any work advice column, and we are sure you could find an archived answer somewhere for each one. But the role of the network is not only to help you answer a question that you might not want to ask directly at your job (or of your job) but to be a place where you can ask questions in the first place. It is to provide the time and space to ask these questions, to seek advice or validation, or to be challenged in your own assumptions about this or that. Early in our careers, we sent many *Ask A Manager*² columns back and forth and tried to adapt the answers to our current predicaments, but in time we learned that as we grew our networks, the support we received from actual real-life people was better than anonymity on the internet. As we are now mid-career librarians, we have been able to serve as referees for each other, connect people across networks for a wider net of support, and watch each other grow as people who happen to be faculty and librarians.

We wrote earlier in this reflection that some time has passed between when we submitted our proposal to when we started creating this knowledge product. We have already indicated that a lot has changed—both personally and politically—for both of us, and we are sure for the reader as well. Regardless of how much changes, whether it be shocking or expected, we still feel the same about the importance of having peers to fall back on.

It is with the support of our peers that we have been able to have the confidence to apply for jobs we were unsure about, to say no to opportunities that looked too good to be true (because they were), to take a leap of faith and move into a new field (or to a new city), to speak up in a meeting when it was unpopular to do so. As we move into yet another unprecedented time for the world, and in particular in the United States (where we are living, working, writing from) and our institutions of higher education, we have learned that the greatest thing you can have to weather the storm is community. Simply for the sake of being around and with other people who understand your situation is enough to learn and grow without burning out or falling prey to any number of things. We have seen how in librarianship in particular, reflecting on the 'whole student' leads to better learning. If this approach is turned inwards, the results would be similar: more support leads to better learning experiences and outcomes.

We hope that we can all leverage our collective networks to advocate for better recognition of collaboration as a strength, not a stepping stone to individual (and isolated) opportunities. We do not have to perpetuate the notion of the solo researcher in the ivory tower, or the library carrel. The most impactful thing that has happened in our respective careers has not been the conference presentation, the article, or the book chapter. It is the networks we have established and the communities we have cultivated. They are the central pillar to the quintessential notion of thriving, not surviving.

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2. Ask a Manager (<https://www.askamanager.org/>) is a site run by Alison Green, who responds to anonymous complaints, queries, and more that are related to work culture in the United States. This site started in 2007 and has an extensive back catalog of advice entries ranging from how to let your job know you are taking parental leave (which in the US is complicated) to how to approach a coworker who chronically steals your lunch.

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