

Alyssa Martin, Amy Smith, and Debbie West

Staying engaged

A conversation with mid-career librarians

How do you stay engaged as a mid-career librarian? Alyssa Martin, Amy Smith, and Debbie West discuss ways to stay engaged. Suggestions include taking advantage of opportunities such as learning new technology to teach, staying active in professional associations, presenting at conferences, writing articles, participating in grants, making lateral job transfers, mentoring other librarians, and going back to school.

Have you made job changes, lateral moves, or promotions in mid-career?

Alyssa Martin: Over the years, I stayed at Troy University, but I have moved around in various jobs, which allowed me to learn new skills. I started as a circulation assistant, and then I became the interlibrary loan librarian once I received my library degree. Now, I am the instruction and reference librarian at the Troy University Rosa Parks Library. During this time, I went through the tenure and promotion process to become assistant professor and later went through the same process to be promoted to associate professor.

Due to librarian and staff shortages, my role expanded this past year, and I served as the social sciences librarian for all Troy University Libraries. Now, I'm back full-time at the Rosa Parks Library, but I still embed in online courses. I believe that "staying in place" doesn't mean becoming stagnant. It's an attitude of constantly wanting to learn new things and taking on new and different roles to grow as a person in your job(s).

Debbie West: I have worked at three small academic libraries. My first professional position was at Auburn University in Montgomery as an interlibrary loan/reference librarian. My next position was at Adams State College in Colorado as an interlibrary loan/reference librarian that morphed into an interlibrary loan/distance education librarian. Later, I applied for and got a collection development position on the Montgomery Campus of Troy University, which became a technical service position. I was then transferred to the Troy Campus as a humanities reference librarian due to staffing changes/needs. In the last year (during the pandemic), I have also become an embedded librarian in multiple courses.

All of these were technically lateral transfers. Some were made because of things I needed (something more challenging, outside a rut, or a change in workload), and others have been because of organizational changes within our university.

Alyssa Martin is instruction and reference librarian, associate professor at the Troy University Rosa Parks Library-Troy Montgomery Campus in Montgomery, Alabama, email: almartin@troy.edu, Amy Smith is reference and information literacy librarian at Trenholm State Community College in Montgomery, Alabama, email: asmith@trenholmstate.edu, and Debbie West is humanities reference librarian, assistant professor at Troy University Library in Troy, Alabama, email: debwest@troy.edu

Amy Smith: I have worked at two small academic libraries. I began as the circulation supervisor at Troy University Rosa Parks Library, and after obtaining my library degree, I became the reference/information literacy librarian at Trenholm State Community College. This change transitioned me from a small four-year university branch campus to a small two-year technical college. The depth of student research and basic student needs is drastically different. I went from an environment that was more research-focused to technically focused. The transition challenged me to re-evaluate the needs of the students and gear my instruction to more real-world challenges and job needs. Two years after joining the college, it transitioned to a community college. Some research needs changed during this time in the core classes, and more subjects were added.

Aside from research, my job functions were much more involved. Working at a community college with only one other full-time librarian and two campuses means you wear many hats. I have learned and performed various roles, including reference, instruction, collection development, cataloging, dual enrollment, Open Educational Resources (OER), budgets, and Title III-B grant operations. Unlike the university system, the tenure process in the two-year system is solely based on working a total of six fall/spring semesters simultaneously. Overall the experience has been great and challenging—a place where I indeed found my niche.

How do you keep up-to-date with teaching technology?

Martin: One of the ways I've stayed up-to-date with teaching technology and grown as an instruction librarian has been to teach a freshman orientation course routinely. Initially, I was involved in writing part the library portion of a print textbook used by students. Later, I was on a committee to transition to an electronic text, and I wrote library content for the new online textbook.

Over the years, the freshman orientation course went from in-person instruction to a flexible/blended class that meets in-person but has all course content online in Canvas. Being familiar with Canvas has been invaluable since I'm embedded in other university courses as an instruction librarian. This experience was crucial when COVID-19 turned the world upside down, and online instruction became the only viable way to reach students. Due to COVID-19, I taught using Microsoft Teams when the course went online.

West: I recommend attending as many webinars and workshops as possible to stay current in the library field and technology. Whether these are provided by vendors, state or national library associations, or the university, they can help expand your knowledge and keep you up to date on what is happening in your environment.

Smith: Keeping up to date with teaching technology is huge! The best way to stay current is to use technology and implement new ideas into my information literacy instruction. Over the last several years, I have kept up with new ideas and trends through professional development and faculty engagement. I have created instructional content for information literacy using Moodle, Canvas, and Desire2Learn (D2L). When COVID-19 hit, I became more familiar with screen capturing software and creating video tutorials for students. Virtual classes through Microsoft Teams, BlueJeans, and Zoom became the new normal for many. I received my certification in online teaching and learned so much about emerging technologies used in the classroom and online through recent coursework.

What have you done to continue to engage in professional development, and what would you advise others to do?

Martin: I've attended and presented at conferences and webinars and attended training workshops. I've written articles and book chapters and presented and served on committees at state, regional, and national conferences. I would advise others to do the same. Networking is key!

West: Attending and presenting at national, regional, or state conferences and conventions is beneficial in many ways. You can stay up to date on changes, see trends, and can prepare for the future, as well as network with vendors and colleagues. I've been lucky to work at institutions that not only encouraged us to attend events but have funded the travel expenses.

Smith: Early on, as a staff member at Troy, I was always encouraged to write and present at conferences. Although it was not required, it greatly benefited me in my future faculty role and highlighted my professional involvement. In my current position, I continue to present and write. My current job requires me to participate in a minimum of two state or national conferences each year. I try and choose meetings and events that influence and impact my current and future endeavors and help me implement new ideas and strategies. Staying engaged has kept me current with what is going on in higher education and libraries.

Have you ever been involved in mentoring either as a mentee or mentor?

Martin: As a new librarian, I participated in a formal mentoring program—the American Library Association's New Member Roundtable (NMRT) mentoring program for new librarians. I was seeking guidance on navigating the tenure and promotion process at academic libraries, including how to write articles for publication. I was mentored by an academic librarian who was a published author.

West: I have not been a part of a formal mentoring program but have been part of many informal groups. I have benefited from the one-on-one engagement with more experienced librarians and have participated in small groups of colleagues that shared the same specialization. In the last few years, I have counseled, trained, and guided librarians new to the profession.

Smith: During my time in library school, I was informally mentored by the librarians I worked with to learn and gain experience. That learning experience was followed by an incredible mentor/supervisor in my current job, who helped me learn the basics and gain confidence in speaking in front of small and large groups. Getting up in front of the class the first time can be scary, but some guidance and teaching from someone else in the field can make the experience more comfortable.

Have you taken part in grant opportunities or engaged in community outreach?

Martin: Other than teaching, writing and implementing programming grants has been one of my most rewarding experiences. It's a way to give back to the community. Grant writing during my mid-career years has helped me stay engaged in my career and grow as a librarian. Over the years, I've written and implemented 11 programming grants (mostly federal). The grants reached diverse populations and engaged them in thought-provoking discussions. We hosted two National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Big Read grants. Our

partners included the Rosa Parks Museum, Trenholm State Community College, and local public schools. Events included book festivals, book discussions, art exhibits, and author talks.

Smith: My primary involvement with grants has been as an NEA Big Read participant. When Alyssa was writing her application for her first Big Read grant, she asked me if Trenholm would be interested in partnering. The program was a great success and brought together students and the community for several events. After the success of the first grant, we partnered together again for a second NEA Big Read.

Have you gone back to school as a mid-career librarian? If so, why?

Smith: In 2017, I decided to go back to school. This was a mid-career decision to help guide me into future endeavors and advance into management or curriculum development one day. I began working on my EdD in Curriculum and Instruction at Valdosta State University in fall 2018. I completed all coursework in July 2020 and finished my dissertation by May 2022. I chose this program to enhance what I can do both in the library and outside the library in the future. This program has opened my eyes to not only what we do as librarians but brought about a better understanding of how I can reach out to faculty and support their programs.

Conclusion

As mid-career academic librarians, we believe it is extremely important to stay engaged. So, what can you do as a mid-career librarian to stay engaged? Look for growth opportunities for yourself and your library. Opportunities may include networking and learning new things by going to conferences. It may mean being involved in state and national associations and mentoring others. Growth can come from writing articles and grants or taking on a new job or new responsibilities within your organization. You may want to make a lateral move to another library or advance within your library to a mid-level position or go up for promotion if the opportunity presents itself. Growth may also include going back to school.

Challenge yourself to improve your library and your profession. Keep an open mind to what you can do—even if you think it is outside your area or your comfort zone. Is there a new program or technology that could be implemented at your library? Think about your student population. What would make things easier or more accessible for them? Attend professional development opportunities to get new ideas. Staying engaged does not only have personal benefits, but, more importantly, it is an opportunity to give back to the profession. Be on the lookout for things that make the library better, that make the research process easier, and things that widen your knowledge of the profession and as an individual. *zz*